


The Garden of Allah: Old Hollywood's Hedonistic Home

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By Benjamin McVay

“Yes, I’ve a wonderful home out near Laurel Canyon, where there are a swimming pool and five fireplaces and even chickens in the back yard by day and mocking birds by night. And please say that I’m tremendously happy to be in California.”

– Alla Nazimova

In the Golden Age of Hollywood, there was a place that became synonymous with, booze, sex, drugs, and lavish parties overflowing with decadence. The place, called The Garden of Allah Hotel, would be home to many celebrities over the years. The walls of which would be privy to stories that would be remembered forever.

The Garden of Allah Hotel was a place where Hollywood players could engage in any hedonistic proclivities they wished, without any fear of repercussions for their actions. It was a safe haven for them.

“Through the intoxicating Twenties and Thirties, the Garden of Allah was more house party than hotel. Robert Benchley was resident clown; John Barrymore kept a bicycle there so as not to waste drinking time walking between the separate celebrations in the sprawling, Spanish villas. Woolcott, Hemingway, Brice, Flynn, Olivier, Welles, Bogart, Dietrich all lived at the Garden during its green years.”

– Time Magazine 1959

The hotel, located at the east end of the Sunset Strip, at 8152 Sunset Boulevard was previously the location of a 2.5-acre estate called Havenhurst. This palatial estate was completed in 1913.

The property was built by real estate tycoon William Hay for him and his wife Katharine to live in. The 40 room mansion contained 12 bedrooms, 4 bathrooms, and a 2 car garage with servant's quarters above. After 3 years, Hay became bored with the house and moved a few blocks east to 7920 Sunset (which now houses the Director's Guild of America).

In 1918 a Russian actress, Alla Nazimova, one of the highest-paid actresses in Hollywood at the time, leased the property from Hay for \$50,000 and bought it the following year. She called her new home “The Garden of Alla”, which was a reference to her own name, and the best-selling British novel *The Garden of Allah*.

“I’ll be damned if I’ll believe anyone lives in a place called the Garden of Allah.”

– Thomas Wolfe

The main change Nazimova made to the property after purchasing it was the installation of a swimming pool (with underwater lights) in the shape of the Black Sea. Over the years it became known that Marlene Dietrich enjoyed swimming in this pool naked.

When Charles Laughton was filming *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* in September, 1939, he would often float on his back in the pool during his lunch, break still wearing the face makeup for his role as Quasimodo.

Nazimova, who was bi-sexual, is widely believed to have coined the phrase “sewing circles” as code to refer to the lesbian or bisexual actresses of her day who concealed the true nature of their sexuality.

Her home would become a place for lesbians in Tinseltown to congregate, hidden away from the prying eyes of the world. Greta Garbo and Marlene Dietrich were said to be frequent visitors to Nazimova’s home.

“a classic movie star’s showplace...its immense tiled hallway dominated by a Mexican chandelier and two massive antique chests, its vast living room with another tiled floor, beamed ceiling, couch and armchairs upholstered in purple velvet, gilded wall candelabra, baronial fireplace, a grand piano. A broad tiled stairway led to the upper floor, and in Nazimova’s bedroom the piece de resistance was a huge circular window that she installed above her bed. A photograph shows her posed below it, hazy sunlight pour through to heighten the already soft-focus effect.”

– Gavin Lambert, Nazimova’s biographer

When her star eventually faded in the mid-1920s, Nazimova decided to convert the property into a hotel. It opened on January 9, 1927, and featured over 2 dozen villas. The night it opened Marlene Dietrich, John Barrymore, Francis X Bushman, and Jack Dempsey were all in attendance.

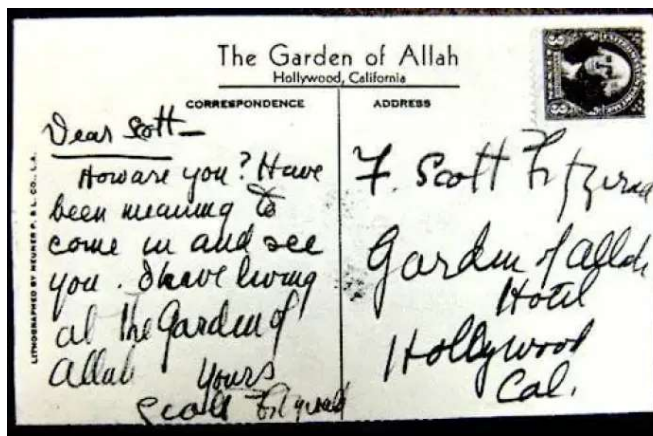
“There were no rules. Nearly everybody partied – and partied hard. You would come back late at night and look around for a lit window. That meant a party, where, of course, you’d be welcome.”

– An early resident of the Garden of Allah

Upon opening, the Garden sent a brochure to the studios that read:

“California’s finest summer hotel in Hollywood: In the Garden of Allah there are 30 individual bungalows, exquisitely furnished and offering you a delightful home, with complete hotel service. A magnificent swimming pool, surrounded by a semi-tropical paradise, transforms your bungalow into a delightful beach home in the centre of Hollywood. In this alluring atmosphere of the tropics, you may dine under the stars. Just the place for that breakfast by the pool, bridge at lunch and a dinner party. You will appreciate the atmosphere of exclusive refinement in this garden of wonderful homes. It is truly a gem of comfort in a setting of romance.”

1928 saw Nazimova close to bankruptcy. She sold off all of her interests in the hotel, and moved to New York City. In 1938, she returned to the her beloved Garden, where she rented villa 24, and lived until her death in 1945.



In a drunken haze, famed writer F Scott Fitzgerald sent a postcard to himself at the Garden of Allah hotel, located in Hollywood, California.

The late 1950s saw things beginning to change, and the atmosphere around the Garden became less glamorous and significantly seedier. Drugs became more prevalent, villas were frequently robbed, and the Mafia was rumored to be sending in prostitutes to seduce, trap and blackmail celebrities.

“Nothing interrupted the continual tumult that was life at the Garden of Allah. Now and then the men in white came with a van and took somebody away, or bankruptcy or divorce or even jail claimed a participant in its strictly un-stately sarabands. Nobody paid any mind.”

– Lucius Beebe, Columnist

In April 1959, Lytton Savings and Loan purchased the Garden of Allah for \$755,000. Their goal was to turn it into the main branch of their bank. On August 29th, a lavish farewell party was thrown by bank president Bart Lytton at the Garden.

Featured guests were dressed up as old-time movie stars, and Nazimova’s 1923 movie **Salome** was shown on a poolside screen. By November 2nd, the building was razed and all traces of it were but a distant memory.



A model of the Garden of Allah, its many villas, and its iconic swimming pool that was shaped in the form of the Black Sea. Complete with underwater lights.

Errol Flynn

Errol Flynn spent a great deal of time basically living at the Garden from 1935 until 1957, using it for his extramarital affairs while married. He stayed there between marriages during this time as well. While living there in 1935, he was offered the lead role in ***Captain Blood***, which made him a star.

Flynn shared a villa at the Garden with actor David Niven and writer Bill Lipscomb. Eventually, Flynn hooked up French actress Lili Damita, who also had a villa there. The pair would participate in Martini-fueled rough sex sessions in her villa. The couple married shortly thereafter.

In 1937, while married to Damita, Flynn began an affair at the Garden with Mexican actress Lupe Velez. She introduced Flynn to cocaine, but not in the way one would expect. Damita would cover his penis with the narcotic, in order to dull the sensitivity of nerves so it would prolong his orgasm. Flynn reportedly used cocaine this way until his death in 1959.

Former Garden of Allah owner Frank Ehrhart recalled that Flynn had a strict regimen while staying there in his later years:

“At 12:30 p.m., his secretary would set up a bottle of champagne and two glasses on a table among the chaise lounges by the pool. An hour later, Flynn would appear wearing a blue blazer with white or grey pants and an ascot and mingle with his friends and neighbors who were lounging by the pool. Before too long, he would approach a beautiful young woman and ask, “My child, will you have a glass of champagne?” By then all eyes were on them wondering how long it would take Errol to get the girl into his villa.”

Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall

Humphrey Bogart arrived in Hollywood to film ***The Petrified Forest*** in 1935. He checked into the Garden of Allah, believing he would return to New York City and the bright lights of Broadway after filming was complete. This didn't happen, and Bogart spent the rest of his life living in Los Angeles.

10 years later, during a rather tumultuous time in his life, Bogart returned to the Garden of Allah, where he caroused with various lovers, including the actress Lauren Bacall. Bogart and Bacall were once attacked in their villa by his drunken and deranged third wife, the actress Mayo Methot.

Other guests at the Garden rushed out to watch the craziness, as bottles flew and furniture was smashed. Bacall escaped out the back door, while Methot chased Bogart around the villa with a large kitchen knife.

Maureen O'Sullivan

In 1930 Maureen O'Sullivan moved into the Garden of Allah as soon as she arrived in Los Angeles from Ireland. She lived here for many years, and actually met her husband, director John Farrow on the grounds. After their marriage, the couple would eventually move to 809 N. Roxbury in Beverly Hills.

Ginger Rogers

Publicity still of Ginger Rogers in 1931

When Ginger Rogers moved from New York City to Los Angeles with her mother in 1931, they shared a less than spacious 2 bedroom villa at the Garden. She lived here for over a year while filming pre-code movies for studios including RKO, First National Pictures and Fox Film Corporation.

Clara Bow

Hollywood's *It Girl* was a fixture at the Garden of Allah during its early years. Bow was notorious for her wild playfulness at the Garden. Her favorite activities included pushing tuxedo-clad men into the pool, and jumping off the diving board in an evening gown with a Martini in her hand.

Harpo Marx

When the Marx Brothers came to Hollywood in 1931, Harpo moved into the Garden at the behest of his friend Robert Benchley. Harpo would routinely spend several hours a day practicing playing his harp within the confines of his room.

“On arriving in Los Angeles, I checked into the Garden of Allah ... a collection of palm trees, bungalows and apartments grouped around a swimming pool built in the shape of the Black Sea. It was at the time the most famous oasis in the stucco desert of the movie colony.”

– Harpo Marx

Late one night, one of the Garden's residents began playing the piano loudly, which prevented Marx from getting a good night's rest. The actor complained to the hotel manager, stating that:

“One of us has to go and it isn't going to be me because I was here first.”

The manager informed Harpo that his neighbor was the world-renowned composer Sergei Rachmaninoff. He was not going to ask Rachmaninoff to change rooms, out of respect for the master pianist and composer.

Harpo set his alarm for 5 am, rising to bang out the first 4 bars of Rachmaninoff's *Piano Concerto No1* (as loudly as possible with the windows open) for the next 2 hours. He heard Rachmaninoff scream in agony. Rachmaninoff changed bungalows that very morning. Later Marx learned that Rachmaninoff absolutely hated that piece of music.

“The nightlife in and around the miniature Black Sea kept the scandal writers supplied with more juicy items than they could use. But...my little bungalow in the Garden of Allah was a peaceful retreat...once the pianist had been moved...After playing the damn thing nonstop for two hours I knew exactly how he felt.”

– Harpo Marx

Ava Gardner, Artie Shaw, and Frank Sinatra

A few months after Nazimova's death, in October of 1945, Ava Gardner moved into villa 24 with her husband, bandleader Artie Shaw. She lived there for 12 months before leaving him due to his egotistical and uncaring behavior.

It was at the Garden that Gardner first met Frank Sinatra, who was staying in the villa next door. Sinatra had moved into the Garden in 1941, with his press agent George Evans. It was Evans who had organized the screaming teens in New York, which helped launch Sinatra onto the cultural landscape.

Tallulah Bankhead

Tallulah Bankhead was a notorious deviant. The actress was said to have seduced Barbara Stanwyck, Joan Crawford, Gary Cooper, and Dolores Del Rio. All of this taking place at the Garden of Allah.

Once, fellow guests were awoken in the early morning by the sound of Bankhead and *Tarzan* actor Johnny Weissmuller, evidently back from a party, jumping in the pool, off the diving board.

Bankhead, who was weighed down in a heavily beaded dress, replete with diamonds, dropped like a stone to the bottom of the pool. The actress managed to shed all her clothes, emerging from the pool completely naked. She reportedly said:

“Everyone’s been dying to see my body, now they can.”

Weissmuller and Bankhead then proceeded to have sex in the pool.

Ronald Reagan

After his marriage to Jane Wyman had failed, actor and future Governor of California and US President Ronald Reagan, moved into the Garden in 1948. During his stay, Reagan had bedded so many women that he told a friend:

“I woke up one morning and I couldn’t remember the name of the gal I was in bed with.”

Interestingly, his next wife Nancy Davis was the goddaughter of Alla Nazimova.

After the Garden Fell

The former site of the Garden of Allah currently houses a shopping center, with a variety of businesses. This too will soon be razed, and replaced with a new complex by Townscape Partners, and designed by famed architect Frank Gehry.

Earlier this year the original sign for the Garden of Allah (which was lost), was found. The sign, which was installed in 1930, was auctioned off by Lytton Savings and Loan in August of 1959. A year later it was installed in the front yard of a house in Detroit, Michigan.

It was eventually sold privately to Mark Santamaria in Oakland, California, who intended on restoring the sign. He recently abandoned this dream and contacted author Martin Turnbull about its whereabouts. The sign was put up for sale, with the price tag of \$50,000. The sign is 12 feet, 8 inches long, two feet high, and 7 1/4 inches wide.