

TRAVEL

Sunday, May 11, 2003

latimes.com/travel



New wave of chic

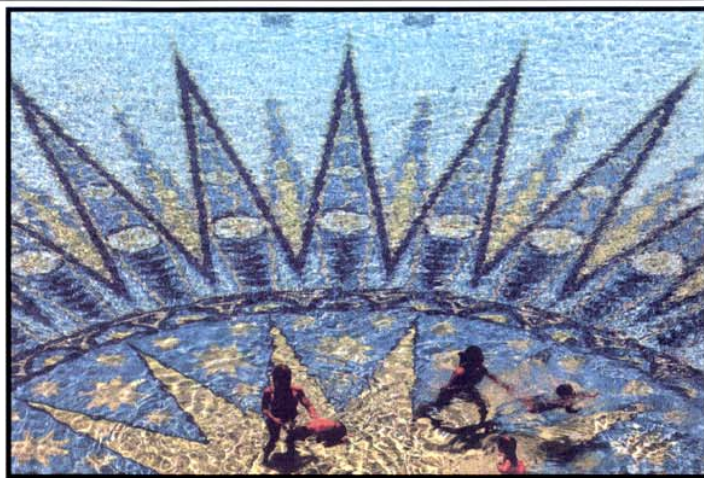
The Laguna look: A resort debuts on the Orange County Gold Coast, clearly raising the bar in this wacky, whimsical beach town.

By **SURAN SPANO**
Times Staff Writer

Laguna Beach

CALIFORNIA 133 doesn't look as though it means to go anyplace interesting after it leaves the San Diego Freeway about 50 miles southeast of Los Angeles and cuts into the stubby San Joaquin Hills. But suddenly the canyon it follows widens and the town of Laguna Beach appears, followed in swift succession by the serpentine Pacific Coast Highway, beach and shining ocean.

A friend who grew up near here describes the sight of Laguna Beach on that approach as the perfect "oh, wow" moment. I initially missed it by driving south into town on PCH, which makes it hard to choose among the charms on the bracelet that is Orange County's Gold Coast: Huntington Beach, New- [See Laguna, Page L13]



SUNNY DISPOSITION A giant mosaic adorns the infinity pool at the Montage. The resort also has a spa with private lap pool.

A new resort polishes up Laguna Beach's image

port, Laguna, Laguna Niguel and Dana Point. Wedged between the hills and ocean, with beaches at every turn, all look equally inviting.

Lately though, little Laguna has distinguished itself. In February, Montage Resort & Spa opened on a sandy cove just south of town. This dreamy and expensive place joins the short list of height-of-luxury California coast hotels, including the Lodge at Torrey Pines, Ritz-Carlton Laguna Niguel, Shutters on the Beach in Santa Monica, the Four Seasons Biltmore in Montecito, Bacara north of Santa Barbara and the Post Ranch Inn in Big Sur.

Better still, in the last 10 years or so more than 17,000 acres of stunning hill-top and shoreline land encircling Laguna has been set aside as nature preserves. Together with Crystal Cove State Park to the north and Aliso and Wood canyons to the south, the Laguna Coast Wilderness Park in the San Joaquin subregion sprawl.

Beyond these new developments, the town has eccentricities that have long set it apart, beginning with the kitschy but beloved Pageant of the Masters, a festival of *tableaux vivants* based on great works of art, held every summer since 1935.

One of the participants in the 1949 tableau was Filer Larsen, the shaggy-bearded fellow who came here in the '30s and took up a position at a downtown intersection saying hello to passersby every afternoon for 30 years or so. In 1963 the city proclaimed him Laguna's Official Greeter. Larsen died in 1975, so my official greeting was the hills coated with yellow wildflowers, as handsome as the English moors.

A parklike place

THE midday drive from central Los Angeles took only 90 minutes or so because I missed the heavy traffic on the San Diego Freeway.

Given a choice, I would have preferred a trip to Santorini or St. Tropez. But I could fit all the shoes I wanted in the trunk of my car, didn't need a passport and left home with just \$40, fairly sure I would find an automatic teller machine along the way. Such are the benefits of a close-to-home getaway.

I was headed for the Montage. But when I reached the top of the hill that overlooks the mouth of Laguna Canyon, where the town is tucked next to a perfect crescent of public beach, I saw the

sign for Las Brisas and made a sharp turn into the parking lot.

Like the Beach House to the south, Las Brisas is a view restaurant, situated on a cliff top, with prettily manicured Heisler Park in front, leading to beach access points north and a lawn bowling court. It was just about lunchtime, and seafood was on Las Brisas' menu, so I ordered crab and scallop cakes. They were hardly as good as the sight before me of clouds billowing over the ocean.

A 10-minute drive south on PCH, the low-lying Montage looks like a country club. It occupies a prime 30-acre beachfront parcel of land that used to be a trailer park and is situated so that all 262 rooms have an ocean view.

To appreciate the way the stone and gray-shingled complex spills toward the beach, you have to see it from the 7-acre seaside park, with wood benches, pavilions, pergolas, flower beds and artists at their easels. The city built the park, but maintains it.

Montage President Alan J. Fuerstman, who envisions the resort as the flagship of a new chain of luxury hotels, says its California Arts and Crafts bungalow style gives the Montage "a sense of place that speaks to Laguna." He's a brave man to open a place like the Montage in the current economy.

Fuerstman's endeavor is one of several similar high-end resorts that have opened recently in the area, including the public part of the private Balboa Bay Club and Resort and the Hyatt Regency Huntington Beach Resort and Spa. Since 1997 the number of accommodations in deluxe resorts on the southern coast of California has increased by 50%, says Bruce Balin, senior vice president of PFK Consulting, which monitors the hotel business.

"We're talking rooms for \$400 and up a night, leading me to wonder who stays there. But perhaps it isn't such a mystery. 'Your fancy California coast places might benefit from the big trend toward regional travel,' says hotel industry expert Harvey Chipkin. "A lot of people are not going to Europe and Asia. But, it seems, they have to go somewhere."

The Montage is an excellent choice if you're not up for St. Tropez or Santorini but have to go somewhere. Here, the reception area yields to a wide lobby, fronted by sea-view windows and decorated with paintings by such American Impressionists as William Wendt and Edgar Payne, who were lured by the color and drama of the coast around Laguna at the start of the 20th century.



The two arms of the resort embrace a Vegas-y pool, with cabanas, a towel and juice station, mosaic tiles and infinity edges, and a croquet court, evoking Old World resorts. The Montage spa, with its private lap pool, treatment rooms and exquisite open-air steam, sauna and whirlpool area, is to the right, as is Studio, the resort's formal restaurant.

I dined there from a menu that offered enticing fish and meat entrees in equal measure. But when the waiter told me I could choose a few items from the special six-course truffle menu, I couldn't refuse, starting with pan-seared foie gras, followed by shaved Pe'rigord truffle risotto. Afterward I told the waiter I had a yen for chocolate, so he brought me beautifully presented miniature portions of hot chocolate soufflé and cold chocolate sorbet.

After a meal like that, it's nice to be close to your room. Mine was on the fourth floor, and spacious, looking south from a sliding glass door and terrace toward Dana Point. The TV console and closet were built into the room. Arts and Crafts style, and made of beachy white wood. The room had a sitting area with a yellow couch, Empire-style lamps and a footstool scattered with glossy magazines. The king-size bed had an Italian coverlet and 400-thread-count sheets.

Two California coast landscapes decorated the walls. Toiletries included Provence Santé bath salts and body lotion. And if I'd wanted to, I could have lulled myself to sleep listening to a CD of C.P.E. Bach's *Symphony in B minor*.

When I think about it, the best thing I did at the Montage was to jog south the next morning into Aliso Canyon Wilder-ness Park. Two men out for a walk directed me to a trail head leading to a hilltop overlook covered in wildflowers, like the Impressionist landscapes at the Montage. From my Aliso Peak perch I could see Catalina Island and soon decided that, though art is a fine imitation of nature, the real thing is always better.

I stayed only one night at the ritzy new resort. But I stayed on in town for two more days, discovering that the advent of the Montage seems to have prompted other established Laguna hotels to improve their offerings. The Surf & Sand Resort, on the PCH just north of downtown, has started a \$2-million renovation of its rooms, to be finished next month,

Montage's domino effect

THE Surf & Sand Resort, on the PCH just north of downtown, has started a \$2-million renovation of its rooms, to be finished next month,

and recently opened a new spa, Aquaterra, smaller than Montage's and on the street side of the resort rather than the ocean side. I didn't try it, but I did stay at the hotel on a package that included room and breakfast for \$255.

The 164-room resort is a collection of buildings connected by walkways, surrounding a small restaurant and pool, built close to the beach. My spacious room was decorated in slightly outdated blond furniture and had a sliding glass door with no balcony overlooking the water. The tub in the bath had shutters that opened onto the room so I could soak and watch the ocean.

The next day I moved to the 70-room pleted a \$2-million renovation. It looks like an apartment complex and sits on a cliff next to Las Brisas restaurant, within walking distance of downtown. The rate, \$199 with continental breakfast, was almost as attractive as the location. My third-floor room was small, with a king-size bed, beige carpeting and walls, a ceiling fan, a settee surrounded by plenty of lamps, and shutters on the sliding glass door that yielded to a private patio. The walls were thin - I could hear voices in the hall and the toilet flushing in the room above - and there were few fancy touches. But I liked the breezy little place, one of Laguna's best hotel values.

From the inn, I could walk up the hill to the Cottage restaurant, a local favorite for breakfast in an Arts and Crafts bungalow, art galleries, cafes and the playhouse downtown and to the Laguna Art Museum. Only a few paintings from its permanent collection of California Impressionists were on display, documenting the early days of Laguna.

In 1910, the out-of-the-way town, bypassed by the railroad between Los Angeles and San Diego, had a population of 300 and was just starting to attract the plein-air painters who gave Laguna its sun-kissed, endless-summer-day sense of place. Even before it was reached by the PCH in 1926 - with actress Mary Pickford presiding at the opening ceremony for the highway - Laguna was discovered by tourists. They were followed by movie stars, prohibition-era merry-makers, flower children and then gays, who turned the town into a West Coast Fire Island in the '70s and '80s.

Underlying it all, though, is the old-fashioned, slow-lane warmth of 1910 Laguna, which lingers despite traffic, bad art and chain stores. I felt it on a stroll through the historic bungalow neighborhood just north of town, where modest double-gabled cottages, surrounded by sweet-smelling roses, evoke a time when kids could go to the beach by themselves and play outside after dark.

And, of course, the landscape: Laguna's chief glory, is almost as it was then. Like the early 20th century artists who painted it, I had a hard time deciding which I admired more: the hills or the coast. I rented a mountain bike and rode up to 702-foot Guna Point above town, where I could see both and didn't feel a moment's regret. Laguna is a town that has found its way back to the coast.

The several sides of Laguna Beach



Los Angeles Times

GETTING THERE: Laguna Beach is about 50 miles southeast of Los Angeles on Interstate 5 to 405. This location is shown.

WHERE TO STAY:

Montage Resort & Spa, 30801 S. Pacific Coast Highway, (888) 271-6953 or (949) 715-6000, fax (949) 715-6100, www.montagelaguna.com. The resort opened in February and has 262 ocean-view rooms, two restaurants, two pools, a spa and a cliff-top path offering easy access to the beach. A special introductory rate of \$395 for a standard double is available through May 31; May 22-Oct. 31, standard doubles begin at \$540.

Surf & Sand Resort, 1555 S. Pacific Coast Highway, (888) 869-7569 or (949) 497-4477, fax (949) 494-2897, www.surfandsandresort.com. It has a restaurant pool, spa and beach access. Through June 27, doubles begin at \$295; June 28-Oct. 5, at \$395.

Inn at Laguna Beach, 211 N. Pacific Coast Highway, (800) 344-4479 or (949) 497-9222, fax (949) 497-9922, www.innlaguna.com. Has a pool, 70 rooms and a cliff-top location just north of downtown and Main Beach. Rates through May 22 begin at \$119; May 23-Sept. 27 \$159; breakfast included.

Vacation Village Hotel, 647 S. Pacific Coast Highway, (800) 843-6295 or (949) 494-8566, fax (949) 494-1386, www.vacationvillage.com. A good choice for families. It has two small pools and rooms (some with kitchens) in five buildings, three of which are on the beach. Rates begin at \$83 until June 26 and at \$92 June 27-Aug. 31.

La Casa del Camino, 1289 S. Pacific Coast Highway, (888) 367-5232 or (949) 497-2446, fax (949) 494-5581, www.lacasadelmcamino.com. A small European-style hotel in a landmark 1927 Mediterranean Revival building a short walk from the beach. It doesn't have a pool, but there's a rooftop deck. Rates through May 31 begin at \$89; June 1-Sept. 1 at \$129, including continental breakfast.

WHERE TO EAT:

Las Brisas, 361 Cliff Drive, (949) 497-5334, and the **Beach House**, 619 Sleepy Hollow Lane, (949) 494-9707, are two favorite view restaurants in Laguna, featuring mainly seafood. Dinner entrees at both, \$15-\$30.

Madison Square Garden Cafe, 420 N. Pacific Coast Highway, (949) 494-0137, open for breakfast and lunch. **The Cottage**, 308 N. Pacific Coast Highway, (949) 494-3023, breakfast, lunch and dinner. All are good spots for light meals of salad, pizza, sandwiches and soups. Lunch entrees: \$7-\$10, dinner, \$10-\$25.

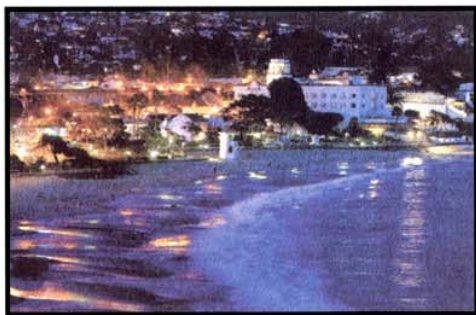
Five Feet, 328 Glenview St., (949) 497-4955, is a popular downtown dinner spot, serving Asian fusion cuisine; entrees, \$18-\$35.

The Studio, at Montage Resort & Spa (see above) serves sophisticated contemporary California cuisine, with dinner entrees such as seared Coronado Island yellowtail and roasted loin of Lamb. Dinner entrees, \$31-\$55.

TO LEARN MORE:

Laguna Beach Visitors & Conference Bureau, 252 Broadway, P.O. Box 221, Laguna Beach, CA 92652, (800) 497-1115 or (949) 497-9225, fax (949) 576-0158, www.lagunabeach.org.

SUSAN SPANIO



THE BLUE HOUR: Evening lights shimmer in the hills above town and on the wet sand of Laguna's crescent-shaped main beach.