

# TRAVEL + LEISURE

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*Montage Resort & Spa, in Laguna Beach.  
Opposite: An aquatic mural by Dora De Lencastre  
around the pool at Montage's spa.*

# Gold Rush

Three of the most exciting new hotels in America are within driving distance of Los Angeles, and they're all making waves by re-creating styles from California's past. Plus: Two great value options

BY STEPHEN DRUCKER | PHOTOGRAPHED BY FERNANDO BENGOCHEA





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ave you lost that old enthusiasm for the bowl of green apples on the reception desk? Tired of the sight of yet another bellman in black Chinese pajamas? Take heart. There is a small revolution under way in southern California that promises a respite from boutique-hotel ennui. A new generation of hotels and resorts has been built along this glamorous coast, spectacular structures inspired by the history of California. Arts and Crafts cottages from the turn of the century, shingled Laguna Beach bungalows from the twenties, a swinging Hollywood Regency paid out of *opéra* staggering amounts of money and an extraordinary passion for design have gone into creating these odes to other times and other California. It's the beginning of something really new—and it's as refreshing as a plunge in a Hockney pool.

**Montage Resort & Spa** LAGUNA BEACH If you aren't blond when you check into Montage, you might be when you check out.

Here's a Montage moment: A young woman takes her seat in the restaurant. She is wearing a short-sleeved white cashmere yardneck. Her smile is perfectly whitened and her hair is expertly lightened. (Nowhere is the power of a hair toss better understood than in Orange County, California.) On her wrist is not just any watch, but *The Watch*, a jeweled number with a pink leather strap. With nails visible across the room, she extracts the most up-to-date cell phone from just the right evening bag, flips it open, sets it on vibrate, and lays it next to her fork. What a performance. I almost applauded.

Here's another Montage moment: It's sunset, and wrapped up in my favorite cotton sweater I make my way down a wood staircase to a beachfront cove, to California in all its natural glory, and have the indescribably colored sea and sky all to myself.

Everything exciting about southern California comes together in this resort, which opened in February. The location is exceptional, on a bluff with a 180-degree view of the Pacific. The shingle-style architecture, all twists and turns and gables and porches, is incredibly romantic; it's a re-creation of the world of the California Impressionists who gathered in Laguna during the teens and twenties, lived in humble beach bungalows, and painted this coastline. And still Montage manages to be a life-imitates-TV California stage set. Why, really, does anybody come to Orange County? To step out of a white convertible and have the valet hand you your teeny shopping bag containing some estuagance, then have the door held for you while you breeze into a drop-dead lobby.

Designed down to the pens by the telephones, the rooms here have all the luxuries, yet are surprisingly relaxed. The furniture—cottage-style, dressed up with plaids and stripes—captures the feel of the beach outside. California Impressionist paintings remind you of why you're here. Grooming being a major activity in this part of the world, a lot of thought has



THE 1000  
**SHINGLE-STYLE  
BUNGALOW**

Montage Resort & Spa. Clockwise from top left: Room No. 304; Mosaic Bar & Grill, the casual poolside restaurant; hand-glazed tiles at Mosaic depicting the coastline. Opposite: The light-filled lobby.





gone into the bathroom: there are soaking tubs and pillar candles, and a bath caddy ready with a loofah and a sumptuous soap. It's assumed you will be bathing for hours.

There are two swimming pools, just where you want them, with clear views of the ocean. One of those pools belongs to Spa Montage, a large facility with many ocean-based treatments. The one I couldn't resist was Vichy Shower Rain Therapy. I lay facedown on a massage table. Many showerheads were strategically aimed. It started raining, gently. The treatment began with six minutes of hot water, followed by 30 seconds of cold water, then made a gradual transition to one minute of hot and one minute of cold. At first you dread the icy water, but soon the pleasure/pain principle takes over, and you begin to look forward to the bracer. I emerged as if shot out of a cannon.

Montage has two dining rooms. The Loft is one of those California places where the ocean view makes you want to stay all afternoon, talking about life, and the pan-seared grouper with white beans in lemon sauce couldn't have been lighter or better. Studio, in a Craftsman bungalow a few steps from the hotel, is the more serious restaurant. The executive chef, James Boyce, came from Mary Elaine's at the Proencian in Scottsdale. He cooks on a staggeringly expensive Molekni range—the other one in the United States is at Alain Ducasse in New York City—and has this country's only Molekni rotisserie, a brass-and-steel wonder that cooks different parts of the rotating bird at different temperatures. His food relies on a few clear, contrasting flavors, and you can taste it just by reading the menu: citrus-marinated Dungeness crab fillets with asaiads, pink grapefruit, and toasted capers. Studio is popular, so reserve a table as soon as you book your room.

At a resort with rates like these (more than \$200 a night), it's largely about the views, of course. A modern slab of a building would have given everybody the same big view; but it would also have had much less heart. As it is, those cozy nooks and turns give all 362 rooms some slice of the Pacific, although not always as dramatic a slice as you might think. (Rooms are categorized as Horizon, Coastal, or Surf View, but that doesn't quite tell the whole story.) Marcus R. Jackson, the resort's manager, has learned that every guest has his own notion of a good view: some need to see the beach, some like breaking waves, some insist on an expanse of sea and sky. Matching a guest to a view can take a few tries. But if you make it to Montage and that's the biggest problem in your life, you are a lucky person indeed.

**Viceroy** SANTA MONICA Don't be too quick to dismiss the Viceroy as yet another Ian Schrager-esque posess. This isn't New York, and this isn't Paris. You're in Los Angeles now, and the Viceroy never lets you forget it. The property is the most ambitious creation yet of the Koe Hotel Group and interior designer Kelly Wearstler, who caught everybody's attention with her Moo Shu Baroque style at Maison 140 in Beverly Hills. Little Maison 140 was cheap chic; the 170-room Viceroy aspires to a higher-quality thrift shop.

Everybody drives past it the first time. Look for a white sixties slab with no sign. Knowing it's opposite Shatters on the Beach may help. Once through the door, you'll have no doubt you've found it. Officially, Viceroy is described as "British style with a cosmopolitan spirit," but there's so much going

THE LOOK  
**HOLLYWOOD  
REGENCY**

Santa Monica's Viceroy  
Above, left: A view of the pool and open-air lounge areas from the lobby. Above, right: The hotel at night. Opposite, clockwise from top: The lounge, room No. 734, poolside cabana, popular with the late-night bar crowd.