



The Harvest restaurant at The Ranch at Laguna Beach in Southern California offers modern cuisine and rustic chic décor. THE RANCH AT LAGUNA BEACH

CASUAL-CHIC GETAWAY AT LAGUNA BEACH RESORT

The Ranch is family-centric and sophisticated — with spa, golf



ROCHELLE LASH
Checking In

The Ranch at Laguna Beach represents the simple life — but it is the simple life of a deluxe resort outside an upscale Pacific Coast town, in fun-loving Orange County of sunny Southern California.

The Ranch is outdoorsy, casual and family-centric, but also sophisticated, with modern California-American cuisine at Harvest, languid treatments at Sycamore Spa, plus a nine-hole golf course and salt-water pool with food and drink service at the wave of a hand.

The Ranch at Laguna Beach is difficult to pin down, so let's define terms.

First, it is not a ranch with

cowboys and livestock. It is an informal resort built on the land of an 1871 farm — one of the first homesteads in these parts.

Second, Laguna Beach is the name of a fun, fashionable town. The Ranch at Laguna Beach is a short walk (300 metres), or a golf cart ride, from the sand and sea of Aliso Beach.

The news: The Ranch at Laguna Beach recently was rebuilt from scratch and reopened two months ago on the same footprint, with low-rise rooftops and 15 pretty buildings of lodging and leisure facilities scattered around gardens and car parks. It's easy-going, walkable and tranquil.

The 97 new Ranch Laguna accommodations sport a contemporary rustic look and playful vintage touches. I call it coastal casual, with soft neutrals like stone and sand, carved furniture and fixtures in sisal. The rooms are spacious and the bathrooms have double vanities and dressing areas.

Simple life: The Ranch at Laguna

Beach has a countryside meme at the heart of a spectacular landscape, at the edge of a swath of inland wilderness. This was new California topography for me. Mountains of rock and sparse shrubs and trees create soaring canyons, and The Ranch is tucked into one of these narrow valleys, with a stream running through it.

Youngsters can roam freely from the restaurant in the main building to their rooms, pool or Ranger Station Kids' Camp, which focuses on nature walks, canyon creatures and birds of prey.

Children are entranced by Deer Talks — storytelling sessions on Wednesdays at twilight (and deer do show up).

Kids' Happy Hour happens on Thursdays, with hot chocolate and s'mores around fire pits. Grown-ups can counter with Thirsty Thursday beer tastings.

Sophisticated life: The resort also is a secluded escape if you're looking for privacy and romance. After acing the 12-lane highways of Los Angeles, you can recover with a spa, golf and Laguna Beach shopping, all one hour south of LAX.

The resort is home to Ben

Brown's Golf Course, a sprightly par-32, nine-hole links whose clubhouse and first tee are adjacent to the central pavilion.

Wellness guests can greet the sun with morning stretch and cardio-sculpt circuit training on state-of-the-art cardio machines equipped with a high-tech virtual training system.

Then, it's time for an indulgent reward. The Sycamore Spa has four treatment rooms and services such as Beach Feet, Anti-Aging facials, Eye Restore and the Gentleman's Facial for post-golf skin care.

The Ranch also partners with Hobie Surf Shop (in downtown Laguna Beach) and the Dana Point Yacht Club Paddle Centre (a 20-minute drive) to organize water sports from laid-back snorkelling and paddle boarding to thrilling surfing and deep-sea fishing.

Food and Drink: The resort's organic veggie garden and the luscious products of Southern California are basic ingredients for the cuisine at Harvest, the dazzling new dining room.

There are Asian and Mediterranean accents on dishes that have become mainstream American, with a sophisticated touch.

Starters and sharing snacks include fried Brussels sprouts, pimento mac 'n' cheese, spiced lentils with lemon yogurt and hamachi crudo with chopped kale. Main courses feature roast chicken, seared salmon and grilled steak, as well as modern comfort desserts: popcorn panna

IF YOU GO

Laguna Beach is 80 kilometres, or less than a one-hour drive, south of Los Angeles International Airport.

The Ranch at Laguna Beach: 800-223-3309, 949-499-2271, ranchlb.com; 31106 Pacific Coast Highway, Laguna Beach, Calif.

Price: Guest rooms start at \$309-\$425 U.S. (high summer season, July 4-Labour Day, rooms start at \$499 U.S.). Suites, studios, two-bedroom cottages and the two-bedroom Tree House cost more. All rates include golf-cart shuttle around the resort and to the beach, fitness centre, swimming pool, sand volleyball, bocce ball, stretch/fitness classes. Activity schedules are seasonal.

Extra: golf, golf lessons, spa treatments, Rangers for kids, water sports.

Laguna Beach tourism: 949-497-9229, visitlaguna-beach.com.

cotta, chocolate pot de creme or apple fritters.

The neighbourhood: Laguna Beach is a picturesque, upscale town stretching along Pacific Coast Highway that winds around coves and inlets.

The local Trolley — it's free — stops just outside Ranch Laguna Beach, a few kilometres to town. Don't miss Rock Etiquette and Seaside Soles among scores of appealing shops, and the lively all-American Lumberyard for casual dining. The Laguna Beach Travel App has a GPS that tracks the trolley, so you can time your transit.

The town also is an artists' colony, with more than 100 galleries, the Laguna Art Museum and several summertime symposiums: the Laguna Art-a-Fair, the Festival of Arts and the Sawdust Art Festival. The nearly 100-year-old Laguna Playhouse has featured many stars, including Bette Davis, Harrison Ford, Leslie Caron and Val Kilmer.

Outside of town, the dramatic cliffs and desert-like terrain attract hikers, cyclists, artists and bird-watchers. The Pacific still is the big draw, for surfing, boating or nighttime bonfires on the beach.

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