

A trio of Destination Hotels & Resorts properties between L.A. and San Diego captures the SoCal spirit with a bit of old-school Hollywood flair.

By Kevin Kaminski

California Dreamin'

Mother Earth is ready for her close-up along the coast of Palos Verdes Peninsula. With the sun gently kissing the horizon, an early evening glow has bathed miles of dramatic bluffs—defiantly withstanding one crashing Pacific wave after another—in the kind of ethereal light for which cinematographers drop to their knees in thanks.

It's a made-to-order backdrop that belongs on the big screen—but that guests at Terranea Resort in Rancho Palos Verdes can experience virtually any day of the year.

This is exactly how Southern California casts its summer spell on the East Coast, especially South Floridians dripping and defeated from either 1) relentless afternoon downpours or 2) relentless humidity. SoCal not only gives tourists the best seats in the house for scenes of jaw-dropping natural splendor (and subsequent outdoor activities), it also throws in a little evening sweater

weather from July to September. For good measure, it teases with enough Hollywood to keep you wondering if, just maybe, you might catch Clooney and Pitt hatching the plot for "Ocean's Fourteen" at your hotel bar.

At least that's what it felt like during a weeklong summer stretch between San Diego and Los Angeles at three coastal hideaways of Destination Hotels & Resorts. In typical Destination style, each property captured the essence of its surrounding area, which, in this case, went a long way toward explaining why the shadow of Seabiscuit looms as large in Del Mar as the memory of Lloyd Bridges in a wetsuit does at Terranea.

Where the Turf Meets the Surf

Long before Bing Crosby started peddling Minute Maid orange juice, he was selling locals in the seaside town of Del Mar on the thrill of horseracing. Crosby was one of the original founders of a track that would become an American treasure in racing circles

Crowds gather cliff-side for sunset cocktails at Nelson's, part of the sprawling resort complex at Terranea.



Clockwise, from above: Summer horse-racing season draws more than 16,000 fans per day at Del Mar Thoroughbred Club; outdoor dining at L'Auberge's popular Kitchen 1540; a rooftop view of the chic, contemporary exterior at L'Auberge.

(the site is now called Del Mar Thoroughbred Club). He greeted fans at the gate when the track officially opened in 1937; and his rendition of "Where the Turf Meets the Surf" remains one of the track's slogans.

A year later, in a prelude to the horse's epic November 1938 showdown with War Admiral, Seabiscuit edged Ligaroti (which was co-owned by Crosby) in a match race at Del Mar that had much of the nation, via the radio broadcast, on the edge of its seats—and 20,000 in the stands doing the same.

What all this has to do with the contemporary comforts at L'Auberge Del Mar may not reveal itself initially, especially as you're trying to process the relaxed, upscale spaces that unfold beyond the open-air lobby, from the popular "Living Room" bar and chic outdoor deck area all the way to a pool that overlooks the Pacific.

But, soon enough, the links between past and present at L'Auberge converge. The 120-room resort, lauded by *Condé Nast* and *Travel + Leisure* as one of the best hotels in Southern California, speaks directly to the casual affluence that always has given Del Mar, some 20 miles north of San Diego, its identity.

The resort, just like the town, couldn't be more quaint and hospitable. But both will ask visitors to step outside. And for good reason. Surfers congregate along a parcel of ocean, right about where 15th Street dead-ends, which locals swear produces the best breaks on the coast. Cyclists seem to outnumber motorists, many of them pedaling equipment so over-the-top sophisticated that the bikes, according to a hotel manager, sometimes cost

more than the cars they drive.

As for Del Mar's other storied outdoor pursuit, just know that L'Auberge throws the best pony party that side of the Mississippi. When the summer horseracing season starts in mid-July, L'Auberge hosts an opening-day bash that locals call "the

event of the year," complete with a signature cocktail—the Vodka Julep—to rival the mint juleps served at the Kentucky Derby.

The party, one of many events throughout the year at L'Auberge, gives out-of-town foodies a chance to experience what "Del Martians," as residents affectionately call themselves, already know: that Brandon Fortune, executive chef at the resort's Kitchen 1540, may be one of the best-kept culinary secrets on the West Coast. The Auburn University grad brings some Southern inspiration to an ever-evolving menu filled with locally sourced ingredients. During our summer visit, his culinary roots revealed themselves in dishes like curried pork cheek gumbo, shrimp-n-grits, and crawfish bisque with corn and crab.

It's just one more reason to place a travel bet on L'Auberge and Del Mar.

Mission Accomplished

What happens when you give a Hollywood film producer access to the largest man-made island in the United States? In the case of Jack Skirball, it was a chance to carve out his own slice of Paradise.

Skirball, who produced Alfred Hitchcock's "Shadow of a Doubt" (1943) among other movies, first explored Mission Bay and its more than 4,200 acres in the early 1960s. He immediately saw its possibilities as a retreat that could deliver a tropical vacation within a stone's throw of downtown San Diego.

Five decades and a \$20 million renovation later, the aptly named Paradise Point remains an ode to Skirball's original vision, as well as a nod to Bill Hader's Stefon character on "Sat-

urday Night Live." That's because this place has everything, starting with 462 California-style bungalow rooms overlooking the lagoon, the bay or any number of lush garden settings—although, to be fair, lush is underselling it.

Back in the day, famed landscape architect Frank Rich dropped more than 600 plant species from 20 different countries into the ground, creating a paradise within the Paradise for horticultural enthusiasts. It's worth taking one of the guided tours offered, if only to identify the dragon tree from Madagascar that bleeds poison.

Living amid the hibiscus, the silk trees from Asia, the singer plants (used in massage oils) and the cactus trees with branches that weigh as much as 100 pounds is a veritable Wild Kingdom's worth of land- and sea-dwelling creatures—everything from exotic birds and red-eared slider turtles to leopard sharks.

That's not to say humans take a backseat at Paradise Point, which hosts more than 300 events per year, plus an additional 150 weddings (the property has four outdoor wedding venues). The resort features five pools, including one for adults only; a marina with sailboats, paddleboards, kayaks, Jet Skis and other watercrafts available for rent; 14 bonfire pits; five tennis courts; access to nearly 30 miles of cycling and walking paths; and a 7,000-square-foot spa with eight treatment rooms.

On the restaurant front, some things never change at Paradise Point, which is a good thing when it comes to the Barefoot Bar & Grill, a casual dining/drinking mainstay since 1962. Originally built to double as a bunker

during the Cuban Missile Crisis, locals like to say that, today, it's the place to "get drunk but not bombed."

The resort's signature restaurant, Tidal, includes its own throwback flourishes—like distressed wood repurposed from the original deck of Paradise Point's famed observation tower (it's 81 steps to the top, where views of Mission Bay and downtown San Diego

await). Then there's the original Smeg refrigerator that the bar staff fills with Pabst Blue Ribbon. Why PBR? It's a chance to raise an aluminum can to Karl Strauss, the former master brewer at Pabst, who went on to launch his own company in San Diego in 1989, thus kick-starting the craft beer craze in Southern California.

The culinary side of the ledger at Tidal is in the capable hands of chef de cuisine Amy DiBiase, a Johnson & Wales grad who infuses her inventive menu of mostly seafood dishes with Mediterranean influences. Her olive-oil poached halibut, served atop a pan-fried brandade cake, was one of the foodie highlights of the trip.

Paradise Point is within shouting distance of SeaWorld and just a short drive from San Diego attractions like its world-renowned zoo. But chances are, you'll find more than enough to keep you on the island—just as Jack Skirball intended.

Paradise Point features more than 600 plant species.



From top: One of the eight treatment rooms at Paradise Point; the resort's legendary Barefoot Bar & Grill



From left: The spa at Terranea takes relaxation to a new level; the backdrops along the par-3 course make it tough to concentrate on golf. **Opposite page:** A cliff-side trail at Terranea leads all the way to a hidden cave.

A Site to Behold

The problem with checking in at Terranea is that, eventually, guests have to check out. In fact, the only challenge greater than returning the room key is walking through the resort's Sea Beans Coffee & Sweets shop without ordering one of the freshly made custard-filled cronuts.

Terranea, about 30 minutes from LAX, is so perfectly situated amid the natural splendor along the Palos Verdes Peninsula, that it's hard to imagine this 102-acre oasis was anything but a majestic, Mediterranean-inspired resort.

But as longtime SoCal residents recall, this pristine piece of real estate first drew visitors as a theme park. Starting in 1954, 10 years before SeaWorld opened in San Diego, Marineland of the Pacific played host to thousands of dolphin and killer whale shows before finally pulling the plugs on its saltwater tanks in 1986.

It didn't take long for a development company to purchase the land, but the same can't be said for the process that led to Terranea. It took the better part of 22 years, a few property transfers, approvals from the city of Rancho Palos Verdes and the California Coastal Commission, and resolution for some 300 entitlements involving potential environmental concerns before the doors finally opened in June 2009.

It was worth the wait.

The 582-room property—including traditional hotel suites, 50 ocean-view casitas and 32 villas that offer up to 2,800 square feet of living space—brings new meaning to the term "retreat." It all starts, of course, with a coastline so dramatic that Hollywood can't stay away from it. Movies from "The Aviator" and "Pearl Harbor" to the first three "Pirates of the Caribbean" adventures have called on its bluffs and landscape as a backdrop.

Terranea complements the setting with

an array of activities, programs and daily rituals—including the sunset ringing of the "Singing Bowls" on the terrace of the resort lobby, a nightly ceremony meant to promote healing and relaxation. The same can be said for the award-winning 50,000-square-foot spa, complete with 25 treatment rooms (all with views of the Pacific), copper soaking tubs, Swiss showers, a full-service salon, a private Olympic-sized pool, fire pits (of which there are nearly 230 total around the resort) and even a separate Spa Café.

The café is one of eight dining venues, including an ode to Lloyd Bridges in all of his scuba-diving splendor. Nelson's, the only restaurant perched atop one of the cliffs, takes its name from the ex-Navy frogman that Bridges played during his four-season run (1958–61) on "Sea Hunt," which was filmed in and around Marineland.

Executive chef Bernard Ibarra oversees all of the cuisine at Terranea, which sources locally from a nearby 90-acre vegetable farm and its own herb garden, as well as through local fisherman. Ibarra and his team even produce their own sea salt, a product so pure that the official charged with inspecting it asked to keep the test batch for his own kitchen use.

The passion and artistry that goes into the cuisine is best exemplified at mar'sel, the resort's signature fine-dining restaurant that recently hired chef de cuisine Charles Olalia to put an eclectic, contemporary spin on seasonal California dishes from Dungeness crab chaud froid to red snapper in a banana salt crust with pickled papaya. Two other dining experiences of note: Bashi, with its contemporary Asian menu; and Catalina Kitchen, which featured a stunning Friday night seafood buffet that could be complemented with all-you-can-eat snow crab or king crab legs.

Terranea even sports a nine-hole, par-3 golf course, made all the more challenging by the endless parade of jackrabbits darting in and out of the brush. Losing sight of the wildlife becomes much easier on the final few holes, which play right into a distant view of the ocean.

Like everything else about Terranea, it was the kind of experience that made you want to do it all over again. As soon as possible. ☺



If you go

Terranea Resort

100 Terranea Way
Rancho Palos Verdes,
Calif.
310/265-2800
terranea.com

Paradise Point

1404 Vacation Road
San Diego, Calif.
858/274-4630
paradisepoint.com

L'Auberge Del Mar

1540 Camino Del Mar
Del Mar, Calif.
858/259-1515
laubergedelmar.com

Flights: American Airlines offers direct flights to Los Angeles International Airport (LAX) from Palm Beach International Airport in West Palm Beach.



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