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SOCAL

# CALIFORNIA COASTAL CREATIONS

**FIVE GOLF GETAWAYS.**  
SO LITTLE TIME.  
HOW TO CHOOSE THE ONE  
THAT'S RIGHT FOR YOUR  
NEXT VACATION

*story by Darin Bunch*

**T**here's no reason to stress out. We know the decision ain't easy, but it's not exactly a Sophie's choice. There's no wrong answer to the question: "Which coastal Southern California golf resort should I pick for my next vacation?" The fact that you're weighing the options at all makes you a winner already, in more ways than one. So have some fun with this cool conundrum — see what's out there and how each of these five resorts along the shores of the Pacific fits your personal sense of getaway style.

We've luxuriated at all five — both Park Hyatt Aviara and La Costa Resort and Spa in Carlsbad, St. Regis Monarch Beach in Dana Point, The Resort at Pelican Hill in Newport Coast and Terranea Resort in Rancho Palos Verdes — and the combinations of golf, spa, food, beverage, beach access and additional leisure activities would get any traveler's heart pumping with excitement at the thought of visiting just one of these resorts (an ultimate SoCal Coastal Golf Trail of all five would be the vacation of a lifetime, but it would require deep, deep pockets and probably at least a month of time away from work — then again, if you can afford to visit all five, you're probably not punching a time clock anyway).

The golf, for one thing, is as good as it gets. Tom Fazio built 36 holes at Pelican Hill in Orange County. Just down Pacific Coast Highway, Robert Trent Jones Jr. worked his magic at Monarch Beach Golf Links. Arnold Palmer and partner Ed Seay did a masterful job routing Aviara through a residential community in northern San Diego County. Historic La Costa recently brought in rising design stars Damian Pascuzzo and Steve Pate to renovate the former North Course into the newly named Champions Course (Pascuzzo+Pate's Old Course at Monarch Dunes farther up the coast in Nipomo remains one of the country's best under-the-radar tracks, followed by the 12-hole, par-3 Challenge Course, which brought a new dimension to an age-old concept). And another rising star, Todd Eckenrode, might have built an even better par-3 course on the bluffs above Terranea Resort in Rancho Palos Verdes, the northernmost point of the Southern California coastal golf scene (and just up the road from Trump National Golf Club, Los Angeles, perhaps the best oceanfront 18 holes in the entire Golden State).

And all five resorts have seen big changes in recent years. Both Terranea and The Resort at Pelican Hill plowed ahead despite

the economic downturn to open in grand style, while Monarch Beach ended up under new, stronger ownership — retaining the St. Regis brand — and Aviara's former brand gave way to Park Hyatt, becoming a better overall resort in terms of comfort, service and amenities in the process. And then there's La Costa, which is in the process of capping off a \$50 million renovation of everything from golf to rooms to pool, spa and dining facilities.

Like we said earlier, this ain't gonna be easy. So let's get started.

#### PARK HYATT AVIARA

How does a resort lose its Four Seasons moniker and actually get better? Lots of hard work, and it shows at the newly named Park Hyatt Aviara Resort. But it helps that this northern San Diego County getaway along Baticuitos Lagoon and just across Interstate 5 from the ocean has always had a strong foundation in golf travel.

The 20-year-old Palmer-Seay design has aged quite gracefully, yet was a refined beauty from the beginning, expertly routed through a development without allowing the real estate to encroach on the golf experience and landscaped in a way that creates a true feeling that you're rolling through a colorful, isolated oasis before spilling out onto the wide-open, lagoon-sidel par-4 finisher for one final, unforgettable challenge, ending in a knee-knocking approach over water to the 18th green.

But some of the most fun we had during a recent stay at Aviara came at night — in the downstairs Game Room. More than just a place for mom and dad to stash the kids (Aviara also offers the daily Camp Hyatt program for youngsters 4 through 12 years old), this collection of indoor amusements includes pool tables, video games, big-screen TVs, air hockey and more — all the stuff that brings out the kid at heart and perhaps a little friendly action among buddies.



Plus there's lots of comfortable seating for groups to just hang out.

Aviara's amenities also include the 15,000-square-foot spa, an incredible tennis facility and a Beach Butler service with transportation and all the goodies you'll need for a day of playing in the sand and surf. Plus the restaurants range from the high-end cuisine of Chef Jesse Paul at Vivace (don't miss the Risotto all'Astice Carnaroli with lobster or the Gnocchi con Maiale Bresato with braised pork belly and 63-minute egg) to the Argyle Steakhouse in the golf course clubhouse, where terrace dining provides a view of the 18th hole and beyond. And since San Diego's weather seldom disappoints, rarely a day goes by that you won't want to be outside as much as possible at Park Hyatt Aviara.

#### THE RESORT AT PELICAN HILL

As one of the newer kids on the block, Pelican Hill and its parent, The Irvine Company, have pretty much thought of everything. Bungalow amenities take advantage of today's technological advances to the Nth degree, and the sumptuous beds rival only the St. Regis in sink-into-a-dream comfort. Around the resort, small touches make

the experience all the more hassle-free, including the ability to drive your vehicle to a parking spot right in front of your door, eliminating the need for valet parking — and the fees that often go with it.

Throughout the resort, the mix of little details and large-scale Palladian-inspired architecture creates a sense that you've been transported to another place and another time — Dorothy, we're not near Los Angeles anymore. Our favorite resort feature? The visually striking — and equally refreshing — Coliseum Pool, a perfect circle 136 feet in diameter with more than 1 million glass tiles, cut and laid by hand. Overlooking the golf courses and blue view beyond, the Coliseum is the perfect spot to reserve a private cabana with television for a day of sports, swimming, beverage service and more.

Speaking of sports, as good as Fazio's 36 holes are — both courses would garner votes in a Best of Southern California poll although we prefer the shorter, more target-golf South because of its proximity to the Pacific and stellar oceanside 3-pars — Pelican Hill's greatest feat might be the fine-dining upgrades that arrived with the opening of the resort. At the clubhouse-attached Pelican Grill, terrace dining offers striking sunset views of Catalina, and the unique Table 200 booth



tucked into a small alcove off the main dining room is *the spot* for that special occasion, seating up to eight served family-style with wine pairings. Back at the resort, the Tuscan-influenced Andrea is another must, especially the Morel Mushroom Risotto served warm from a giant Parmesan cheese wheel. And whatever you do, don't pass on the pasta — it's all fresh and handmade in Pelican Hill's temperature-controlled Pasta Room.

Other resort highlights include the 23,000-square-foot spa, plus Camp Pelican, with programs for children ages 4-12 as well as youngsters 13-17. Plus, there's 3.5 miles of coastline to be explored just across Pacific Coast Highway at Crystal Cove State Park, where a renovation of sorts is in the works to turn this historic area into a mini-retreat of its own.

And that's just the beginning of what The Resort at Pelican Hill has to offer. For the truly upscale experience, you can step up to the Villas, where a staff is assigned for your stay, including concierge, butler and personal chef upon request. Not that the food in your bungalow isn't great in its own right — room service at Pelican Hill is truly gourmet, some of the best in-room meals we've eaten anywhere in the world.

#### TERRANEA RESORT

The first night I stayed in Rancho Palos Verdes, the walk to my room was especially long. But then I stepped out onto the private balcony and understood why. A storm was blowing in, and the soothing ocean breeze mixed with the rain while the surf crashed, literally, below my feet. And I knew Terranea Resort was a special place.

I've since been back a few times, exploring a bit more with each visit — just enough to whet my appetite for yet another return. Speaking of appetites, Nelson's might be one of the best post-golf bar-and-grill eateries in the West. The location is certainly unbeatable, overlooking the ocean with fire pits to warm the chill and lighten the night sky once the sun has sunk into the horizon. With a solid collection of California wines, microbrewed beers and specialty blended drinks, I always manage to find something to greet the approaching darkness. And the menu is loaded with pure American comfort — pulled pork sandwiches, crabcake sliders, even a *Top Chef*-like twist on the classic ice cream sandwich for dessert. And if you drink a bit too much, Catalina Kitchen is one of the better breakfast spots around, with a variety of hangover-fighting morning fare.

For pure drama, Terranea is the best of the coastal golf resorts — its hang-off-the-cliff ambiance, including the ultra-cool adults-only pool that's even closer to the water than everything else, gives you that true sense of standing at the edge of the world. Up above, the golf course is euphoric for short-game junkies. But more importantly, it's one — and arguably the best — of a number of new 3-par collections that fill a growing void in the game today. Almost anyone of any talent level can take a shot at golf on a course like this — and a round never takes more than two hours. That's not to say it's a pushover. Designer Todd Eckenrode uses the rolling terrain, native grasses and lots of bunkers to create a challenge for those who want one — shooting under par out here requires skill with the short clubs, and errant shots can punish even the best players. Plus, if you need to get your fix of championship golf, there's always Trump's track down the road, where you can hit the driver all day long — if you can hit it straight — but will also appreciate the short-game skills you sharpened at Terranea. In my mind, the Trump-Terranea connection is the perfect one-two punch for golf travelers in search of fun, variety and challenge. And the views from both courses are among the best you'll find anywhere.

Thankfully, Terranea isn't your typical *golf resort*, and that's one of its strengths, something that sets it apart from the other guys. Visitors don't feel like they need to spend half a day — or more — on the golf course at the expense of all the other cool stuff the resort has to offer. With a short course like this, you can get your fill of iron play, chips and putts and still have the rest of the day to relax and enjoy the beauty of sunny Southern California. Or you can take advantage of one of Terranea's specialties — restorative therapies — by spending time in the 50,000-square-foot oceanfront Spa, Fitness and Wellness Center.

In addition, Terranea's three heated swimming pools include private cabanas, food service and a whole lotta fun — especially the Resort pool, which is available for all guests and features a 140-foot waterslide, children's splash zone, two hot tubs and a fire pit. The Cielo Point pool offers spectacular ocean views for guests 18 years of age and older, and the Spa pool provides even closer Pacific scenery and is available before and after spa services. Other amenities include a Children's Center with interactive programs; Discovery Trail, a bluff-top path that connects to miles of coastal trails; and a secluded beach cove for those who want to experience the ocean up close.



#### ST. REGIS MONARCH BEACH

Butler service is always at the top of the list when describing the amenities of St. Regis resorts, and the Monarch Beach property is no exception. For junior suites and above — they're not as expensive as you might think — you get a personal assistant to help with everything you can possibly think of, from shoe shines and pants pressing to more substantial requests, like specialty items and even things you've yet to think about.

"It's all about offering *bespoke* service — one of our core value words, meaning tailored service," says Michael Mustafa, the resort's director of sales and marketing. "It's about tailoring an experience for you, and we feel the butler can offer that even one step further in terms of trying to anticipate your needs so that they are always there, one step ahead of what you're thinking."

Another place where Monarch Beach's service is a step ahead is on the beach. Monarch Bay Club's private stretch of beach — or as close as you can get to a private stretch of beach in regulation-happy California — has that ultra-secluded feeling about it, whether you're soaking up the sun, swimming in the surf or dining on restaurant's outdoor deck at

sunset, which makes for a truly magical meal. But there's so much more that we love about St. Regis Monarch Beach. The Robert Trent Jones Jr. golf course climbs high onto the hillside and works its way down to the water during a round. At the 30,000-square-foot Spa Gaucin, you can toss your cares away, both literally and figuratively, with a coin into the fountain. Underwater music is pumped into the lap pool to enhance the soothing exercise experience. Michael Mina's modern American cuisine is featured in the Stonehill Tavern, along with his expert staff's wine selections.

But, above all, it's St. Regis' extraordinary service we love best.

"That's a big selling point about the experience you're going to receive here," Mustafa says while discussing the resort-rich Southern California coast. "We're all pretty properties, we all have crown mouldings and great artwork and marble and this and that, but it's about the service, it's about the attention to detail, it's about remembering who you are when you arrive and making sure you feel unbelievably welcome. We want you to remember that this was an experience long after you're gone. That's what you get here. That's really what the five-star, five-diamond is all about."

#### LA COSTA RESORT AND SPA

When we heard that Damian Pascuzzo and Steve Pate were being brought in to handle the renovation of La Costa's North Course, we couldn't have been more delighted. After all, we've been fans of Pascuzzo's work since the day we first played his brand-new Old Course at Monarch Dunes on California's Central Coast, and we knew that Dick Wilson's original vision was in good hands. "The bunkers were obsolete, in the wrong place, which is understandable given the technology," Pascuzzo told *Fairways + Greens* in September. "We have the bunkers in the right place now."

He also said they worked to keep that "Dick Wilson large-scale look with grassy fingers" and the three-dimensional quality the bunkers had. "We put a lot more diversity into the golf course," he added.

The "new" Champions Course is part of La Costa's \$50 million project — quite a journey from the \$3 million facility that opened in 1965 — that's expected to transform the resort into the getaway we've always known it could be once again and regain its place as a leader in the high-end golf-travel game. With a new look to the 43,000-square-foot spa, a cool new pool-and-deck area and upgrades to the rooms

and accommodations throughout the property, La Costa is making a statement in the vacation industry. Of course, they've always made a statement when it comes to food, with locally inspired cuisine at the stylish Legends Bistro and BlueFire Grill restaurants.

Back on the fairways, the Champions Course is once again a true reflection of the resort's rich history and tradition, which has challenged some of professional golf's greatest players for more than 40 years as La Costa hosted a variety of events such as the WGC-Accenture Match Play. But the new design, which includes four completely new holes on the Champions, makes the course more accessible for everyone. "We set up the course to accommodate a broader range of players," Pascuzzo says. "The greens remain about the same size, but they are more undulating, with variable slopes rather than the back-to-front orientation of Dick Wilson's greens."

The end result is a more strategic course the designer is proud to put the Pascuzzo+Pate name on.

"Be patient, give it a year, the course has to break in, weather with time," he says. "But the members get it, they understand what the goals were — they were patient. I couldn't be happier." **FG**