

Montage Laguna Beach: A Slice of the Southern California Good Life

By: **Cynthia Dial**, Posted: Jun. 30th, 2011



Photo Credit: Cynthia Dial

From the moment I rolled in, I felt special. As soon as my auto pulled into the circular drive bellmen swept from the double doors - one to take my car, one for the luggage and one to welcome me. Speaking softly into a mouthpiece (ala Secret Service agent), I overheard the announcement of my arrival.

Have they mistaken me for a VIP? I wondered. The answer is both yes and no. I am considered a very important guest, but in truth, no more so than any visitor to **Montage Laguna Beach**. "Hello, Mrs. Dial," greeted Amanda, an attractive blonde in a smart white blazer with colorful embroidered flowers (the resort's couture-like uniform), as I approached the front desk. It was only the beginning of Montage's renowned hospitality.



My Amanda-guided resort tour unveiled my-kind-of lobby - an accommodating old fashioned gathering spot with a fireplace on one end, a bar on the other and a pianist and an assortment of cozy seating areas nestled in between - all set against a floor-to-ceiling backdrop of the Pacific Ocean.



Since its 2003 opening in California's creative arts community of Laguna Beach, the five-story, 250-room resort - perched atop a 50-foot ocean bluff amid 30 acres of coveted shoreline property - has been a coastal presence. This prime piece of land is called Treasure Island, named for a movie of that title filmed here in 1939.

And the two palms towering over Studio (Montage's signature eatery) are Lucy and Desi, honoring the celebrated stars of *The Long, Long Trailer*, also filmed on site. So

knowing its star-sprinkled background the seemingly single-level gray shingled lodge might catch a first-time arrivee off guard when spotted from the PCH (local lingo for Pacific Coast Highway) - for initially it appears inconspicuous and understated.

BEST RATE
GUARANTEE

BOOK THIS HOTEL NOW WITH CONFIDENCE!

Personal Service. Best Rate Guarantee. 100% Luxury Hotels.

BOOK NOW >

But further inspection reveals much more: architecture replicative of California's early 1900s Arts and Crafts period, multi-levels spilling from street level down the hillside toward the sea, a mosaic tile sunburst-embellished pool punctuated by white loungers and the luxurious lures of a 20,000-square-foot world-class spa, two nationally-noted restaurants and *Better Homes and Gardens*-like grounds.



Though they reside nearby Shelia and George Franklin couldn't resist a weekend with their granddaughter at this around-the-corner getaway. *Why?* I quizzed knowing the expenditure translates to numerous '\$' signs. "Its reputation," they shared. "We've eaten at Studio several times in the past, and it was wonderful. But until now we hadn't stayed here. It was time."



And understandably so. A magnet for those seeking exclusivity, Montage's fine touches are plentiful: all beachfront guestrooms, oceanfront fitness center, three outdoor pools, 2,200 label wine collection, 400-thread count bed linens, 100 percent goose down pillows and the list goes on. It's coastal lifestyle at its most exceptional.

And continuing in the "exceptional" category is Studio Chef Craig Strong, a semi finalist in the 2009, 2010 James Beard Award for Best Chef/Pacific. "How would you like to experience Studio tonight," asked Chef Strong when we met tableside in the small dining room. "Do you want to order off the menu? Does the Chef's Tasting Menu appeal to you? Or would you like for me to surprise you?" he quizzed. "Surprise us," my daughter and I quickly replied and we were not disappointed.

Eight courses, one cocktail, five white wines and two reds later, we agreed that we had been privy to an extraordinary event. Favorite pairing: seared Hudson Valley Farms foie gras served with Adelsheim Pinot Noir, Oregon 2008. Close second: Moroccan spiced Maine diver sea scallops with fresh chick pea, socca crisp, dates, red frill lettuce and burnt orange vinaigrette enhanced by Dr. Loosen Riesling Kabinett, Germany 2009.

The latest in Chef Strong's commitment to delectable dishes is Studio's organic garden, a delicious extension of the restaurant. Only steps from Studio's entrance, the 1,000-square-foot garden's five raised plots overflow with fruit, vegetables and herbs. Even Spa Montage takes advantage of the fresh produce, with spa director Julie Raistrick using the fresh-from-the-garden elements in select spa treatments. *Truly Soleful* utilizes the benefits of rosemary, which encourages circulation stimulation and soothes aching feet.



But it was when I retired to my room to find a box of handcrafted chocolates that the day was succinctly summated. The accompanying note: "Enjoy a sweet end to an even sweeter day. Montage Laguna Beach."

INSIDER TIDBITS:

- Begin your Studio dining experience with a seasonal cocktail designed by Tashina, the restaurant's mixologist. **Example:** *Sweet Citrus* (bourbon, kumquats, ginger ale, lime and raw sugar).
- Book a 60-minute spa treatment, giving you all-day access to the no children, no cell phone, no smoking spa pool. **First-hand observation:** pool attendant offering an impromptu shoulder massage to a spa pool patron.

- Stop in The Loft for a five-star snack. Called the "perfect bite," fromagers Jason or Mina will pair the ingredients of your tasty tidbit. **My bite of perfection:** Winchester gouda cheese on date nut bread, topped with lavender caramel jam.

- End your evening with dessert by the lawn's outdoor fire pit, toasting marshmallows for s'mores. **Tip:** Order them through in-room dining; they'll be delivered al fresco.

- Join a beach yoga class. Last time I pondered Montage's plein air workout, an attractive woman whose body told me she was no stranger to the spa world stood nearby, convincing me that to look more like her I should consider the activity. **Her identity:** Actress Heather Locklear.

- Visit the beach's tide pools using the in-room low tide time table as your guide. A walk north from the bottom of the stairs will guide you to drier rocks where you'll see such marine urchins as striped shore crabs and hermit crabs. And if the tide pool docent is in house, take advantage of a guided exploration.





