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HOTELS

MONTAGE LAGUNA BEACH

BY RUTHANNE TERRERO





One of the first things we did after arriving at **Montage Laguna Beach** (www.montage-lagunabeach.com), aside from gaping at the resort's close proximity to the Pacific Ocean, was to head down to its organic Studio Garden outside of Studio restaurant. We'd heard about it but wanted to visit with Chef Craig Strong so he could personally show us the five raised garden beds that had been planted earlier this year with a lovely variety of fruits and vegetables. As we stood there, eyeing the bunches of lavender, rosemary, and varieties of basil that were growing happily alongside tomato plants and marigolds, a cool breeze wafted over to us from the ocean. Just then, Chef Strong was telling us how he'd recently brought a young guest out to the garden to pick her own basil for a plate of simple pasta. It was at that moment that we got Montage and its self-admitted quest to

STUDIO RESTAURANT (left) at Montage delivers truly unique experiences to its guests.

SPA LAP POOL (above) overlooks the Pacific and is one of the quietest places at the resort.

deliver truly unique experiences to its guests.

The next evening, we got Montage even more when Chef Casey Overton graced us with a tasting dinner complete with wine pairings. The best part, however, was when, toward the end of the meal, he invited us over to his cheese gallery to taste some excellent fromage paired with a variety of honeys. Just when we'd thought we couldn't eat another thing, our taste buds lit up and we decided we needed a cheese and honey bar in our very own home.

Interesting to note: Both chefs are dramatically different in their cuisine choices and styles, but each made us, and the other guests around us, feel as if we were dining in their own homes. That's the ambience of Montage.

Now, back to that view of the Pacific. If you're thinking that Montage, Laguna Beach is one of those ocean resorts set so far above the ocean that you'll have to take a helicopter down to access the water, guess again. The most striking feature of the property is its closeness to the beach; this is a true seaside resort.

To make the most of the experience, book a Bungalow

Suite, especially during the summer months; they're great for a family confab, since they can be expanded from a one- to two-bedroom suite. Ocean Surf Rooms and Suites have the top views of the Pacific; for the quietest of these, reserve one on the southern end of the resort. Best Part: They have balconies with excellent views, and in the bathrooms, there are double sinks, spacious tubs and separate showers.

Do bring the dog: The resort welcomes pets on its ground-floor accommodations.

Be sure to visit the **Spa Montage** (www.spamontage.com); it has 21 treatment rooms. (Hint: We suggest booking a treatment if only to be able to enjoy the tranquility of its pool, which overlooks the Pacific and is one of the quietest places at the resort. It's also the ideal place to enjoy a meal from the spa menu or from the main pool menu after a facial or massage.) Nice Touch: Some of the therapy ingredients come from Chef Strong's herb garden. If you're feeling particularly indulgent, reserve the Signature Surrender, a 120-minute program in which a therapist determines the guest's treatment through a consulta-





tion. Spa Director Julie Raistrick (jraistrick@montagehotels.com; 949-715-6001) can point you in the right direction as far as treatments are concerned, but we hear that Noel Dial is the most-requested massage therapist and is known for his customized approach to body care. Briana Richardson is the most-requested aesthetician. Hint: We hear she has a high repeat-guest factor, so remember to book when you're making your room reservations.

The spa has great exercise facilities with views of the ocean; be sure to make the most of the surroundings by signing up for a Thalassic Beach Walk, which starts with a little stretching down on the sand and evolves into a brisk walk along the ocean.

Chef Concierge Carol Leenerts (cleenerts@montagehotels.com; 949-715-6142) can arrange tons of fun things to do, such as kayaking, tennis lessons, private helicopter rides, private yacht charters and private art tours.

Want some SoCal shopping? Head to South Coast Plaza, where Montage guests are provided with complimentary valet

THE GARDEN (top left) outside Studio has five raised beds growing fruits and vegetables.

THE CHEESE BAR (above right) pairs cheeses with honey.

THE ALISO SUITE (right), a.k.a. Room 570, is 1,700 square feet in size and has a fireplace.

passes, admission to the plaza's Access VIP Hospitality Suite, and a savings passport.

The Laguna area is home to several art festivals throughout the year, so be sure to reserve ahead (particularly for the Pageant of the Masters, Sawdust Festival and Art-A-Fair). Summer is the highest-demand period.

The resort is run by the dynamic Todd Orlich, but luxury travel advisors should contact Sales Manager Hanae Nagasawa Kalland (hkalland@montagehotels.com; 949-715-6138) with questions.

To get to Montage, fly in to Orange County's John Wayne International Airport (SNA), which is just 18 miles from

the resort, and approximately half an hour by car. Private jets can land at Signature Aviation & Atlantic Aviation, which is adjacent to SNA. We drove down from Los Angeles, which can take two or more hours, depending on traffic.

We toiled around town in our rental car and found some fun places to check out. Not to be missed is the town of Laguna Beach itself—it would take days to explore its art galleries, shops and restaurants. We found **Stella's Serious Italian Restaurant & Lounge** (www.stellaitalian.com) at Monarch Bay Plaza in Dana Point, a

great restaurant popular with the locals. There's a happy hour and an enclosed patio, and the food is really good. If you go in the evening, you're sure to hear Gary King on the saxophone, a true New Yorker who moved to Southern California in 1978. In the same plaza, you'll find a fun Mexican restaurant called **Olamendi's** (www.originalolamendis.com), which has its own "fiesta" hour complete with frozen margaritas. Nearby, a unique clothing store, Monarch Silks Boutique (949-661-9507), sells some lovely Southern California garb that you're not likely to find anywhere else. ■

