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Hotel Review: Montage Laguna Beach in California

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The 30-acre Montage Laguna Beach features 253 oceanfront accommodations and 23 privately owned Montage Residences.

Credit: 2019 Montage Laguna Beach

It was a warm summer evening, and we were seated at a small table on a coastal bluff overlooking the Pacific Ocean. The sun hadn't yet set, affording my best friend and me another hour or two of the million-dollar views from our perch, which is just a small portion of the perfectly manicured 30 acres that Montage Laguna Beach calls home.

The luxury hotel is located on what is arguably one of the most enviable pieces of oceanfront property along Southern California's coastline — but all Lauren and I had eyes for were the bunnies.

As we awaited each of our six courses from chef Benjamin Martinek's Garden Menu at the award-winning on-site Studio restaurant, Lauren and I were oohing and aahing not over the incredible vistas, but instead at the six tiny rabbits grazing on the grass next to our table. Each time our server, Jamie, would come out with a new dish — each somehow more artistic and delicious than the next — we would look up at her, blushing, caught in the act of recording yet another video of the creatures.



Chef Benjamin Martinek's seasonal menu at Studio sources produce and more from the dinner venue's newly replanted 1,000-square-foot garden.

Credit: 2019 Montage Laguna Beach

But perhaps our focus on the small, unplanned moments is precisely what Montage Laguna Beach would want for its guests.

Every year since 2013, the 253-room property has earned the Forbes Travel Guide Five Star Rating and AAA Diamond Award, among a long list of other accolades. And although it's apparent why the hotel deserves its lengthy list of exultations — from the 20,000-square-foot Spa Montage and excellent dining to the bespoke service and personable staff — Montage Laguna Beach does a sneaky job of brushing aside its ritzy rankings via the laid-back ambiance it creates in every nook and cranny of the property.

Devoted to the Guest Experience

Almost disarmingly unassuming, the luxe hotel caters flawlessly to its upscale clientele while keeping well in mind the flip-flop-wearing, “surf’s up, dude” vibe of Southern California. (Though, bear in mind, while you can meander in your beachwear most places on property, you can’t wear sandals and boardshorts to dinner at Studio.)

Perhaps it’s because the hotel has been refining the guest experience since 2003, when it opened as the first property under the Montage brand. Or, maybe it’s the Craftsman-style architecture that makes it easy to forget you’re paying close to \$1,000 per night for a room (the hotel is more like a friend’s summer house than a resort).

For instance, the open-air Lobby Lounge — with its high ceilings, floor-to-ceiling windows, light wood tones and cream-and-slate decor — is elegant but understated. In fact, there’s no

exaggerated opulence to be found anywhere at Montage Laguna Beach. Instead, most guests are wearing jeans and sandals, and ebullient laughter can be heard alongside live piano music.

We had pre-dinner drinks in the Lobby Lounge, where I noticed multiple patrons engaging their servers in lively conversation. Our waitress showcased a cheeky sense of humor as Lauren and I deliberated far too long over our cocktail orders, ultimately settling on the Full Bloom, made with gin, vermouth, St. Germain, and sparkling wine; and the Bourbon Renewal, with bourbon, cassis liqueur, bitters and lemon. As we sunk into the cozy seating and soaked in our views of the Pacific, I was delighted by how easily the hotel had lulled me into feeling at home.

That feeling extends throughout the property, including in our bright and airy, 500-square-foot Ocean Horizon guestroom. We had comfort aplenty with a private balcony, a small indoor sitting area and a large marble bathroom with a deep soaking tub and a separate rain shower. All rooms, including suites and bungalows, were recently enhanced as part of an extensive, propertywide renovation that debuted in March, which included new furnishings, contemporary art and a redesigned color palette, as well as new vanities and mirrors featuring dimmer-controlled lighting in bathrooms.

To highlight its commitment to sustainability, Montage Laguna Beach also added new amenities including robes from The Madison Collection, a luxury linen manufacturer founded on eco-commerce; throw blankets from luxury linen-maker Matouk; candles from local business Laguna Candles, which created a proprietary scent exclusively for the hotel; and even natural fiber crib mattresses by Bloom Coco Mat. Those interested in reducing paper waste can download the PressReader app, which offers access to thousands of newspapers and magazines worldwide.



A renovated Ocean Coastal Suite offers about 1,000 square feet of space and features updated decor and a new color palette.

Credit: 2019 Montage Laguna Beach

But the unmissable element of the enhancements is the hotel's new partnership with Valmont, a Swiss cellular cosmetic and skincare company. Book one of the 90- or 120-minute Valmont beauty treatments, which each feature a signature collagen-infused mask composed of pure medical grade collagen. My two-hour Valmont Masterpiece Facial, available exclusively at the resort, combined six masks — including a complete collagen treatment for my face, neck, décolletage and eyes — oxygen therapy, LED light treatments, salicylic and glycolic acid peels, ultrasound waves and Vortex extraction for the most comprehensive facial of my life. I emerged from the treatment room feeling like I had aged in reverse a la Benjamin Button (and, in fact, with babylike skin).

Any trip to the spa should include time at the outdoor Jacuzzi and lap pool, which was updated in March to be salt-based. The only downside I could find to my stay at Montage Laguna Beach was that the spa pool servers were overly attentive in making sure I never went thirsty — a privileged grievance that most certainly does not qualify as a complaint. (The expansive spa area also encompasses an oceanview fitness center, though I had more leisurely pursuits in mind.)

Additional highlights of a stay include lounging by the large Mosaic Pool, a family-friendly spot with an intricate tiled bottom that makes for the ultimate snapshot during sunset, as well as direct access to picturesque local beaches. For the active set, there are local hiking and biking trails and abundant watersports opportunities. Guests who want to explore the area's shopping and nightlife can contact the concierge to reserve complimentary transportation to and from town and South Coast Plaza (the largest shopping center on the U.S. West Coast), or they can sign up to use one of the property's complimentary Cadillacs (must be prebooked and subject to time limits).

Beyond Studio and the Lobby Lounge eateries, dining venues include The Loft for all day-dining, and Mosaic Bar and Grille for poolside lunching, in addition to in-room and private dining options.



Spa Montage's outdoor lap pool was upgraded in March to be salt-based.

Credit: 2019 Montage Laguna Beach

Dinner at Montage Laguna Beach's Studio

But let's get back to the bunnies.

A Studio dining experience — and it is truly an experience; calling it merely “dinner” couldn't possibly suffice — is the pinnacle of a Montage Laguna Beach vacation. Chef Martinek's latest seasonal menu, which focuses on the journey of a plant's life cycle, sources edible flowers, herbs, produce and more from Studio's newly replanted 1,000-square-foot garden.

The vegan Studio Garden Menu begins with a red quinoa escabeche, followed by crudite that resembled a terrarium — a hen of the woods mushroom espuma (foam) sits atop puffed grains and a kalamata olive “topsoil,” with baby carrots “planted” inside. Next came a confit of root vegetables with coconut curry and a chickpea panisse, rounded out with fruit and a black sesame pave with aguafaba (chickpea) meringue, cassis, pomegranate seeds and coconut sorbet.

My omnivore-friendly Tasting Menu was no less captivating. Jamie, a server who has been with the hotel for over a decade, kindly accommodated my lactose-free diet and somehow perfectly recalled each substitution that had been made just for me as she described each dish in delicious detail. From smoked red abalone and roasted sablefish to a juicy, tender veal — the memory of which still makes me salivate — I was floored by the simultaneous subtlety and intricacy of each course.



One of Studio's innovative, plant-based dishes from its Garden Menu includes a root vegetable confit with coconut curry.

Credit: 2019 Montage Laguna Beach

Our meal lasted well over four hours, not least because Lauren and I were savoring (and Instagramming) every morsel, but also because we were engaged in heady conversation with our sommelier, Mario, over each pairing he brought out from Studio's “Wine Spectator” Grand Award wine list.

After we had debated the merits of riesling, conferred over where the best gruner veltliner wine comes from and discussed the labyrinthine process of becoming a master sommelier, I felt like I had dined with two old friends instead of just the one I had arrived with. I didn't even notice that the meal had ended far past my regular bedtime — and Studio's closing time — until I spied servers inconspicuously closing shop.

Indeed, at once understated and profoundly refined, Montage Laguna Beach had beguiled me. But that's just par for the course for the storied Southern California hotel.

The Details

Montage Laguna Beach

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