

# Laid-Back Luxury IN LAGUNA

## Slip away to Montage Laguna Beach for the perfect weekend escape

By Michelle Lyn

The moment you pull up to the entrance of Montage Laguna Beach, you know you are in for an unforgettable experience. The valet team greets you instantly, and I say team because before you know it, someone is opening your doors, another person is unloading your bags and yet another is walking you into the lobby, chatting amiably until it's your turn to check in.

You are immediately greeted by sweeping ocean views the second you walk through the door. If you're checking in with your family, as I was, one of the team members instantly rolls out a red radio flyer wagon stuffed to the brim with complimentary stuffed animals, much to your child's delight.

A brief and scenic drive up the coast from San Diego, Montage Laguna Beach is a sophisticated, yet approachable resort that makes for the perfect relaxing weekend away from home.

Built in 2003, Montage Laguna Beach is discreetly perched on an oceanfront bluff along South Coast Highway. Spanning 30 acres, this luxury Craftsman-style resort melds the perfect blend of elegance and comfort.

The lobby lounge is spacious and welcoming, flanked by a fireplace and a bar on either end. Once you've checked in, you are guided across the lobby to the main balcony for a vantage point tour of the property.

Having entered on the fifth and top floor

of the resort, you're able to get your bearings as you quickly scan rooms to the left and right of you and settle on the jaw-dropping view of the Pacific Ocean that extends beyond the massive mosaic-tiled infinity-edged pool in the center of the grounds.

To the right of the pool is Mosaic Bar & Grille, a casual bluff-side terrace and grill complete with a fire pit. On the edge of the bluff in a standalone Craftsman cottage is Studio, the resort's signature fine dining restaurant.

After several minutes absorbing the picturesque view, you are then escorted to your room. There won't be any aimless hallway wandering here.

To say we were impressed by the balcony view from the lobby would be an understatement compared to how we felt once we entered our suite.

Walking into our foyer (yes, foyer), we were greeted once more by the same stunning ocean view we had just left moments ago. Just a few floors lower, we were directly

in front of the pool. Sheer white curtains billowed in the breeze that wafted in from our living room balcony, and yes, I have to specify because our suite had two.

Fresh flowers arranged on the coffee table added a welcome touch, as did the personalized note welcoming us to the resort.

Within minutes, a pistachio crusted, cranberry goat cheese hors d'oeuvre of sorts was delivered, only to be followed by a chilled bottle of champagne, of course. We had been at Montage less than an hour and I was beginning to think I might never leave.

Although it felt like we probably had the best room on the property, each of the 250 guest rooms have their own private oceanfront balcony with floor to ceiling windows that afford a view of the glittering sea.

The well appointed rooms boast marble bathrooms with oversized soaking tubs, feather topped beds with goose down pillows, plenty of sitting areas and a bar area that make it a more than comfortable home away from home.



Taking advantage of our early arrival, we headed over to Mosaic for an informal, light lunch before taking a walk along the beach. The fire pit in the middle of the terrace provided just the right amount of warmth.

On the edge of the property, there is an enchanting path that leads you along the lush landscaping, overlooking four pristine white sand beaches that rival those in Hawaii or Southern Portugal. From a perfectly manicured park at the edge of the path, you can peer over the cliff, down into the marine tide pools. Perfect for a romantic stroll or a walk with the family, beach access is available from several different spots on the path.

After walking the grounds, our afternoon agenda consisted of nothing more than indulging in the resort's amenities. Child care accounted for, my husband headed to the fitness center where he could work out while watching the sunset through the floor to ceiling windows overlooking the private adult lap pool.

I, on the other hand, chose to retire to Spa Montage for a complete dose of relaxation. There's something intoxicating about walking into a spa and smelling that combination of candles, scented lotion, cucumber water and eucalyptus emanating from the steam room.

The outdoor waterfall whirlpool beckoned me to leave the outside world and all my worries behind. It isn't surprising that I soon found myself contemplating the logistics of replicating this experience in my own home.

The next couple hours were an escape from all responsibilities as I retreated into the steam room, followed by a customized balancing massage. The spa successfully

manages to achieve a sense of quiet intimacy, despite the labyrinth of treatment rooms.

Refreshed and ready for our next meal, we made our way down to the edge of the property for dinner at Studio. We passed the Studio garden, where Executive Chef Craig Strong grows fruit trees, berry bushes and five raised planter beds full of organic vegetables and herbs that provide a year-round source of fresh produce for use in Studio cuisine.

Dining at Studio is everything you would expect from a 5-star restaurant, minus the pretension and arrogance. Service is friendly and unhurried the instant you arrive.

Before sitting down to dinner, we pulled up a chair at the communal bar table for a drink. Although you have your pick of \$20 glasses of wine, the ambience is nothing what you would expect for a restaurant with such steep prices. The bar actually feels more like you're at a swanky cocktail party at a friend's lavish beach cottage.

Upon entering the dining room, I was struck by the laid back chatter and instant warmth I felt as we're led to our table. Servers clad in dark suits rush about in every direction, smiling with a sense of authenticity you don't often see in fine dining establishments. Service is impeccable, while achieving congeniality at the same time-not always an easy thing to do. The menu is described as 'Modern French with California influences,' so we decided to leave the progression to the experts and embark on the Chef's Tasting Menu: six courses appropriately paired with unique wines from around the world.

Before our first course, however, we were treated to some delectable small bites, such as a caviar taco and a mini quiche, as well as

a warm brioche roll served with house made lemon garlic butter. Yum.

And it just got better and better after that. Dungeness crab, persimmon and ginger salad, followed by parsnip soup with quince and candied pecans (paired with a Champagne Vouvray which was absolutely delicious), filet mignon with a creamed parsley, and one of my favorites...the cheese course.

Chef prepared a Brillat Savarin Affiné, a decadent triple cream Brie that was paired with a blueberry – rosemary compôte. I think I finished mine before my husband had even taken a bite of his.

Towards the end of our meal, the affable Chef Strong came out to our table to introduce himself. It was refreshing to hear his philosophy on fine dining and his vision for it to exist in an unpretentious atmosphere where you don't have to spend all your time worrying about which fork to use.

This dining experience runs you around \$500 for two people.

As our weekend came to a close, we headed to The Loft for breakfast. If you don't want a sit down breakfast, it's great to grab coffee and a pastry and head down to the beach. Very family friendly, the staff was happy to accommodate our stroller at a table on the gorgeous balcony with a perfect view. Complimentary warm banana bread was served immediately alongside my coffee, yet another pleasant surprise. I ended my culinary sojourn with some of the best french toast I've ever had-brioche with cinnamon and whipped crème fraîche with a citrus zest.

Our entire stay was just under 24 hours, but we felt so well rested and rejuvenated, it was as if we'd been on vacation for a week.