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Heaven by the sea: A visit to L.A. County's secluded paradise Terranea



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By [Eric Althoff](#) - *The Washington Times* - Thursday, January 5, 2017

ANALYSIS/OPINION:

If you were a nonnative resident of Southern California, as I was for 15 years, you likely didn't know that on a spit of land jutting into the Pacific at Rancho Palos Verdes was once an amusement park called

Marineland of the Pacific, which opened in 1954, a full decade before nearby San Diego's Sea World. Marineland's oceanarium featured trained pinnipeds putting on shows for enthusiastic crowds, but then the owners of Sea World purchased the park in late 1986, moved the whales and dolphins south to San Diego and basically left the property abandoned — including its stadiums and 414-foot tower — at the mercy of nature and the unforgiving salt sea breeze.

But that was then. International property developer Destination Hotels stepped in, completely renovating the property and transforming it into 102-acre luxury resort located on some of the primest real estate in all of Los Angeles County. Rechristened Terranea, the new facilities on this singular, peninsular spit of land were reopened to the public in the late aughts with a new mission to welcome in visitors for luxurious enjoyment.

From the ashes of 20th century memories, Terranea has arisen, offering golf, outdoor activity of all manner and some of the best cooking in all of Southern California. The Washington Times was invited to visit the opulent resort to experience just a taste of what this property has to offer.

Thursday:

No matter which route you take, it seems like a long way. Past the industrial hubbub of the Port of Long Beach, we cross the Vincent Thomas Bridge and then dive headlong again into Angeleno suburbia, through stoplights and neighborhoods, unsure if this is even the correct direction.

My girlfriend [Victoria](#) and I are indeed headed west, but something just doesn't seem right. Where is it?

Suddenly we come to Palos Verdes Dr., and the Pacific opens up

afore us, with the spires of Santa Catalina Island poking out 30-some miles offshore, even on this somewhat atypical cloudy, rainy day. It's strange weather for paradise, but you can't have everything. Heading northwest on PV Drive, we come to a left turn entrance that welcomes us to Terranea. [Victoria](#) and I both smile. It's been a long drive through typical L.A. traffic, and we're both anxious to be out of the rental.

As you pull up to the main concourse in front of the entrance, you have the option to either valet your car or self-park, depending on your whims. (Even with your vehicle parked, you can still get around the property without too much trouble thanks to an armada of staffed golf carts to whisk one around the extensive grounds.) The fountain at the entrance sprays water alighted by multiple different colors, many of them holiday-themed.

The festive atmosphere continues as we walk into the main foyer. We are greeted by a wondrous array of Christmas trees and decorations, to say nothing of full-length windows offering fine views of the fading California sun, now diffused through the light rain.

Upon check-in, we are met by [Hilary Feutz](#), social communications manager for Terranea. Quickly we learn that the affable and extraordinarily friend [Hilary](#) is not only from the Virginia suburbs of D.C., but also, for me, a fellow Trojan, giving us a connection on both coasts.

[Hilary](#) gives us a brisk walking tour of the grounds, which entail numerous villas, the golf course, dining venues, hiking trails and points to simply enjoy the views and the smell of the sea.

[Victoria](#) and I check into our villa, which is about the most amazing place I can imagine to spend a night anywhere on earth. The villa offers up a kitchen replete with all cooking utensils and crockery,

two apportioned couches in the living room with a huge flatscreen TV on the wall, plus a bedroom with an enormous, extremely comfortable bed, closet, generous bathroom and yet another flatscreen.

But the coup de grace is the outdoor patio between the bedroom and living area, set up with four chairs around a dining table that offers a breathtaking view of the Pacific beyond the cliffs below. Were it a nicer day, it would be wondrous to sit out here with a glass of port and a cigar and enjoy the California sun dancing off the waves.

[Hilary](#) walks us down to [The Spa at Terranea](#), where [Victoria](#) and I are due for a couple's massage. We each head to our gender-appropriate locker rooms to change. In the men's room — and, one assumes, the women's — you can relieve yourself of street clothes and suit up in the extraordinarily comfortable robes Terranea supplies.

I join [Victoria](#) in the treatment room, where we are met by our therapists, who duly inquire after any injuries, chronic conditions or body areas needing any extra attention. The treatment room is spacious, homely and thoroughly quieting. A fire burns at one wall set before a rather proportioned tub big enough for two. A pair of massage tables are set up for us, and we go to our respective station. The therapists return, and I ask if she can please turn off the heat on my bed, which is making me sweat already. (Remember, be honest with your masseuse. You're doing no one any favors by not saying what you want — or need.)

My therapist goes deep into my musculature, duly working out a stiff neck that I acquired after sleeping on it wrongly, as well as the tense areas in my back where I carry the stresses sedimented from a constant reporter's grind. My masseuse even offers me choices of

various oils to use in the treatment — some which are attractive to my nose, others not so much.

Sixty minutes later, the therapists leave so we can extricate ourselves from the tables. [Victoria](#) and I share contented grins and a hug, thankful for this thoroughly relaxing experience.

Back in the men's room, I take some time to sit outside in the outdoor hot tub as the rain falls from above — with an oh-so-brisk dip in the “cold” tub — before a quick session each in the steam room and sauna.

After freshening up back at the room, [Victoria](#) and I meet up at the main lobby with Terranea Community Relations Director Gaye Vancans. A British accent is instantly detectable, and [Victoria](#), who hails from Cambridgeshire, strikes up a conversation with Gaye, who happens to be from Oxford.

Gaye ushers the two of us and other Terranea guests onto a shuttle bus, which whisks us up a hill to an even larger villa for the [Chef's Table Dinner Series](#), which the resort touts as a “farm-to-Terranea dining experience” in which guests partake in a communal meal basically with strangers also staying at the resort. It's a great way to meet your fellow travelers, who come from all walks of life and all parts of the country.

Chef's Table also removes the barrier between preparers and diners, with Terranea's chefs and their staffs crafting up courses right there in the villa's kitchen. You are encouraged to interact with them, ask questions and, of course, thank them for their hard work. Associate Director of Food & Beverage Vincent Brunetti introduces me to the esteemed chefs who will be preparing our meal.

Afore the formality of the sit-down dinner commences, a cocktail party atmosphere ensues, with wine on offer as we dine on

appetizers. Chef Andrew Vaughan has prepared grass-fed beef tartare with black truffle, shaved Iberico and Shassetra caviar and cured foie gras, all of it served on rye. The “warm” apps entail braised veal cheek, pork rillettes and gnocchi.

The guests are seated, and [Victoria](#) and I introduce ourselves to our “neighbors.” Gaye makes a formal toast, wishes us well for the holidays, and then is off. The floor is then taken by Heidi Scheid, senior vice president of Scheid Vineyards up in Monterey County, and who has selected the perfect pours to pair with our portions. First course, from Chef Johnathan de la Cruz, is a 36-hour mulato braised beef lengua (tongue), served with marcona almond courton, onion escabeche and smoked cherry agrodolce. It’s tender and perfect, and absolutely melts on the, well, tongue. Heidi pairs this course with Mertz Road Pinot Noir 2013 from Scheid.

The main course, prepped by Chef Bruce Nguyen, is pan-seared Chilean sea bass served with crispy fingerling potatoes, applewood bacon lardon, salt cod and dungeness crab chowder. Sea bass, not an easy fish to prepare, is here cooked divinely, and the chowder could be a meal in and of itself under the right circumstances. Heidi offers the Scheid “Claret Reserve” Bordeaux Blend 2010 or the Metz Road Chardonnay 2013, which I preferred for the pairing.

And dessert, courtesy of Chef Pierino Jermonti, is an apple tarte tatin, next to pomegranate caramel glazed persimmons vanilla bean gelato. Heidi’s selection is the “Closing Bell” Fortified Wine 2011 Monterey, which caps the dessert — indeed, the entire meal — nicely.

It’s been one of the most intricate, amazing meals of my life, and now completely sated, [Victoria](#) and I head back to our villa to turn in.

Friday:

After a rest like no other, we walk over to [Terranea's Catalina Kitchen](#), named for the member of the Channel Islands in view off shore. All staff have smiles as they seat us and help us make some selections from the outstanding menu. It's a wonderful setting, with yesterday's rain clouds abating and offering greater views to the west.

We dig in first on the "monkey bread," a baked morning treat that boasts flavors of cinnamon that light up the tonsils, especially in combination with the iced tea and coffee that [Victoria](#) and I are waking up with. For the main dish I opt for the beef hash, which is flavorful, while [Victoria](#) goes in for the BLT eggs Benedict, which she enjoys.

After breakfast we meet up in the lobby with Mike, a staffer from New Zealand, who takes us on an "Adventure Concierge" guided coastal walk. Mike is amiable and has certainly done his homework, with a beyond thorough knowledge not only of the grounds, but the local ecosystems, the climatic and man-made forces that affect the health of both the ocean and this land, as well as such other local tidbits as that a flotilla of world-class swimmers makes the transit from Catalina to the mainland during the summer months, pulling up on shore right by Terranea's backdoor before promptly collapsing on the sand in a likely far less dramatic fashion than [Kevin Coster](#) in "[Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves](#)."

Mike also discusses the flora and fauna of the area, including minutiae about invasive species and how erosion and sea breeze affect all in this delicate ZIP code. We pause at some overlooks, but the winds are still far too strong to reasonably ponder the beautiful Pacific for long.

One last meeting has us rendezvous in front of the main lobby with

Paulie Corry, a professional falconer from Liverpool, England, home of The Beatles, and where I visited just months ago [for this publication](#). Decades in the States have done nothing to soften Paulie's Liverpudlian accent, and he eagerly and thoroughly imparts the need for a professional of his virtuosity in these parts. For his falcons, being birds of prey, chase away the gulls, whose invasion not only harms the plants but creates some rather, uh, unpleasant piles that guests might otherwise step upon during their walks.

Yet it's not just for luxury that Paulie is so employed. For he takes his birds — which he delightfully pronounces “byerds” — to airports around the world, where the falcons scare away other avians from the land in and surrounding various airports. Paulie relates how the consequences of “birdstrikes” can be damaging at best or, had Captain Sullenberger not been as astute in the cockpit as he was, even deadly. Ergo, falconry saves human lives by, conversely, saving the birds from humans.

It's noon, and I have more appointments in Santa Barbara, 150 miles to the north. [Victoria](#) is loathe to get back in the car, wistful that we didn't have one more night at this magnificent location. [Hilary](#) returns to bid us adieu, promising that upon our next visit, we can take advantage of so much else Terranea has to offer, from kayaking to helicopter rides and perhaps even my first 18 holes of golf. All in good time. This was but a scouting mission to the wonders of Terranea, and as we pull back onto Palos Verdes Dr. and away from this enchanted place, it is incumbent upon me to I preach its heavenly evangel.

For more information or reservations visit [Terranea.com](#).

Eric Althoff is Travel and Lifestyle Editor for The Washington Times.