

CALIFORNIA DREAMING

Neil Tappin laps up some memorable golf by the Pacific Ocean on his latest trip to the Golden State

Those thinking of a golfing voyage to California are likely to be drawn towards Monterey and the city of Santa Cruz. Here you will find some of the most prized jewels of the golfing world like Pebble Beach, Pasatiempo, Spanish Bay and Poppy Hills.

But the ingredients that make these layouts such a treat (sea views, perfect weather, rugged terrain) are shared by a plethora of great courses up and down the Golden State. Indeed, they are what makes a visit to this part of the USA an absolute must for any travelling golfer.

My own pilgrimage to California involved flying from London Heathrow to Los Angeles, but instead of heading north along the famous Route 101, I made my way south 50 miles or so to Newport Beach.

Pelican Hill is one of the leading golf resorts in the States, boasting two Tom Fazio-designed golf courses, 204 bungalows and 128 villas. Its incredible location on the hills, just over a mile from the beach, offers stunning views of the Pacific Ocean towards the island of Catalina. A glance at the



The stunning 7th hole on the Ocean South course



Dining al fresco

resort fact sheet explains that average temperatures around here drift from 23°C in winter to 30°C in summer. That's a band we can all work within!

Aside from the weather, Pelican Hill offers the golfer two distinct, interesting golf courses, both of which feature in the top 15 of *Golf* magazine's list of the best public courses in California. The Ocean South course is the closer to the ocean and from beginning to end is a feast for the eyes. Make sure your camera is fully charged because the photo opportunities just keep coming.

Fazio has successfully taken a stretch of land with huge changes in elevation, and created a playable layout that is neither quirky nor contrived. This is easier said than done and for the most part the challenge is there in front of you, laid out fairly with no hidden tricks.

My favourite stretch came at the start of the back nine. The 11th is a short par 4 that plays directly towards the sea. Just 367 yards from the back tees (or 350 from the more sensible blues!), it is a test of strategy and accuracy. The drive is straightforward, but the relatively small green is guarded by a series of rugged-edged bunkers. You may only be attacking the flag with a short iron in hand, but par is far from a given.

Next, you play back-to-back par 3s – the first 160 yards and the second 131 yards. Fazio has resisted the temptation to change the course's routing to avoid these similar challenges coming so close together, and what you get is a memorable, unique stretch that can either make or break a round. The second of these two par 3s features a very small, almost perfectly round green surrounded by sandy waste areas.

Pull your tee shot, even with a wedge in hand, and your ball is likely to miss mainland USA.

While it offers the same stunning views, Pelican Hills' Ocean North course is quite different. There's a comparison to be made with some of Portugal's best-known courses. It has a similar style to the Old Course at Vilamoura or Vila Sol, where the holes gently shape left and right through the landscape.

The 17th on the North is perhaps the best hole on the entire property. A long par 5, it plays uphill and towards the ocean. A cavernous area of scrubland hugging the right side of the hole from tee to green will swallow anything that's pushed or sliced. Not for the faint-hearted, this hole is a challenge to embrace – a par 5 is a memorable score, whatever your handicap.

Likewise the 18th provides a fitting finale. A relatively straight drive to the top of the hill leaves an approach towards a green that sits below you and to the right. The green is beautifully framed by slopes, bunkers, and behind, by the resort's striking 'Coliseum' building. It might not have

the immediate backdrop of the ocean but this is equally as arresting and a challenge any golfer will enjoy.

A third Tom Fazio course under the Pelican Hill umbrella offers a slightly different golfing experience again. Oak Creek Golf Club weaves through the Orange County countryside via tapered fairways, scenic greens, beautiful lakes and bull-nose carved bunkers. This golfing sanctuary is a real haven for

Above: both courses have the Pacific as a backdrop. Right: room with a view



Below: Ocean South 11th





Even away from the shoreline there are some beautiful holes

flora and fauna, and offers year-round playability for golfers of all standards thanks to five sets of tees on each hole. Oak Creek is open to the public daily.

Away from the golf, if your forays into the US tend to stick to the familiar, sundrenched courses of Florida, you will be surprised by what California has to offer. The beachside towns along this coast have a shabby-chic, relaxed vibe that is full of character and charm.

Pelican Hill itself is a good example of this as the design of the resort is both impressive and grand without being imposing or ostentatious. There is no hotel as such, but instead a selection of bungalows and villas set all around the sprawling landscape.

While the courses have been around for 25 years, the resort was only built eight years ago, with the inspiration for its design the Venetian renaissance architect, Andrea Palladio. The reception building, called the Main Estate, features large pillars, high ceilings and a huge collection of authentic European art

pieces. The two large frescos hanging on the wall of the reception hall are well worth closer inspection.

Whether in the bungalows, villas or the Main Estate itself, you are always being treated to views out over the golf courses, and towards the sea. And if you are looking for a large four-bedroom villa or perhaps a more intimate bungalow, you'll have a private terrace from which to enjoy watching the sun go down. Sheer bliss.

The resort has two main restaurants, both situated within the Main Estate building and both, fittingly, offering an al fresco dining experience. Andrea Italian restaurant features a small but neatly crafted menu including some particularly impressive handmade pasta dishes. Then there is the Pelican Grill, which is much more of an American-style restaurant, offering everything from Ahi tuna tartare to barbecue-style short ribs on its menu.

If you are considering setting your sights on a golfing holiday that takes



The greens will keep you on your toes

you beyond the well-trodden paths of Continental Europe, the California coast should be a prime candidate. The truth is, Pelican Hill with its Fazio-designed courses and its individualised accommodation, sits at the premium, luxury end of the market. But if your budget permits, it will provide you with an unforgettable golfing and holiday experience.

ESSENTIALS

WHERE TO STAY

Newport Beach is a great place to base yourself for any golfing visit to California and if you don't want to stick to one resort, there are plenty of hotels to choose from. The Island Hotel, just a ten-minute drive from Pelican Hill, captures the elegant style of California. There are 294 rooms and it is close to Newport Beach's bustling shopping scene. The hotel's Oak restaurant offers a lively al fresco dining experience as well as a selection of fantastic dishes. We can certainly recommend the fillet steak and warm pineapple cake with salted caramel ice cream. Alternatively, Hotel Irvine, also in the Newport Beach area, is a more affordable option and offers a great base from which to explore. You'll find everything you need here from comfortable, spacious rooms and free Wi-Fi to an excellent swimming pool and fitness centre.

The Coliseum Pool at Pelican Hill Resort



FURTHER INFORMATION

Drive an hour or so south from Pelican Hill and you will find Encinitas, an elegant surf town with a small but varied selection of restaurants and shops. The beautiful coastal drive alone is worth doing and the town itself offers some lovely beaches and boutique shops. In particular, look out for Scotty Cameron's own shop called The Gallery, where you'll find his incredible range of headcovers, accessories and, of course, putters.