

DEPARTURES

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California's Italian Renaissance

Along a three-mile stretch of Newport Coast is the Resort at Pelican Hill, an extravagant haven-cum-hotel that combines haute California style with, yes, more than a little Tuscan flavor.

It's easy to imagine oneself on the wrong coast, standing there surrounded by more than a hundred villas with terracotta roofs that look like they belong on the gentle slopes of Tuscany. A vast expanse of water with ships sailing for the horizon lies ahead, and off in the distance is an island that suggests...maybe Porto Ercole. The walkways are lined with olive


trees. The main entrance fronts on a piazza. The climate is right. The whole scene screams Italian hillside town by the sea.

The reality is, your plane landed minutes ago at John Wayne Airport in Orange County, California. The sea is the Pacific Ocean, not the Mediterranean. And that's Catalina Island doing a credible stand-in.

The Resort at Pelican Hill, a massive 504 acres with two golf courses designed

by Tom Fazio, lies contiguous to Crystal Cove State Park, a pristine landscape that extends along three and a half miles of coastline between Newport Beach and Laguna Beach. The location allows for panoramic vistas from any of the 128 villas and 204 bungalow suites on the property.

Just as striking as the view is the resort's architecture, inspired by all things Italian, it would seem, but with a special



The main palazzo and Coliseum Pool overlook the 18th hole on the Tom Fazio-designed South Course.

nod to Palladio, who, of course, drew upon the classic building principles of ancient Rome and Greece. So, too, Pelican's master builder borrowed inspiration for his 21st-century Xanadu, creating carefully manicured gardens with Italian cypress and stone pines along secluded pathways and private entrances.

It's all the vision of Donald Bren, chairman of the Irvine Company, a privately held development firm founded more than 140 years ago and known for its portfolio of prime California real estate in Orange County, San Diego, Los Angeles, and Silicon Valley. "Bren believed strongly that this architectural style would translate perfectly to the Newport Coast," says Ralph Grippo, president of the Irvine Company Resort Properties. "Palladio inspired

homes and villas in Mediterranean locales with similar climates and vegetation." Bren's specific influences were the 16th-century villas Palladio designed as summer retreats for the merchants of Venice, sites Bren has visited when traveling to Italy. Entitlements and design of the resort lasted about four years from inception to the start of construction, which took another 38 months. Industry analysts estimate the cost at \$500 million—and counting. "Our goal was to create an iconic property," is how Grippo puts it, "and we committed the resources necessary to accomplish it."

That includes hand-cut limestone from Italy, customized tiles modeled on those in the grand piazza of Siena, and Italian wrought-iron pendant lanterns and sconces. But look a little closer at some of the details, like the

antiquing of roof tiles to replicate old Italian buildings, and this is not quite 16th-century Tuscany—but still the effect *is* transporting.

As is the meticulous service, which begins even before arrival and makes every effort to live up to the \$3,350-a-night price tag (for a four-bedroom villa). The villas, set apart on their own promontory, function as a resort within a resort, a gated community of sorts with a concierge-staffed clubhouse, an infinity pool, cabanas, a state-of-the-art fitness studio, plus a café and grill. When you reserve a villa, the concierge—or "Personal Travel Designer," as they're officially called—will phone within a day or two to plan a full itinerary; confirm dinner reservations, spa appointments, area museum hours, Disneyland tickets (the park is just 30 minutes away), and car rentals; and even

stock the pantry and Sub-Zero fridge with requested staples—all in an effort to make the villa feel like a second home, with the comforts of a five-star hotel.

An on-call butler service will replenish the wine vault, do the afternoon laundry, or arrange for one of the resort's chefs to come over and cook a family dinner on the Wolf stove with the All-Clad pots and pans stored in the cupboard. They can serve it alfresco on the private, oversize terrace with enough room to invite the neighbors. (An early visit to the property, Thanksgiving weekend 2008, showed a few kinks—but *very* few—in the butler service: More attention to detail, we thought, needed to be paid.)

All that's been smoothed out, insists the villas' general manager, Oliver Rooskens. "As we got to know our guests better," he says, "we enhanced the service to make it more immediate and personal. For example, guests are greeted by the butler team upon arrival and escorted directly to their villa for check-in. The butler then determines any special needs and preferences to personalize their stay in every way—from having coffee ready at a certain time to arranging for the resort's Bentley to take them wherever they want to go."

That could be to one of five eateries on the property. Chef Gianluca Re Fraschini creates northern Italian dishes with fresh pasta made daily in a temperature-controlled "pasta room" at Andrea, the resort's signature restaurant. Pelican Grill at the golf club serves California cuisine with more than 30 wines by the glass. The Caffè is the place to go for traditional Italian ice cream made every morning in the Laboratorio del Gelato. Outside the main lobby—also known as the Great Room, an unpretentious living room of sorts offering a Champagne cart, Italian cocktails, organic coffees and teas—is the Coliseum Pool & Grill with a menu of pizzas and panini.

The restaurant overlooks the centerpiece of Pelican Hill, the Coliseum Pool. At 136



Suite-like cabanas surround the Coliseum and villa pools, while kids have their own area.

feet in diameter, it lays claim to being the largest circular pool in the world, holding 380,000 gallons of saltwater. The radiant blue bottom comes courtesy of 1.1 million mosaic tiles, each one carefully cut and set by hand. Vaulted arches and corniced col-

umn support a terrace of 18 recessed cabanas so decadently luxurious that one almost expects Nero to be playing his fiddle while relaxing on a lounge chair—that is, if he could keep his eyes off the 30-inch flatscreen TV installed in each. Truth is, the entire Coliseum Pool complex is so over-the-top that it's charming, like those old sand-and-sword movie epics once made to keep Charlton Heston in a toga.

Off to the side is the kids' clubhouse, Camp Pelican, which is out-

fitted with everything from Wii games to touch-screen computers to iPod accessories. The full- and half-day programs keep the children occupied so the adults can golf or escape to the resort's 23,000-square-foot spa. Entered via a striking 28-foot Palladian rotunda, the Spa at Pelican Hill houses 22 treatment rooms along with the requisite steam rooms, saunas, whirlpools, and soaking tubs, but in a sophisticated Roman bath-like setting. The relaxation rooms feature light-reflecting water walls that are instantly calming. Spa director Kasia Mays, formerly of Ojai Valley Inn & Spa, has infused the menu of services with locally grown herbs, extracts, and botanicals. The emphasis varies with the seasons—figs in the fall, pomegranates in winter, honey in spring, and lavender in summer. One of the more exclusive services offered is the Men's Grooming facial, which includes a deep-cleansing treatment using Hommage products, a scalp massage, a skin-conditioning mask, and eyebrow trimming. If at-home treatments are the order of the day, a spa therapist will set up shop in a villa or bungalow for reflexology, deep-tissue, or the Amber Gold Signature massage using dry brushing exfoliation. Grapes and palm-frond fanning not included. —FRANK VIZARD

Bungalow suites start at \$695 a night, villas at \$1,450 for a two-bedroom. For more information and reservations, call 800-315-8214 or go to pelicanhill.com.

Cottages on the Cove

Get a sense of what the old beachcombing days of California were like by taking a short walk or Pelican Hill's courtesy shuttle bus down to **Crystal Cove Beach**. Nestled under overhanging bluffs are 46 cottages built between 1920 and 1950. Once slated for development as a resort and now part of the Crystal Cove State Park Historic District, 21 of the cottages have been painstakingly restored, and 13 of them are available as rentals for a maximum of seven days per year. Each is different from the next, with whimsical names like Shell Shack, Sand Castle, and South Sea Shanty. They feature vintage furniture with present-day amenities like microwaves. Average rental fees are \$180 per night, but scoring a berth is said to be like winning the lottery. You must call on the first of the month at precisely 8 A.M. PST (seven months in advance). Visit crystalcovebeachcottages.org or call 800-444-7275. There's also a lovely on-site restaurant called The Beachcomber that's within earshot of the crashing waves.