



Peace Initiative

Laguna Beach's The Pearl is a gem among destinations for those seeking to recharge

by TANVI CHHEDA / photographs by PEDEN + MUNK

As we're walking up the steep Canyon Acres trail in Laguna Beach, looking out on slopes covered with sage and buckwheat, Katresha Moskios, a slender blonde who has been teaching yoga for more than three decades, tells me I will make friends with the area's hills soon enough. In response, I laugh softly, my lungs frantically trying to keep up with my feet. This particular hike, a sharp mile-long climb to the appropriately named Top of the World, is one of several area trails explored by guests at The Pearl, the yoga and rejuvenation retreat Katresha opened two years ago with her husband, Geo. He's a world-renowned yogi in his own right, and his YogaWorks classes in Laguna are so packed they practically have people doing sun salutations in the parking lot.

Finally at the summit, I marvel at the view of the aquamarine Pacific; could it look even bluer from Laguna? I've managed to ignore the grumbles and groans of my stomach, but then the memory of my "last supper" of vinegar fries and zucchini-topped pizza at the ritzy Montage earlier in the day takes over, making me feel both guilty and secretly glad. I wasn't sure what to expect, but I knew carbs weren't going to be part of The Pearl's seven-day program, which entails yoga, hiking in the surrounding hills, weight training, massages, natural foods and, of course, dozens of glasses of lemon water.

Still, The Pearl doesn't fit neatly into the classification of a boot camp. There's no obvious calorie counting at every meal (though lost pounds and inches shed are recorded at the end of week). And there's no starvation diet à la bland steamed veggies. "Some people don't come to lose weight," Moskios says, almost anticipating the look of surprise on my face. "They just

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come because they're totally stressed out." That's where the meditation, energy work and breathing all come in, but it's not New Agey or forced. In fact, you're left to navigate that mental terrain on your own, which tends to happen anyway when you connect to nature. "When you're hiking up a hill, you push—you face limits you didn't know even existed. You're able to see life's path clearer when you start to clean out the body."

Cleaning out means eating vegetarian (which I already do, so that's not tough), but kicking my daily ginger chai and afternoon latte habit is another

matter. The withdrawal is made easier by fresh spearmint tea, presented in charming mix-and-match cups and saucers. (A variety of mints and herbs grow right outside the B&B-style main house, which was entirely redone and renovated in a Zen-meets-coastal-chic aesthetic.)

As for meals, wholesome dishes like baby-spinach salad with pear, goat cheese and toasted walnuts and sushi-style hand rolls with mango, avocado and sprouts taste downright gourmet. Naturally, I wish there were a bit more on my plate, but I adjust to the smaller portions within a few days, as does the rest of my group.

"I would normally be tempted to eat a huge breakfast before a three- to four-hour hike," says Danielle Chevalier-Prescott, a fellow guest who had previously been to the Ashram in Calabasas, where Geo used to work. "But they teach you that's not necessary. You don't need 3,000 calories before a climb." I later find out that she's planning on scaling Mount Kilimanjaro and has come to The Pearl to train.

I'm astonished by how easily my body yields to The Pearl's regimen of mind-body training, and this little but powerful fact seems to be one of those invaluable lessons about wellness I'm meant to take away. Though exhausted at first, I feel better and stronger with each subsequent stretch and hike. I mention this to Geo, and he says, "The problem most people have as they gradually become unhealthy is that they forget how it feels to feel good."

What better place to get yourself fit and healthy than Southern California? That was the idea for one guest, Corry Andrews, a busy mom visiting from rural Virginia. She was attracted to The Pearl not only because of its unique combination of exercise, detoxing, yoga and massage but specifically be-

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cause of its location. "I wanted a change of scenery," she says.

Fittingly, The Pearl capitalizes on Laguna Beach's inspiring canyons, cliffs and coves. I see plenty of blue and green on every trail. Every fleeting glimpse of the ocean quiets my mind. It's on one of their six-mile stretches that I remember a favorite quote from a book of travel vignettes: "Here, most often, is nothing more than the best perspective from which to contemplate there. One climbs the mountain to see the valley."

Another member of my group, Nanc' Good Wallace, has lived in the area for 37 years. "I

didn't realize how beautiful our trails are," she says. "You hike a few hundred yards into the chaparral, and it's another world."

While moving along a path in El Moro Canyon in Crystal Cove State Park, I see a quail and, later, a cottontail. I even stop to smell the flowers. Well, I pluck and taste licorice-like flowers— anise, to be exact—at the insistence of hiking guide Derek, who seems to know as much about the local flora as he does about motivating out-of-shape hikers. "We were designed to walk," he declares with a smile to urge on my weary self trudging along beside him.

Driving from the trailhead back to the 12-room The Pearl, past galleries and umbrellas in the sand, it occurs to me I've uncovered a hidden Laguna beyond the artsy, beach-town postcard. Perhaps it's a metaphor for my own self-discovery.

The fitness and cleansing have certainly helped unclutter my mind of perpetual to-do lists and worries. The hikes, yoga and wholesome food have refreshed my body and spirit, enabling me to bring energy and perspective to my new role as a mother. And yet part of my transformation should be attributed to The Pearl staff, who subtly but unmistakably create the right environment to tackle my mental landscape, to reflect and to work at that *other* to-do list—the more intangible one that includes the goal of being more patient, more kind.

"They have such open hearts and spirits, it just reminds you of how to be," Danielle notes back at the retreat when we discuss the positive energy in the air. "It's something you wish you could bottle. It's a real special place." ♦