

Carmel Valley – Where to Stay and Play

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By Elizabeth



Carmel Valley is a popular destination for luxury loving Californians. Resorts, lodges, and restaurants in this area two hours from San Francisco offer the food, wine, and activities that Golden State residents love.

Want to connect with the local culture? You couldn't make a better choice than to spend some time at Carmel Valley Ranch. When I stayed here with my husband, we found a sophisticated playground that attracts successful folks from San Francisco and Silicon Valley, as well as Southern Californians like us.

Most Carmel Valley guests are informal, outdoorsy people, who place a high value on good food, comfortable surroundings, and an appealing menu of recreation options. That's what drew Richard and me, and Carmel Valley Ranch exceeded our expectations.

The sunny side of Carmel

The 500-acre property is located on the sunny side of the Monterey Peninsula, 8 miles from Carmel-by-the-Sea. John Pritzker, one of 11 members of the Pritzker family on the Forbes 400 List, bought Carmel Valley Ranch in 1986 and has spent more than \$40 million turning it into a "playground" to be enjoyed by adults and kids.

On the way to our room, we noticed an old-fashioned oak swing hanging from a tree branch – a signature of the hotelier, who believes "we all just need to play more."



Farm-to-table food and wine

The first thing we did was wander over to the organic vegetable garden where assistant chef Gus Trejo was picking swiss chard for that night's dinner. He pointed out the tall fences intended to keep the resort's large deer population and flocks of wild turkeys away from the produce. He also showed us some of the 7,000 lavender plants and the young vineyard on the property.

Over our first meal, Chef Tim Wood, a graduate of the Culinary Institute of America, introduced himself and explained that he sources ingredients from local fishermen, farmers, artisans and "the salt guy" who brings him Monterey Bay sea salt. In addition, a vintner and sommelier each do their part to ensure that wine offerings are impressive both in number and quality.



Carmel Valley Ranch lodging

Until recently, the resort offered 139 rooms, ranging from 650 to 1,200 square feet. We enjoyed our Ranch Suite with a living room, wet bar, spacious bathroom, king size bedroom, and balcony with a vineyard view – and I loved falling asleep on crisp linens with the fireplace warming the coolish Carmel night air.

However, this summer, **Carmel Valley Ranch** added 30 luxury indoor-outdoor suites with soaking tubs and stunning vineyard and valley views. In keeping with the resort's playful attitude, these 700 square foot suites include daybeds, rocking chairs, and picnic tables in an outdoor living area.



Carmel Valley Ranch fun and games

In the morning we opted for the aptly-named Huff 'n Puff Trail that wound up past the golf course and the yoga platform and connected with the Mucklehead Trail to Sniveley's Ridge. Here, the CVR property ends, but miles of hiking trails continue in Garland Ranch Regional Park. Along the way we spotted rabbits, birds, turkeys, bobcats, and quail. The early morning fog and the Spanish moss hanging in oak trees gave it an ethereal look.

When we returned, we realized we had to make some decisions about how to spend our time. This playground could keep a family thoroughly occupied for a week or more, and we only had a weekend for this visit to Carmel.



The Pete Dye-designed golf course with views of lush woods and expansive mountains draws many guests, as do the nine tennis courts, the basketball court, the two bocce ball courts, two saltwater pools, splash zone for kids, the fitness center that offers a daily menu of classes, and the Spa Aiyana.

Guests can also don protective gear and try their hand at harvesting honey under the supervision of a certified beekeeper. Cooking classes are another option, as is horse riding and archery.

We opted for the spa, where I indulged in an Herbal Hot Rocks massage and Richard enjoyed an Arnica therapeutic massage. Spa Aiyana includes three double treatment suites with fireplaces and eight deluxe rooms.

That night – feeling *very* relaxed – we enjoyed a casual meal at the River Ranch Café, where we sat outdoors under a starry sky and enjoyed the bonfire and lap robes provided by the staff. We even roasted marshmallows and indulged in S'mores – a nightly tradition at Carmel Valley Ranch.



Richard thinks we should go back to Carmel Valley Ranch for Valentine's Day, but I want to wait until May when the lavender is in full bloom.

Whenever you visit, I know you'll have a good time.

Looking to connect with other aspects of California culture? I'll never hang ten, but I'm fascinated by **California's surf culture**. I also love **Highway 1 as it winds along the coast in Monterey County** and passes through the artichoke capital of the world. And here's **the run down on NorCal's best beaches**.

My best,

Elizabeth Hansen