

Back at the ranch

Luxurious and Earth-friendly, Carmel Valley resort offers beekeeping, yoga and golf in verdant foothills

By Norma Meyer • 8:03 p.m., Sept. 27, 2012



Guests participate in yoga on a hilltop with spectacular views at Carmel Valley Ranch. Carmel Valley Ranch photos

CARMEL — I felt a *BUZZZZZZZZ*, but it wasn't from the Lavender Bliss Martinis being served back at the lodge. I was also clumsily suited up head-to-toe like a Hazmat worker — heavy white coveralls, leather elbow-length gloves, foot covers, helmet, protective veil — and anxiously standing in an apiary housing 60,000 Italian honeybees at the luxury Carmel Valley Ranch resort east of Carmel. n “If they land on you, try to stay calm,” instructed beekeeper John Russo. “I don't expect them to sting but it's always possible. Just remember the intimidator bee will try to intimidate you. Sometimes they try and get in your face. Don't swat.”

I nearly made a beeline out of there when a black-and-yellow-striped pain-inflicting-capable critter parked on my netted face hood just inches from my eyeball. But by then I was having a honey of a time during the Bee Experience, an educational romp that gives resort guests an up-close look at bees' communal society — not only will you hold in your hands a honeycomb slat teeming with hundreds of the queen's subjects, but you'll witness “guards” patrolling hives, “nurses” tending to the young, and possibly “undertakers” flying away with the dead. By the time we extracted and tasted honey, my head swarmed with intriguing info about the dwindling and crucial crop-pollinating population.

However, if you're one of those folks who need to carry an EpiPen, you might want to stay as busy as a bee elsewhere on this 500-acre play-themed retreat set among stunning 100-year-old oak groves and tucked into the verdant foothills of the Santa Lucia Mountains.

Carmel Valley Ranch is like an upscale yearlong summer camp for adults, children and canines (in the lobby, the official greeter may smell your pants. That'll be Roxy the English bulldog). After sleeping in chic

earthy suites with private balconies (some of the 139 rooms peer straight into tree branches which makes it feel like being in a treehouse), kids-at-heart can enjoy optional activities such as Lavender Balm and Soap Making, hilltop yoga in the forest and nightly s'mores around the poolside fire pit. There's a Pete Dye-designed golf course, an organic garden to explore, tennis courts, guided hikes, running trails, a fitness center, an adults-only saltwater swimming pool, and a separate family-oriented River Ranch with a children's pool, kids' camp, water-spraying Splash Zone, bocce ball, basketball and more. Whew!

To really get in touch with your inner imp, hop on one of six old-fashioned wood-plank swings that dangle by ropes from ancient sprawling oaks and dot the property. It was awesome to crazily swing toward fluffy clouds while gazing out over the ranch's four-acre pinot noir vineyard and watching a parade of hefty-chested wild turkeys strut by.

Oh deer. That's another bonus — Bambi is everywhere. One day, we walked out our door into an incredible scene — 16 deer serenely grazing on the fairway next to a sand trap. Another time (seriously, just like the ranch's postcards) the heads of a doe and fawns suddenly popped up from behind lavender hedges.

In spring and summer, the 7,000 blooming lavender bushes cloak the air with a sweet pungent scent. Since the resort is focused on sustainability and using local ingredients, the lavender-cured salmon and Honey-Chile Chicken Wings at the Lodge Restaurant — as well as the spa's Lavender Honey Pedicure — are courtesy of the on-site purple plants and bee colonies.

I joined colorful bee guru Russo again for the Lavender Harvest and Essential Oil Distillation outing, which began when he armed his three participants with sharp sickles. After we hacked away and gathered basketfuls of lavender (more backbreaking than I expected), Russo shoved the flower-spiked stalks into a large mobile stainless steel condenser and amusingly explained “distilling lavender oil is a lot like steaming vegetables.”

While awaiting the end result, retired executive Zeke Zau and his wife, Mary, who live part-time in San Diego, leisurely wove ribbons around floral stems to create lavender wands.

Zau noted he had traveled the world and found the ranch “very tranquil, very, very relaxing and very, unique.”

Earlier, farmer Mark Marino showed off his lush two-acre organic garden, which brimmed with heirloom tomatoes, purple asparagus, pumpkins, rhubarb, herbs, sunflowers and dozens of other crops. Marino's agricultural array reappears in the Lodge Restaurant's farm-to-table cuisine cooked up by executive chef Tim Wood.

“The chef comes down every morning and picks what he wants,” Marino said. “I think of myself as providing art supplies for the artist.”

Epicureans who sign up for the Garden Chef's Series get to forage the garden with Wood and Marino and then cart back the bounty for hands-on culinary classes in the Adventure Kitchen.

Taking the back-to-the-land push even further, salt slated for restaurant recipes is homegrown. In the garden area, visitors can view a salt greenhouse where seawater is evaporating, leaving white crystals in metal trays. Dinner one night started off with savory warm bread — baked with the garden's rosemary, the crust sprinkled with the coarse salt derived from nearby Monterey Bay.

Carmel Valley Ranch may be all about tapping into our youthful sentimental summertime memories. But c'mon, I never ended my days at YMCA camp like this: with a Lavender Garden Massage, a bee-enabled Honey Blue cocktail and a soak in an adults-only infinity hot tub that seemed to drop into the gnarly limbs of magnificent leafy oaks and looked out over an emerald green vineyard. Ahhhhh, child's play.