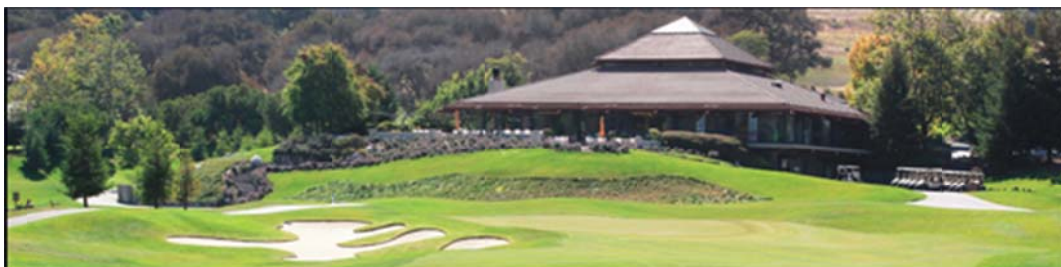


CARMEL VALLEY RANCH NORTHERN CALIFORNIA, USA



Top Hills frame the 2nd. Above the clubhouse at the 18th © James Mason all images taken on the day of play



Looking back from the 5th green



I loved the 6th hole above



Stunning views from the 11th tee

The journey from Bayonet to Carmel Valley Ranch (CVR) has to be one of the most amazing trips I have ever taken. I stay at Sanctuary Beach Resort which is a five-minute drive from Bayonet. I leave for Carmel around 7am so I could be at CVR for an 8.20am tee time. The early morning mist in Monterey is visible and the SatNav takes me on a road that winds higher and higher until suddenly, as I cruise around a bend, I emerge out of the mist which is now below me as the road still climbs. It's one of the best views I've ever experienced. I just have to stop and take a look.

It's similar to the view that you see out of a plane window as you break through the clouds at take-off, but this time the clouds sit below me in the valleys of Carmel. I really hope your SatNav takes you on the same route and you get to experience this natural wonder. It's truly amazing.

Back to the golf course, and when you drive through the gates to this resort and get a glimpse of the track you know you're going to be in for a great day's golf. But the true gems of this course are not unveiled until you get to the back nine. That's not to say that the front nine has nothing to offer – you'll see that's far from the truth when you stand on the beautiful opening hole. At 341 yards it's not the longest or toughest of starts, but the view from this elevated tee gives you an insight into what's to come.

This Pete Dye course opened for play in 1981 and sits in the foothills of the Santa Lucia Mountains, and as you start to play this stunning little track you'll spot plenty of wildlife like quail, rabbits and foxes. But for me the best part is watching the wild turkeys and deer that just saunter around the 12th tee and fairway, quite amazing. The deer don't move or flinch when I hit my tee shot. I swear I hear one of them say 'Great shot' as they go on their own merry way or graze in the shade of the trees.

Now everyone will talk about the view from the 11th tee, and make sure you go to the very back tee even if you're not playing from them and take a look – the view is breathtaking. I've stood on some stunning elevated tees in my time around the world and take my word for it. This is right up there with them. There's no better feeling than smashing a driver and watching it sail through the air and, after what seems like an age, hit the fairway below. Well, the right rough actually, but it rolled back out onto the fairway – a bit of local knowledge for you!

There are four tee options that range from 6,117 to 4,433, but it certainly plays a lot tougher than that yardage would suggest. Water features on five of the holes but (I feel) only comes into play on the fourth and fifth holes. The finishing holes to each nine are strong holes, especially the 18th – it's a great finishing hole and will leave you with nothing but fond memories of those views from most of the tees on the back nine.

The standout holes have to be the run from 11th to 15th, but I also enjoyed the front nine. If there is one weak hole on the front it would be the par-3 seventh, and if you add the 10th they are probably the two weakest on the course. They're not bad holes by any means – it's only when you start to compare them to the rest.

This is a course I would definitely recommend, and not just for the views. It's a terrific venue and, as with most Pete Dye courses I have played, a tough test of golf. Add in the millions of dollars that have just been spent on this track and you now have a course in superb condition.