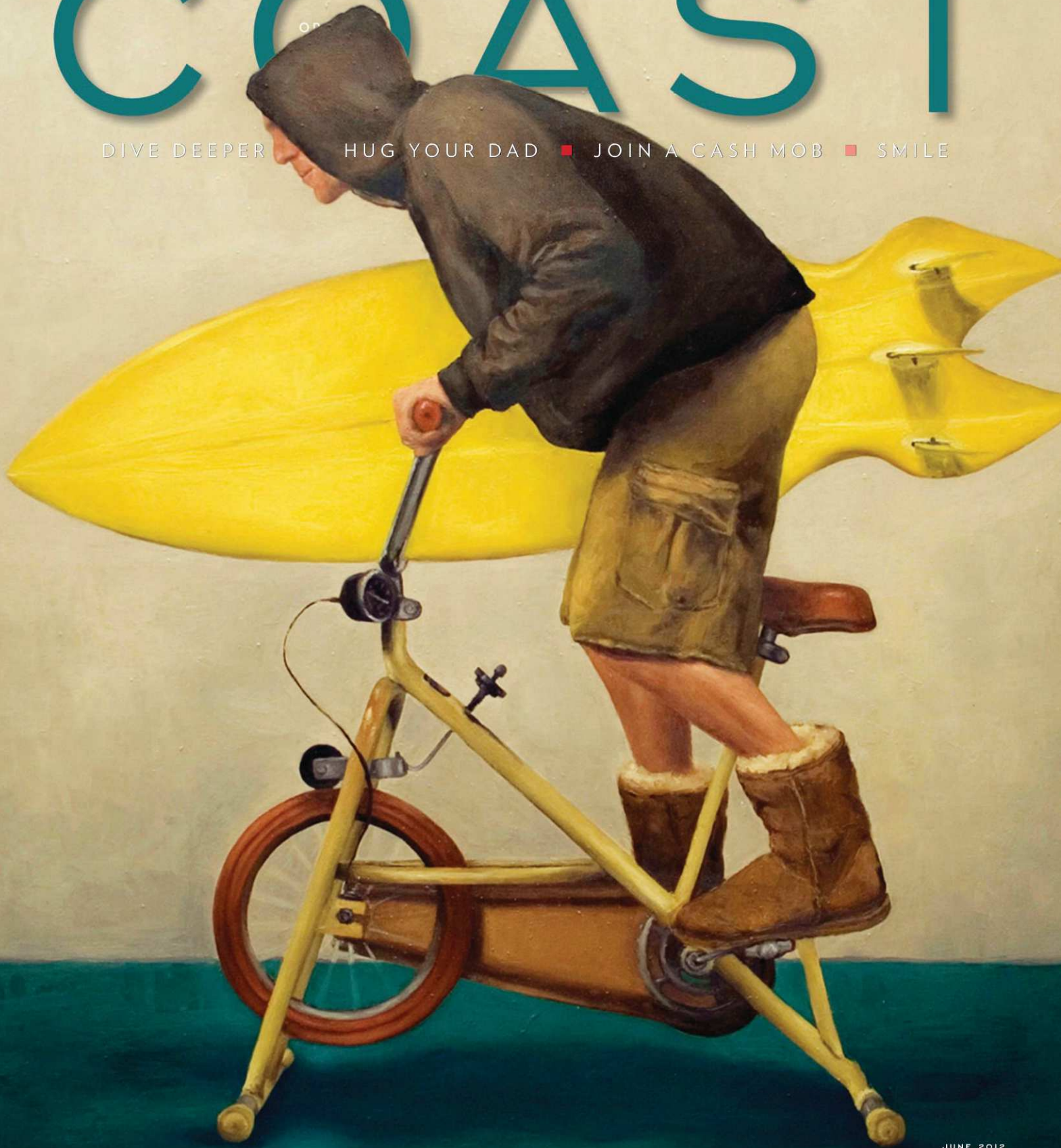


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BY LISA LIDDANE



up on a swing

CARMEL VALLEY RANCH EVOKES THE CAREFREE VIBE OF SUMMER CAMP IN A LUXE SETTING.

When was the last time you sat on an old-fashioned rope swing hanging from the branch of a big shady tree?

It's a question that my family and I faced when, at the invitation of John Pritzker, we visited what may very well be the most personal of the billionaire hotelier's recent projects, Carmel Valley Ranch. Tucked away in the Santa Lucia mountains, the resort was sold three years ago for \$20 million by the Blackstone Group to Pritzker's Geolo Capital investment fund in San Francisco, then added to the Joie de Vivre Hotels' luxury portfolio, in which Pritzker has the majority stake.



The scion of the Hyatt Hotels & Resorts global empire, Pritzker proceeded to give the 500-acre property a \$30 million renovation, infusing it with the essence of his happy memories of summer camp in Rhinelander, Wis., while signaling a distinct departure from the hospitality brand that had been a part of his heritage.

He distilled the Carmel Valley Ranch experience to a single verb: play.

And that's exactly what we did.

We drove up from Orange County and arrived at the resort's gates, which parted to reveal lush lavender cultivated in the property not merely for its beauty but to be harvested and used as an ingredient for food served at the resort's restaurant and in body and bath products used at the spa and sold at the on-site boutique.

The road undulated through the hills with more lavender as well as vineyards and low-slung buildings on either side, eventually leading us to the Lodge, a one-story building that was command central for the property. There, we spied the first of the resort's many rope swings. Both my kids predictably made a beeline for it.

We also saw a bonfire pit nearby that turns into a natural gathering spot for roasting marshmallows and making s'mores when the sun sets. Inside the Lodge, we joined other guests who watched as John Russo, the semi-resident beekeeper and lavender gardener gave us a close look at the honeycombs from the resort's apiary, then extracted the fresh lavender-flavored golden honey and placed it in small glass jars. Guests had the option earlier in the day of putting on beekeeping suits and visiting the busy insects in their habitat as part of the Bee Experience.

It was one of the many resort activities that included golfing

in a Pete Dye-designed 18-hole course and driving range, tennis, basketball, guided hiking, tai chi, yoga, Pilates and swimming. Down the hill at the River Ranch, kids could frolic in the saltwater pool and Splash Zone and take part in outdoor games and crafts. My young kids were content to swim with us in the junior Olympic-sized pool and play with the sprays of water in the Splash Zone, save for the one time we ventured out of the ranch for a 10-minute drive so they could visit the spectacular Monterey Bay Aquarium for the first time.

That's part of the beauty of the ranch – it's idyllic to begin with and we could make our stay as languid or as action-packed as we wanted it to be.

And when it came to complete relaxation, a stop at Spa Aiyana – just steps away from the Lodge – was hard to resist. Being a lover of natural sunshine filtering into indoor spaces, I found the sun's afternoon rays streaming into the ultra-spacious treatment rooms a welcome and refreshing change from the windowless dimly-lit rooms at some luxury resorts. That dose of light added to the bliss of the Orange Blossom & Marigold Polish and left me feeling invigorated, not drowsy.

Whether it's at Aiyana, the River Ranch or the Lodge, luxury was conveyed at its most casual and understated form. Besides, Roxy, the resort's beloved English bulldog set the tone for place. Anything flashy, ostentatious or stuffy would have looked out of sync with Roxy's chill domain.

During dinner at the Lodge Restaurant, for example, a young couple dressed in their quietly chic cocktail best sat at one table, while at another, a large extended family in laid-back preppy attire gathered for what clearly was a special celebration.





There, the cuisine was a sophisticated take on classics. With Pritzker's mandate to highlight the connection to nature, executive chef Tim Wood's menu was sustainable, organic and sourced as much as possible from local suppliers. Line-caught sea bass from a local fisherman was served with housemade potato gnocchi, fennel-tomato fondue and a garden herb salad. Kids chose from the tried and true staples, including what they called an "ooey gooey" oven-baked cheesy mac n' cheese. Both dinner and breakfast fare, especially the ranch garden omelet, were worth the walk from our hilltop suite.

Our family of four rarely took the shuttle or a golf cart ride to and from our lodging, preferring the meandering walk on the pathway through the woods. Plus, we liked the idea of a chance encounter with the non-ferocious wildlife. There were wild turkeys that roamed the property as well as fearless deer that nonchalantly crossed the road.

Our expansive suite – sized like a big one-bedroom Newport Beach condominium – was furnished in a contemporary style, with neutral hues ranging from sand to deep brown – the better to complement the outdoors rather than compete with it. Yet, no matter how tranquil and restful the rooms were, the mountain views constantly beckoned us to go outside.

Pritzker probably wouldn't be surprised at that. As he once remarked to me, "Sometimes, the grownups will see a rope swing on the property. They look around and when they think no one's looking, they sit on it and start swinging."

Just how fast and how high?

It's all up to each guest.

|| carmelvalleyranch.com

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