

Carmel Valley Ranch undergoes renovation

Written by Eren Göknaar - Special to the Town Crier
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Photo Courtesy Of Carmel Valley Ranch Activities at the Carmel Valley Ranch encourage guests to interact with nature via hikes, meditative walks and yoga, above, in which classes are conducted on a hilltop platform with sweeping views of the surrounding area.

Nothing says wild, wild west like a ranch, a reminder of the cowboy spirit that inspired a nation to "Go West, young man." Think rawhide, cattle and hired hands who round 'em up and move 'em on.

Now think Carmel Valley Ranch. After a \$35 million renovation, the 139-room hotel has more in common with California cuisine, organic farms and New Age retreats like Tassajara than with dude ranches. The new definition of "ranch" leaves the rugged Ponderosa behind.

Instead, the theme revolves around play, not work.

"It's summer camp without the rules," said Mark Feldman, director of sales at Carmel Valley Ranch. "That's part of the vision, and even the oak-tree logo is designed to invoke a sense of playfulness - maybe the man with the briefcase will put it down to swing on the rope swing."

The whimsical notes continue on the Lodge's breakfast menu, which lists a \$13 Green Eggs and Ham dish, made with poached eggs and jalapeño peppers.

The revamp included a new building for the full-service Spa Aiyana, restored hiking trails and an infusion of cutting-edge complimentary classes in yoga, spinning and beekeeping. Families especially love the s'mores served around the fire pit, Feldman said.

An all-suite resort, the Ranch strives for family harmony with a door dividing the rooms, each with a flat-screen TV, so adults can move around after the children are asleep. The proprietors paid attention to details like soft blankets for the queen pullout sofas and computer desks placed under windows facing the paths. From the wraparound decks, guests can watch the stars at night in tranquility.

The outdoorsy elements include hiking trails called the "Bambi Path" and "Huff'n'Puff," which lead to an elevated yoga platform with sweeping valley views of the 500-acre property. There's a vineyard and 3 acres of organic gardens. Turkeys and deer roam freely.

Hyatt Hotel heir John Pritzker and his Geolo Group purchased the place in 2009, hoping to draw San Francisco foodies and sophisticated Bay Area day-trippers back to the region known for its golf clubs, ties to actor Clint Eastwood and sunny ranches. Pritzker also owns a controlling interest in Joie de Vivre Hotels, which boasts 33 boutique hotels, including Mountain View's Hotel Avante.

Carmel Valley Ranch's Pete Dye-designed 18-hole golf course and clubhouse costs less per round than pricey Pebble Beach, with greens equal to Spanish Bay's.

"It's an easier, shorter course, but just as good," Feldman said.

When the billionaire hotel scion - his dad, Jay, founded Hyatt Hotels and Resorts - bought the Carmel property, it was mainly condominiums, which remain on the ranch's outskirts. Pritzker repaved the gravelly main road leading to the 300 homes to smooth over relations with the residents.

The Ranch bills itself as a "sophisticated playground for adults and kids." With an adult and a children's saline junior Olympic pool, an upscale Lodge restaurant, a more casual River Ranch cafe, the full-service spa and bocce,

tennis and basketball courts, there's something for everyone. Spa clients can wait for their treatments in the outdoor infinity hot tub.

Chef Tim Woods, lured from Bernardus Lodge's Marinus restaurant, presents an "adventure kitchen," modeled on the Food Network shows, for up to 35 adults at a time. Beekeeper John Russo presides over the three mature beehives, including Italian honeybees. He introduces beekeeping in the apiary on Saturday mornings, weather permitting. Nervous guests can wear a special protective suit; the truly nervous can watch from behind the apiary's Plexiglas window. The Ranch expects to harvest 100 pounds of honey annually. Most of it will be flavored with essences from the 7,500 organic lavender plants grown onsite. Russo will also distill the lavender to make essential oils for the spa and gift shop.

Initially, the resort catered to adult team-building groups, but now it hopes to draw the "show-me" crowd, which craves interactive experiences. Feldman noted that 70 percent of the guests come from the Bay Area, many of them San Franciscans craving weekend sun. Only 90 minutes from Silicon Valley, the Ranch also targets the wedding market, with ceremonies on the vineyard lawn and two others, as well as bridal-shower parties in the 11 spa treatment rooms. The bridal section of the spa can be cordoned off from the public, so catered food can be served to the guests.

Children enjoy the activity cottage, where assistants oversee their play while parents get some time to swim, take a spinning class, play tennis or work out in the state-of-the-art fitness center.

Try the golf and Land Rover Driving Experience special packages. Land Rover offers driving lessons at Quail Lodge, and they'll pick up guests at the Ranch. Room rates start at \$315 nightly.

Carmel Valley Ranch is located at 1 Old Ranch Road, Carmel.

For more information, visit www.carmelvalleyranch.com or call (831) 625-9500 or (855) 687-7262.