



Puttin' On the RITZ

The Ritz-Carlton, Laguna Niguel, celebrates 40 years with a multimillion-dollar renovation that captures the essence of its Pacific Coast setting.

By Rebecca L. Rhoades





Just south of Los Angeles on the Pacific Coast Highway, the small oceanside town of Dana Point is renowned for its steep cliffs that offer breathtaking views and cascade down to the sandy shores of “Surfin’ USA” fame. Here, crashing waves meet verdant bluffs, and warm breezes give way to golden sunsets that cast a fiery glow across the endless horizon. Looking out over it all is the Ritz-Carlton, Laguna Niguel.

For 40 years, the Spanish Mediterranean-style property has stood as a symbol of Southern California’s iconic blend of laidback lifestyle and timeless elegance. Set 150 feet above Salt Creek Beach, the landmark resort — the world’s first for the Ritz-Carlton brand and the first beach accommodations along the shores of Orange County — redefined coastal hospitality when it opened in 1984.

Designed by international architecture firm WATG, then just a small studio in Honolulu, the property showcases architecture that’s rooted in the Golden State’s Mission heritage and lush landscaping that honors the spirit of the region’s ranching history.

To commemorate its 40th anniversary, the resort unveiled a \$50 million renovation that elevates the guest experience and re-connects the rooms and suites to the architecture and natural surroundings.

“The Ritz-Carlton, Laguna Niguel has long been part of the fabric of Dana Point, perched atop a coastal bluff overlooking the Pacific Ocean for nearly four decades,” says General Manager Kelly Steward. “As we undertook this remastering, our vision was not simply to refresh spaces, but to create a deeper connection to the spirit of this remarkable destination.”

GROUNDING IN PLACE AND HISTORY

Global design firm Wimberly Interiors led the renovations, which included all 373 guestrooms and specialty suites as well as the Club Lounge, an exclusive retreat-within-a-retreat that’s available only to guests staying in Club-level rooms. Wimberly, which has worked on other Ritz-Carlton properties around the world, specializes in luxury hospitality design. And, in a stroke of serendipity that brings the project full circle, it’s also an independent branch of WATG.







“Luxury design has evolved over the years, and now people want more than just a pretty hotel. They want to connect with the location, they want to feel a sense of place, so we try to balance that and come up with a thoughtful narrative,” says Liana Hawes Young, Wimberly’s creative director and associate principal. “The hotel was always a beautiful property, but changes over the years gave it more of a glam look that didn’t connect to the architecture or the location, with features rolling hills, ranch lands, and direct views onto the ocean.”

With a directive from the resort to not incorporate blues — a common color choice for waterfront properties — into the interiors, Hawes Young and her team turned to Mother Nature for inspiration.

“We tried to frame the views with something that felt more intentional to the surroundings. There are these deep verdant greens that you find all around, and that became part of the color story,” she explains.

A mural of large-scale native flora anchors the headboard wall and serves as the focal point of each guestrooms’ design. Set on a background of soft taupe, its botanical print echoes the gardens outside and establishes the overall color scheme.

“The rooms are more about the landscape than the ocean,” Hawes Young says. “We chose colors that are complimentary to blue, so it feels very natural. To me, blue and green are neutrals. They’re the colors of nature, and they look beautiful together.” Soothing hues of cream and beige complete the palette, while natural wood accents in rich walnut tones reflect the aesthetic of the property’s traditional Spanish-Mediterranean architecture.

Bolder colors form the foundation of decor in the one and two-bedroom suites. Rich aubergine and vibrant leaf green pop against a background of warm cream walls, saddle brown furnishings, and gold accent pieces. Organic touches, including sleek marble countertops and backsplashes in shades of green, gray, and a boldly veined white; wicker light fixtures and rattan seating; and raffia-like textiles, add visual interest and texture.

“We tried to keep the overall palette light and bright but also not void of color or pops of interest,” Hawes Young says. “We used more color and pattern than we do in other properties.”

Bathrooms in the guestrooms and suites received complete overhauls. “A bathroom from 40 years ago definitely has constraints, and the expectations of guests back then aren’t the same as they are now,” Hawes Young says. “We wanted to make the bathrooms feel more like a luxury experience.”



In the standard guestrooms, the plumbing remained in place, but the designers removed a wall and expanded the vanity. “The room didn’t get any bigger. It just feels bigger,” Hawes Young notes. The walls are clad in marble for a fresh stone palette.

In the suites, the bathrooms were completely reworked. Plumbing was relocated, the bathroom’s footprint was expanded, and closet space was added. “We tried to come up with unique ways to open up the space,” Hawes Young points out.

“Overall, we wanted the suites to feel residential,” she continues. “We used styles of furniture, textiles, and wall coverings that you would generally see in a home, and we expanded the kitchen with a large island.”

A SENSE OF BELONGING

Boston-based Parker-Torres Design was brought in to give a new look and feel to the resort’s Ritz-Carlton Spa.

The former beige-on-beige color scheme has been updated with deep hues that evoke coastal forests and underwater grottos. Layered shades of leafy greens and toffee-colored woods, accented with pops of antique gold and aqua blue, ground the rooms and provide a rich backdrop for the flowy, cream-colored amorphous furnishings and stone sculptures.

The spa’s refresh also includes the addition of a new co-ed lounge, dubbed The Cove, where guests can relax together while enjoying herbal spritzers and snacks. And the treatment menu offers a new cold plunge experience that’s designed to awaken the senses and provide nourishing elements from the ocean.

“Every design element was inspired by the beauty, culture, and history of coastal California — from the colors and textures of the ocean and surrounding landscape to subtle references to the area’s indigenous roots,” Steward says. “What has been especially rewarding is hearing



guests describe how the spaces make them feel: restored, inspired, and fully immersed in the coastal lifestyle that makes Dana Point so special. The renovation has elevated not only the aesthetic experience but also the emotional connection guests have with the destination and with their time here.”

While other resorts and beachfront accommodations have popped up along the shores of Dana Point over the years, the Ritz-Carlton, Laguna Niguel remains the gold standard for oceanside luxury that’s grounded in its surroundings. A AAA Five-Diamond property since 1984, it has received numerous accolades, including being named one of Travel & Leisure’s World’s Best Hotels, Condé Nast Travelers Readers’ Choice winners, and U.S. News & World Report’s Best California Hotels.

“With so much information out there and so many things that people can see, it’s a tall task to keep up with the luxury traveler,” Hawes Young says. “Giving them something that reflects where they’re going is important, and I think we did that in a really beautiful way.” ❶

The Ritz-Carlton, Laguna Niguel

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