

weekendgetaway

BY DEBORAH SHADOVITZ

# A WEEKEND IN LAGUNA BEACH

**Sure, this happenin' Orange County town might be the focus of a slew of new teenybopper shows – but, as Deborah Shadovitz reports, the real Laguna Beach is a sophisticated enclave of art, dining and hospitality.**

Leaving Calabasas around 7:30 a.m. on a typical summer day, I headed down the 405, my mother in my car. Our goal: two days just enjoying Laguna Beach's timeless beauty, wealth of art, cooler air and the fun of new culinary experiences. An hour and a half later, we were there; the speed at which we arrived surprised both of us, and we found ourselves with the full day ahead.

Before departure, I'd read up on some local history. Somehow, Laguna – or Lagonas, as the coastal Indians originally called it – escaped giveaway as a Spanish land grant. Instead, in the 1870s, the Timber Culture Act awarded land to people who lived in Laguna. The coast attracted a few, but, steep and rocky, it didn't lend itself to farms or ranches. Thus, it was able to remain open to the many Orange Country settlers who'd travel pitch tents or build shacks, enjoying days along the seven miles of beautiful coastline.

Heading in, we turned right onto North Coast Highway. This is our good old PCH, but flatter, not as commercial, more of a lazy-day hangout road. We passed a few simple hotels, some small eateries and a few art galleries. Along this stretch is the Indian Territory Museum ([www.indianterritory.com](http://www.indianterritory.com)), which displays antique Native American art, and the Laguna Art Museum ([www.lagunaartmuseum.org](http://www.lagunaartmuseum.org)), which houses 5,000 works representing California artists from the early 19th century to today. Once in town, the Coast Highway becomes Broadway, and the water comes into view. For a few miles, there are many art galleries, some large, one-of-a-kind hotels, and a variety of places to eat. Behind the buildings is a pristine, publicly accessible beach.

## THE ART

It's said that Laguna's first painting was painted in 1878. By the early 1900s, the town had gained a reputation as an artist colony. When the Depression hit and L.A. hosted the 1932 Olympics, creative Lagunans hosted their first art festival, now called the Pageant of the Masters ([www.foapom.com](http://www.foapom.com)) – and Laguna's art reputation was set.

Laguna Canyon Road, the main route into Laguna Beach, is now home to three major art fairs. Indeed, no summer visit to Laguna would seem complete without visiting one of these nonprofit festivals. We chose Art-A-Fair ([www.art-a-fair.com](http://www.art-a-fair.com)), a juried fine art show, because I'd heard I'd like the work of Leo Simone ([www.simonewatercolors.com](http://www.simonewatercolors.com)). Art-A-Fair, as well as Pageant of the Masters and Sawdust Art Festival ([www.sawdustartfestival.org](http://www.sawdustartfestival.org)) – are on the trolley route just a short way up Laguna Canyon Road.

Simone, whose uniquely rich watercolors did capture me, happens to be a local artist, but Art-A-Fair is unique in that it's international in scope. A variety of styles were evident, and a jury evaluated 253 artists for 22 open spots. Sawdust, on





Photos: Boaz Gabbai



on the wooden deck) was full.

After being seated, I turned to our waiter, Fred, for advice. His love of the food and respect for Chef Ghahreman was evident, and his descriptions so detailed that I felt I'd been in the kitchen with the chefs. For appetizers, we went with a green mango salad, and for my entrée, I went with baked Kurobuta pork shank, marinated overnight in three bottles of wine and 25 spices. This succulent, most uniquely flavored meat literally fell off the bone. I was intrigued by the blends of flavors on each plate. Truly, everything about Sapphire Laguna provided for a fabulous dining experience.

Earlier in the day, knowing we were in for an evening of fine food and wine, we opted for a simple brunch at Ruby's Diner ([www.rubys.com](http://www.rubys.com)), which was hopping. About 1.5 miles off the main walking area, it's on the free trolley route.

### THE STAY

We were lucky enough to stay at the Ritz-Carlton Laguna Niguel ([www.ritzcarlton.com](http://www.ritzcarlton.com)), about six miles from Broadway, and one of three full-out resorts in Laguna. The St. Regis Resort, Monarch Beach ([www.stregismb.com](http://www.stregismb.com)), a quarter-mile inland from the Ritz-Carlton, isn't beachside but does sport a golf course. A free shuttle runs between the St. Regis and the Ritz-Carlton for guests to take advantage of both resort's offerings. Further up the South Coast Highway, on the beach, and closer to town, is the Craftsman-style Montage ([www.montagelagunabeach.com](http://www.montagelagunabeach.com)), which struck me as more of a cottage-oriented resort.

The Ritz-Carlton evokes a feeling of timelessness. Decor is elegant without trying to be, and doesn't seem decorated in any particular period's style. It's a long, marble-floored building sitting atop a 150-foot bluff, which affords views of sunbathers, picnickers, swimmers and surfers. Somehow, as I looked out, I felt I could have easily seen bathing suits from the 1920s or any other time period.



We stayed on the Club Floor, along with annual guests who summer there, and several families. The Ritz-Carlton (as the other two resorts do) offers a day camp and activities for children. Boogie boards are provided free, and many kids take surfing lessons. Other offerings include a 7 a.m. beach walk and 9 a.m. yoga. All three hotels have a spa and fitness center.

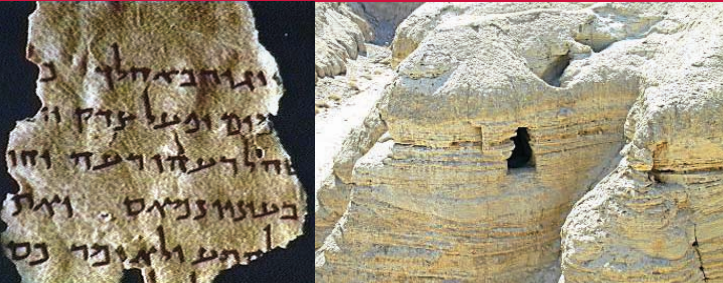
But only the Ritz-Carlton has Eno. If wine, cheese and chocolate entice you, you're bound to appreciate the hotel's newest addition. In contrast to the bright lobby, Eno is romantically dark, with walnut-lined walls, a fireplace, six high wooden tables and tall, comfy chairs. Calling it

a wine-tasting room doesn't do it justice, nor does the fact that it offers more than 500 wines (14 varied flights), 50 cheeses and an array of chocolates, alongside hand-stuffed olives, fragrant breads, delicate meats and Spanish Marcona almonds. Our host, Michael, was terrific, taking us through the experience with expertise, allowing us to enjoy every taste sensation.

### A DAY'S PLAN

Laguna is a viably easy day trip. Arriving early, you have the morning for a late breakfast, and the afternoon for exploring the town and its many shops and galleries. You'll have time to change modes, relax at the beach, enjoy an ocean overlook or meander through artworks. Move into evening mode at Eno, followed by another exquisite taste experience at Sapphire, topped off by an easy walk along the beach before heading home to our Valley. If you opt for an overnight getaway, well, all the more time to enjoy and explore. ♦

## PLAN ON SEEING...



### THE DEAD SEA SCROLLS AT THE SAN DIEGO NATURAL HISTORY MUSEUM

**T**hrough December 31, the San Diego Natural History Museum is offering Southern Californians the rare chance to see the Dead Sea Scrolls, which are considered among the foremost archaeological treasures ever discovered.

These ancient documents are the oldest known manuscripts of the Bible (they date from 250 B.C. to 68 A.D.). The text, handwritten in Hebrew and Aramaic, contains previously unknown stories about Old Testament figures such as Abraham and Noah.

Bedouin herders initially discovered the scrolls in 1947. After that, archaeologists excavated 11 caves in Israel, on the Dead Sea's northwestern shore. They worked delicately to recover these writings, which are of great religious and historical significance, particularly to Judeo-Christian beliefs.

San Diego's exhibition of the Dead Sea Scrolls, jointly produced by the Israel Antiquities Authority, the Dead Sea Scrolls Foundation and the San Diego Natural History Museum, is billing itself as the most comprehensive ever assembled. A display of 27 scrolls spans two floors and 12,000 square feet. For hours, admission prices and to buy tickets (\$15-\$28), go to [www.sdnhm.org/scrolls](http://www.sdnhm.org/scrolls) or call (877) 946-7797.

— Avital Binshtock

the other hand, is open only to local artists and is more of a family fair. Art-A-Fair represents the true art fair season here – summer, while Sawdust puts on a Winter Fantasy art festival, on four weekends over November and December.

### THE FOOD

After perusing the colorful offerings at Art-A-Fair, we were hungry, so we headed to the recently opened Sapphire Laguna ([www.sapphirelaguna.com](http://www.sapphirelaguna.com)), which I found exquisite and easy to recommend.

Chef Azmin Ghahreman, formerly executive chef at the St. Regis Monarch Beach, has created a global menu, each item on it well-described, clearly unique and with a seductive appeal. This place is popular – not because it's new and trendy, but because it's comfortable, casual, elegant and offers an array of amazing food. When we arrived at 7 p.m., every table (including those outside