

SBLS

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INDIAN SUMMER OASIS

TO SUR WITH LOVE

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I know I am going to like this place as I pull up to reception. There is a swing hanging from the oak tree outside. The only thing stopping me from jumping on is my equal eagerness to get to the pool, lined with orange umbrellas and sparkling in the sunlight. I can already feel Carmel Valley Ranch bringing my inner child out to play. To celebrate the reopening of Highway 1, I took the coastal route up to Carmel Valley, with plans to stop in Big Sur on the return trip.

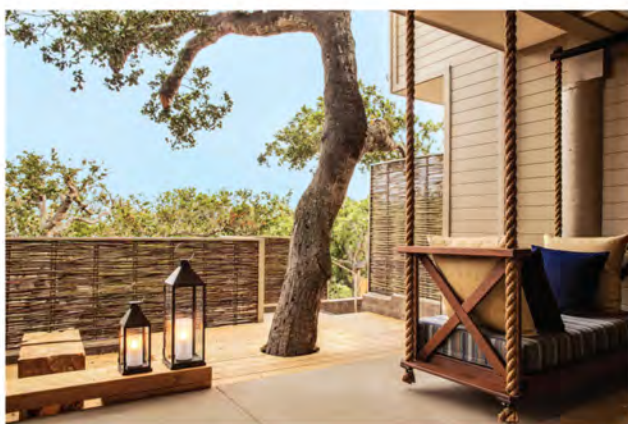
Soon after checking into my spacious one bedroom suite, I step out onto the private balcony to get the lay of the land. Through oak trees, I catch glimpses of the golf course at the bottom of the hillside and mountains in the distance. After unpacking, I head straight to the pool, settling beneath a cabana where I'm promptly offered water and a pool menu. Carmel Valley Ranch is a relaxing place. It's rustic, fun and unpretentious, yet refined. I slip into the jacuzzi overlooking the valley, the air smells like campfire smoke from the wood burning fire pit. If this is ranch living, I'll take it.

When the early evening sun turns to shade around the pool, I head back to my suite to prepare for the evening. I arrive at Valley Kitchen for dinner and am guided through the bustling restaurant and seated along a glass wall with unobstructed views of the valley. I sip a Smoked Lavender Martini while perusing the menu. I decide on Fisherman Jerry's Catch—salmon served atop asparagus puree, power greens, and locally foraged wild mushrooms accompanied by a glass of Swing Pinot Noir, Carmel Valley Ranch's wine label; only fitting as I can see the Pinot Noir vineyards from where I'm seated.

Stepping out into the cool evening air, I stop by the pool to roast s'mores by the fire pit and chat with fellow guests before walking back to my room. Back in my







suite, I wrap myself in the cloud-like robe, get a fire going in the fireplace and watch the sunset illuminate the mountains as the sky fades to a pale pink.

Before the sun rises the next day I am on a hike up Horseshoe Trail. I take in my favorite time of day among the wildflowers and trees. I smile as I come across another swing along the way to the peak. They're everywhere, it's like a giant playground for adults.

Ready to relax, I head to Spa Aiyana where my masseuse Kaye leads me to a room with two treatment tables, all for myself. I can tell this is going to be good. To begin my Bee Beautiful body therapy she scrubs me down with a body polish made of honey, lavender oil and calendula from the property's garden. Kaye then wraps me in a cocoon and massages my face with royal jelly. After rinsing off the scrub I emerge—metamorphosis complete—with skin softer than I ever thought possible, and return to the other treatment table for a honey shea butter massage.

The next day, I say goodbye to Carmel Valley Ranch, not without one last swing over a lavender field in full bloom, and merge back onto Highway 1.



To my right, churning waves swirl around the rugged rocks far below. The natural beauty of the coastline makes it hard to resist every pullout.

An hour later, driving through the gates at Ventana Big Sur, I feel instantly calmed like I'm entering a sanctuary. The driveway leads me through towering redwoods to the rustic yet upscale property, which was renovated and reopened by Singapore based Alila Hotels & Resorts just last year as their only North American property. Yes, it's that special.

After checking in with the most courteous staff I head through the lobby to enjoy the daily wine and cheese reception in the adjoining Social House—complete with a pool table and board games. I take my Humboldt Fog and red wine to the deck to soak in the view. Pristine swimming pools and lawns in the foreground segue into ginormous trees and white-capped ocean in the distance.

Eager to see the rest of the property, I walk along the paths, making a mental note to return to the Japanese hot baths. Then, inside the vine-covered library, I sink into a leather couch. The room smells of old books and is the most authentically cozy building I've ever been in.

Before dinner, I retreat to my room. The clean minimalist architecture melds perfectly with earthy touches of stone and redwood. Retractable walls give the option of creating more open space. Black and white photographs of Big Sur tide pools above the wood burning fireplace add an urbanized touch. Yet the highlight of the calming room is actually outside—the jacuzzi on the glass railing patio. With views of only an expansive meadow, trees and the ocean, it's heaven.

It's a third of a mile walk to The Sur House for dinner. I pass deer wandering on the path below me and a wedding site that would make anyone want to recreate Sean Parker's wedding. The restaurant would have been worth a 10 mile walk thanks to its ambiance, tastes-as-good-as-it-looks food, and views of the sunset.



I begin with The PCB—tequila, mezcal, lime, passionfruit, pamplemousse liqueur, and lime salt. I sip the delicious concoction while perusing Chef Paul Corsentino's four course 'Taste of the Season' menu; each dish sounds as intriguing as the last. I start with green gazpacho, followed by grilled octopus. Then, with perfectly timed service, my main course Alaskan Halibut arrives. And it is still moving. Well the benito flakes sprinkled atop are at least. I ask the server and he explains that it's the thinly shaved fish skin reacting to the heat. I finish off the meal with a light pavlova topped with fruit compote, mascarpone cream, lemon basil sorbet, and a dried lemon slice. I can barely wait to return to The Sur House the next night.

After morning yoga on the deck, excited to see where some of my previous night's meal originated, I meet gardener Peter for a tour of Ventana's tiered garden. He explains their gardening system with immense passion. As we walk around he offers me a white sage flower to try; it tastes like honey. He shares stories of The Birdman, a legend in Big Sur, who gave Ventana their chickens. He lets me pick multicolored carrots and explains the medicinal benefits of lovage. We harvest beets and thyme which I get to take home. I leave with a bounty of vegetables, herbs and newfound knowledge about gardening.



At Ventana you feel immersed in nature yet in no way roughing it, I mean there are several pools to choose from. I spend the afternoon between the clothing optional Mountain Pool (when in Big Sur) and the infinity hot tub, which sits amidst towering redwoods and is quite possibly the most tranquil place on earth.

Throughout my stay, the decks and pools with expansive views were too hard to part with. As much as I love hiking in Big Sur, I didn't do more than the two mile loop that surrounds the property. I typically travel to explore a location, see everything and go go go, making the hotels I stay at a means to an end, not the destination. And while both Carmel Valley Ranch and Ventana Big Sur are in absolutely beautiful locations, the hotels themselves are enchanting destinations that aim to help you relax, disconnect from work and reconnect with your inner child. ✨

carmelvalleyranch.com

ventanabigsur.com