

A Great Getaway: Carmel Valley Ranch

I knew we'd come to the right place as soon as I saw Roxy. The stocky English bulldog was asleep in her basket next to the concierge desk when we arrived, but she woke up just long enough for a welcome cuddle before drifting back to dreamland.

The genuinely friendly attitude of the two-legged staff also confirmed that we'd picked the right spot to celebrate my husband's birthday. Richard and I are informal, outdoorsy people, but we also place a high value on good food, good service, and comfortable surroundings. Carmel Valley Ranch, it appeared, would be able to deliver everything we needed.

The 500-acre property is located on the sunny side of the Monterey Peninsula, eight miles from Carmel-by-the-Sea, and a

two-hour drive from San Francisco. John Pritzker, one of 11 members of the extended Pritzker family on the Forbes 400 List in 2011, bought Carmel Valley Ranch in 1986 and has spent \$40 million turning it into a "playground" to be enjoyed by adults and kids.

On the way to our room, we noticed an old-fashioned oak swing hanging from a tree branch — a signature of the hotelier, who believes we all "just need to play more."

Later, we wandered over to the organic vegetable garden where assistant chef Gus Trejo was picking swiss chard for that night's dinner. He pointed out the tall fences intended to keep the resort's large deer population and flocks of wild turkeys away from the produce. He also showed us

some of the 7,000 lavender plants and the young vineyard on the property.

A few hours later, after stopping to pet Roxy, we were seated in



Roxy, a two-year-old English Bulldog, resides in The Ranch's lobby and welcomes all two-legged and four-legged guests

front of a cozy fire in the Lodge Restaurant where chef Tim Wood, a graduate of the Culinary Institute of America, introduced himself and explained that he sources ingredients from local fishermen, farmers, and artisans, and cooks with Monterey Bay sea salt.

Our delicious dinner began with maple roasted butternut squash bisque, followed by organic beet salad. The main course was fisherman Jerrie's line-caught sea bass served with garlic olive oil-glazed Napa cabbage, sweet potato puree, and olive/red pepper tapenade. I loved the food, the service, and the country club ambience.

In all, the resort offers 139 rooms, ranging from 650 to 1,200 square feet. It was a pleasure to retire to >>

The painting over the fireplace in the lobby of Carmel Valley Ranch was painted by John Pritzker's cousin Joyce Treiman. It is full of sly references and conveys the sense of play infused into the property



detour

(DESTINATIONS)

<< our Ranch Suite with a living room, wet bar, spacious bathroom, king-size bedroom, and balcony with a vineyard view — and I loved falling asleep on crisp linens with the fireplace warming the room.

In the morning we opted for the aptly-named Huff 'n Puff Trail that wound up past the golf course and the yoga platform and connected with the Mucklehead Trail to Sniveley's Ridge. Here, the CVR property ends, but miles of hiking trails continue in Garland Ranch Regional Park. Along the way we spotted rabbits, birds, turkeys, bobcats, and quail. The early morning fog and the Spanish moss hanging in oak trees gave it an ethereal look.

When we returned, we realized we had to make some decisions about how to spend our time. This playground could keep a family thoroughly occupied for a week or more and we only had a weekend.

If the swings don't do it, the s'mores are sure to bring out the kid in every guest



The adults-only pool located between the lodge and the spa is a serene getaway

The Pete Dye-designed golf course with views of lush woods and expansive mountains draws many guests, as do the nine tennis courts, basketball court, two bocce ball courts, two saltwater pools, splash zone for kids, the fitness center that offers a daily menu of classes, and the new Spa Aiyana. Guests can also don protective gear and try their hand at harvesting honey under the supervision of a certified beekeeper. Cooking classes are another option.

We opted for the spa, where I indulged in an Herbal Hot Rocks massage and Richard enjoyed an Arnica therapeutic massage. Spa Aiyana includes three double treatment suites with fireplaces and eight deluxe rooms.

That night — feeling very relaxed — we enjoyed a casual meal at the River Ranch Café, where we sat outdoors under a starry sky and enjoyed the bonfire and lap robes provided by



Spanish moss hanging in oak trees creates an ethereal feel on early-morning walks

the staff. We even roasted marshmallows and indulged in s'mores — a nightly tradition at Carmel Valley Ranch.

Richard thinks we should go back to the resort for Valentine's Day, but I want to wait until May when the lavender is in full bloom. In either case, my first stop will be the concierge desk to check in with my pal Roxy.

ELIZABETH HANSEN