

Hotel Del puts its beach foot forward

Staying at Coronado resort not required to enjoy fruits of its \$150 million remodel

By *Jeanne Cooper*

CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

CORONADO,
San Diego County

IIey, who put that beach in front of the hotel?

For 20-odd years, family celebrations in the San Diego area have brought us to the Hotel del Coronado, the fabled-and-gabled Victorian-era resort in this quaint island town. We've gorged on festive brunches in the elegant Crown Room and ogled the obligatory ornate Christmas tree on the main floor; we've poked around the lower-level rabbit warren of shops, appeasing young relatives with ice cream and time in the toy store.

Yet if not for the prominently displayed photos of a swimsuit-clad Marilyn Monroe in "Some Like It Hot," filmed in 1958 at the Del (as locals call it), some of us might never have guessed that broad white sands lay just beyond. The tennis courts outside and the confusing layout and decorous ambience inside made Coronado Beach seem inaccessible, and almost inappropriate.

A recent visit, however, revealed that the 120-year-old grande dame of Coronado has been not only extensively renovated, but reimagined. It's as if Miss Havisham slipped out of her faded wedding dress and into an elegant bathing costume — and yes, she's had some work: a \$150 million makeover, in this case. You don't even have to stay at the Hotel Del to enjoy its new oceanfront orientation, although you'll probably wish you could.

Gone are the tennis courts and

beachside clutter, replaced within the last year or so by a sophisticated indoor/outdoor restaurant, outdoor bars, an inviting spa, a roomy and well-stocked fitness center, a chic salon with a feng shui theme, and an intriguing wine bar that also serves chocolate and cheese. The public can patronize everything but the fitness center. (Guests need know they're getting something for the daily \$25 resort fee).

Meanwhile, celebrities craving privacy (the kind that announces, "Look at me, I'm being private!") have patronized the resort's new Beach Village, a posh enclave billed as "a resort within a resort." Right off the new beachfront promenade that the Del was required to build in order to expand, the cluster of cottages and villas are really more like a mini Malibu Beach within Coronado: Simple exteriors hide exquisite furnishings and wealthy residents.

Kevin Bacon and Kyra Sedgwick, Geena Davis and young Hollywooders Seth Rogan and Michael Cera are some of the famous guests who've enjoyed the Bose surround-sound systems, Wolf ranges and ubiquitous flat-screen TVs and mini fridges — assuming they left their private pools and hot tubs to go inside.

Rates at the Beach Village range from \$750 to \$5,000 a night. For a little under \$300, I spent a night in a plushly remodeled room in the original 1888 building, with quaint angles, a sloping floor and a city view that included the hotel's signature red roof.

Part of the ongoing AAA American Treasure package, my rate in-

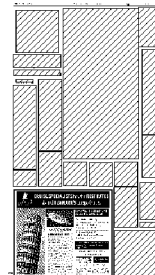
cluded the lavish breakfast buffet at Sheerwater restaurant (for two) and a commemorative book. But one could easily stay for a lot less at one of the motels on Orange Avenue, or across the bay in San Diego, and still take advantage of the Del's new amenities.

Dinner at 1500 Ocean — formerly the hotel's Prince of Wales restaurant — is certainly worth a splurge, excelling any meal I've ever had in Coronado, including those sumptuous brunches in the Crown Room. Since it was San Diego Restaurant Week (an annual January event that may be repeated this June), I ordered a three-course prix fixe dinner for \$40, but even at half again as much, it would have been worth it.

The repast began with an amuse-bouche of quivering burrata cheese on a salad of roasted beet, blood orange and arugula, followed by savory celery root soup topped with grilled mushrooms and chive oil, and a main course of perfectly seared diver scallops with squash puree, delicate shavings of Brussels sprouts and almond brown butter. The last was so satisfying, I had to ask for my warm chocolate chipotle cake to go.

It was too chilly to dine outside, but fire pits — part of the resort's new signature touch — and stiff drinks allowed a number of patrons to enjoy sunset over the ocean from several outdoor sites, including 1500 Ocean's terrace bar. After dark, the fire pits act as little beacons on the sprawling grounds.

Another fire pit warms loungers by the vanishing-edge pool of the new Spa at the Del, which boasts 21 treatment rooms for its massages, facials and body therapies, several of them ocean-themed. I kicked myself for scheduling a massage so close to my dinner reservation that I only had time to for a brief soak in the beautifully tiled indoor spa before needing to get ready. At least the abundance of toiletries in the spacious spa lounge made hurried primping



easy.

I had also called too late to book an appointment at the adjoining Yamaguchi Salon, named for celebrity stylist and feng shui adviser Billy Yamaguchi. He swoops in from Hollywood once a month for consultations and haircuts, but has trained his staff to offer feng shui-influenced hair styling and nail care, using ingredients such as ginger, bamboo and green tea.

Earlier in the day, though, I had put my resort fee to good use at the downstairs fitness center, which opened last April. I loved the cork floors, comfortable weight benches, top-notch equipment — and the absence of youthful ruckus (ages 15 to 17 must be accompanied by an adult, while kids under 15 are not admitted).

That workout, and a brisk stroll along the Paseo del Mar promenade at the Del's edge, gave me the excuse to try one more of the new additions, just before I turned in. Eno, a sleek wine bar that also serves flights of artisanal cheeses and gourmet chocolates, offers 50 wines by the (Riedel) glass, with 300-plus selections in its library. Since my diet and budget had room for just one glass of wine to wash down a sea-salt caramel, I relied on the expert sommelier's advice on what to order.

I confess I don't remember what delicious dessert wine he chose, but I won't soon forget there's a beach — and a whole lot more — at the Del.

To comment online, go to sfgate.com/travel and follow the links.

If you go

GETTING THERE

From San Diego International Airport, it's about 9 miles to the Hotel Del Coronado.

WHERE TO STAY

Hotel Del Coronado, 1500 Orange Ave., Coronado. (800) 468-3533, (619) 522-8490, hoteldel.com. Room types vary widely; standard rates start at \$290 (no view — \$355 for partial ocean view). The AAA American Treasure package, which includes breakfast buffet for two and a commemorative book, starts at \$280; see Web site for other packages available through June 30. Rates exclude parking (\$23 self, \$30 valet) and \$25 resort fee.

For nearby moderately priced lodgings, see the visitor center Web site, below.

WHERE TO EAT

New options include:

1500 Ocean, dinner 5:30 to 10:30 p.m. daily, terrace bar open till midnight. Entrees \$28 to \$45.

Eno, (619) 522-8456, www.enowinerooms.com. 4 to 10 p.m. Sunday-Thursday, till 11 p.m. Friday-Saturday.

WHAT TO DO

The Spa at the Del, (619) 522-8100. Open 9 a.m. to 7 p.m. daily. Massages, \$150-\$185 for 50 minutes, \$225-\$235 for 80 minutes. 50-minute facials, \$160 (\$150 teens). Body scrubs, wraps and peels, \$155 to \$170 (50 minutes), \$270 (80 minutes).

Yamaguchi Salon, (619) 522-8808. Open 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. Sunday-Thursday, till 7 p.m. Friday-Saturday. Haircuts from \$85 (\$260 with consultation by Yamaguchi). Manicures and pedicures, \$70 to \$110.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Coronado Visitor Center, (866) 599-7242, www.coronadovisitorcenter.com.



TODD TRUMBULL / The Chronicle



Photos courtesy Hotel del Coronado

Wine lovers can dine in a private room at 1500 Ocean, above, or enjoy tastings at the new wine bar, Eno.



Patrons of the new spa at the Hotel del Coronado can soak in a private pool, above, with a view of the beach. Guests of the hotel's new cottage-style Beach Village have their own pool, below.



It's as if Miss Havisham slipped out of her faded wedding dress and into an elegant bathing costume – and yes, she's had some work.



Warming to the view: New fire pits at the Hotel del Coronado, like this one on the spa terrace, entice visitors to linger outside.