

REALITY CHECK

A letter from Laguna

By: Richard Turen
May 26, 2009



It has not been my practice to vacation at abandoned trailer park sites, but this time, I was making an exception.

I had just had the unsettling experience of sitting in a steam room with a therapist I'd just met, while he took my pulse every few minutes to make certain that my "death by steam" did not end up as an item in TW's [Travel Confidential](#) column.

I was still alive, so this was followed by a walk down some steps into a freezing plunge pool outside the steam room, where the goal is to submerge oneself for a few moments in the ice-cold water before running back up the steps. Then it's back to the steam room as the ritual is repeated. Five times.

My hot-and-cold, yin-and-yang, blood vessel-dilating, toxin-flushing routine began poolside with a casual interview that struck at the very heart of my being:

"So tell me, how do you feel about your body?"

"What happens when you are sleeping?"

"How do you deal with impurities in your system?"

"Are you in tune with your spouse, bodywise?"

This conversation took place looking out over the Pacific, and while this was, I realize, normal conversation for folks meeting for the first time in Southern California, I had just flown in from a snowstorm in Chicago, where we just don't talk that much about our bodies.

Anyway, I surrendered. I experienced a series of treatments for the next several days that included spiritual walks on the beach and a hot/cold blanket wrap that reminded me of the night I slept in a doorway in the rain outside the Lake Como Youth Hostel.

I also had a Swiss shower, which consists of lying on a wet massage table while a rubber-gloved

therapist uses industrial-size shower heads hanging in series to apply hot and then cold water to various nether regions of the body.

Then there were the massages, simply the best I've had anywhere. All of this took place amid indoor/outdoor facilities with floor-to-ceiling windows opening to views of the Pacific Ocean.

It was all part of the aptly named Surrender program offered at the Montage Resort and Spa in Laguna Beach. They had me on the first day.

Here's why:

I believe that the Montage provides the best overall food, service and spa program of any resort I have experienced in the U.S.

The second reason is more personal. The Pacific Ocean is my mistress. I moved away from her when I moved from San Francisco to Chicago. And she has never, for one day, been out of my thoughts.

My wife, Angela, has been voted the World's Top Spa Specialist by Conde Nast Traveler for the past several years. She has traveled the world evaluating spa operations and services. It was as members of her retinue that my daughter and I were in attendance at the Montage.

The place was once the hunting ground for an Argentinean pirate named Hippolyte de Bouchard, who sailed the local waters looking for boats to attack for their treasures as well as for vegetables for his irritable crew. Since reading of his exploits, I have started using his name when making restaurant reservations.

Looking out at the grounds before me, I tried to imagine what those four Geoff brothers must have seen after they arrived here from Connecticut in 1878 and decided that this land, speckled with wild mustard plants, would be the perfect place to grow potatoes.

They made some money farming until one of the brothers sold out to open a small hotel. The land then became the Geoff Island Trailer Camp, the locale for many movies, including the Lucy and Desi classic "The Long, Long Trailer."

In the interest of time and space, let's just say that there was some rezoning, some clearing of brush and some acknowledgement that this stretch of view along Laguna Beach, cradled in the strong arms of the Pacific, might be the most desirable view in the U.S.

In February 2003, Alan Fuerstman started a company to build luxury resorts for affluent travelers and launched his first property, Montage Laguna Beach. The 250 rooms and four bungalows, all designed in Laguna Craftsman style, are reminiscent of the wood-and-stone dwellings that lined the beach in the early 1900s.

There is never a single reason why a property soars to eminence. But I can tell you that every staff person I engaged in conversation talked about the respect the staff feels for one another and

the way they appreciate Fuerstman's approach to management.

He is, I believe, one of the world's pre-eminent hoteliers. I can cite any number of reasons I believe this to be true, but let me list just one. The resort hosts a yearlong, weekly program that prepares employees for designation as a Master Wine Sommelier. It is paid for by management and is open to all employees. Last year, 14 staff members passed the exam. So the person making up your room at the Montage might be a master sommelier.

There has been zero turnover among the 14-member senior executive team since the Montage opened six years ago.

Our room overlooked the sweeping lawns leading down to a magnificent beach reached by a curved series of wooden steps. A public walkway enjoyed by the fortunate citizens of Laguna Beach sashays around the outer edge of the property.

Service levels are somewhere near the highest I have ever experienced in the U.S. We did our "unaided staff recognition test," and the property received 28 out of 31, the second-highest score since we began recording results 19 years ago.

When I interrupted a maid cleaning a guestroom to ask directions to the spa, I was led there personally and was asked if there was anything else I needed. This, despite the fact that the spa was several buildings away.

The waiters did all possible to personalize and enhance the dining experience. Room service always surpassed expectations, although minibar and breakfast prices were north of the norm.

We had planned to experience the art galleries and small shops of Laguna Beach. We never did. We couldn't bring ourselves to leave this haven of tranquility and truly caring service.

Angela felt there were a handful of spas in Asia that were on the same level of service as the Montage. "But they don't have this," she said to me one morning as we sat, in our robes, overlooking a particularly gorgeous slice of the Pacific. "You really don't have to travel to Asia to get the best spa services in the world."

I have now bought into the notion of hot-to-cold-water jump starts. I believe there is value in having the heat of a sauna dilate the blood vessels followed by the constricting result of cold water that sends blood flushing out the body's toxins.

Twice a day, every day since my visit, I scream, "I hate you, Montage." It happens at the end of each shower, when I turn the really hot water into a rush of ice-cold water.

I didn't just like this place. I surrendered to it.

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