

Condé Nast Traveler

Introducing the 2019 Hot List

by CNT EDITORS
April 16, 2019

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For the 23rd edition of the Hot List—our picks of the year's top hotel and cruise openings—these 82 outstanding winners represent not just the vanguard of the world, but where travelers are headed next.



Every year our team of contributors and editors vet hundreds of hotels that swing open their doors promising all sorts of industry catnip from holistic spa treatments to rockstar bartenders to unprecedented access to some of the world's hardest-to-reach locations. Most of these openings are...perfectly fine. But only a fraction are what we'd call 'hot.' Our army of sleuths spent the last year checking into hundreds of new properties, assessing everything from Wi-fi strength to rooftop pool scene. Ultimately, the hotels and cruises that land on this list are the absolute best of the best; the game-changing, boundary pushing, vacation-making openings that are so good, we're already dreaming about going back. Eighty-two made the cut this year; scroll down to see the complete list. And peruse all of our Hot List galleries to find out what we love most about each winner.

Keep reading to find out why we think they're extraordinary, and see how beautiful these places are in our [gallery of hotels](#) and [gallery of cruises](#).

UNITED STATES

CALIFORNIA

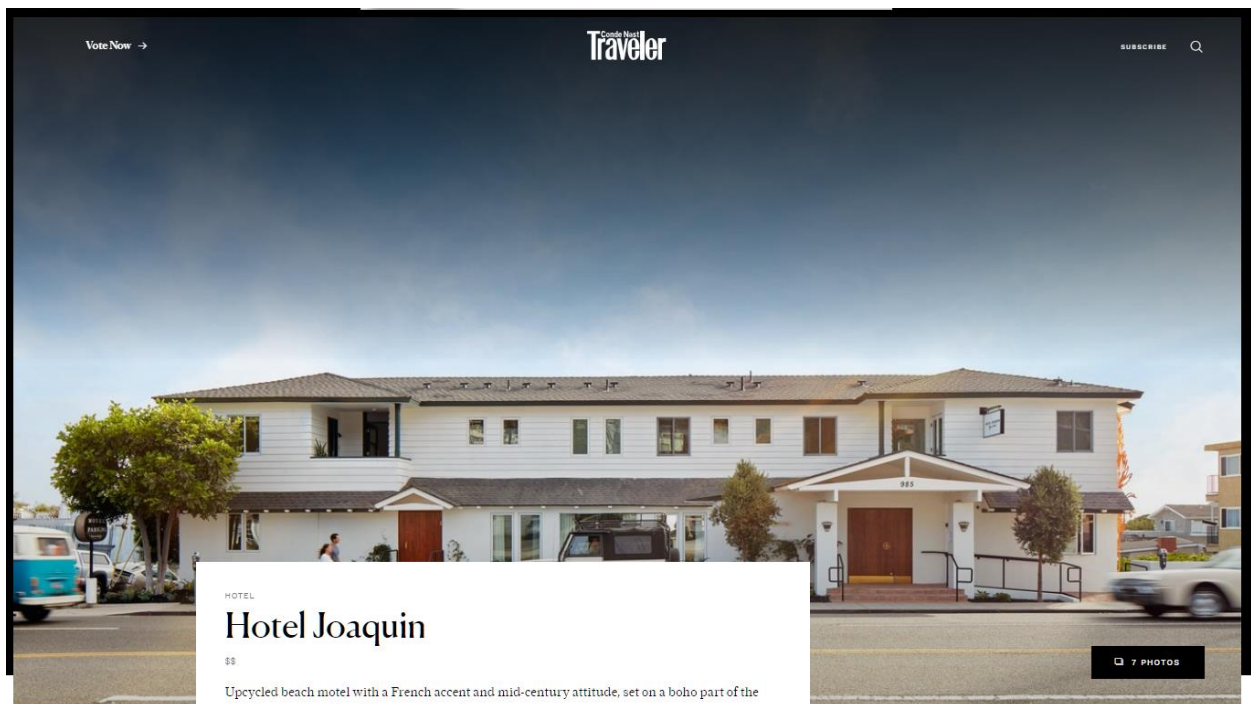
Sands Hotel & Spa, Indian Wells

Kimpton La Peer Hotel, Los Angeles

Nomad Los Angeles

Palihotel Culver City

Hotel Joaquin, Laguna Beach



TL;DR

Private club meets surf lodge

FIRST IMPRESSION

Welcome to the Hotel California

FOOD & DRINKS

The day's catch and raw Cali cuisine

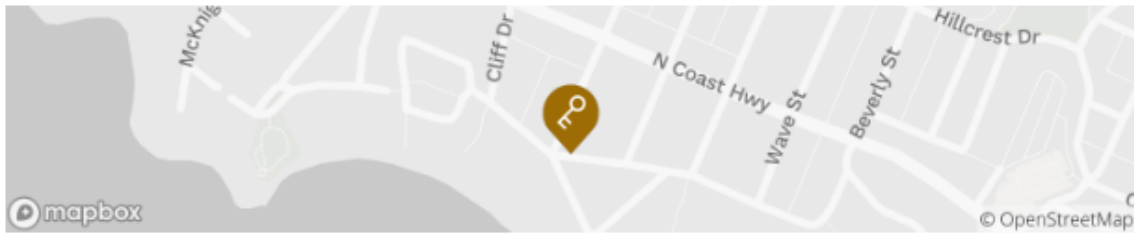


STAFF

Young, trained, empowered

BED & BATH

Barefoot-luxury, white on white



◆ 985 N Coast Hwy, Laguna Beach, CA 92651, United States

[MAKE A RESERVATION](#)

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AMENITIES

Free WiFi

Bar

Pool

ROOMS

22

Our Review

By CYNTHIA ROSENFELD

Contributing Writer

Set the scene.

On the Pacific Coast Highway, this Laguna Beach motel has had a shiny-bright, white-lacquered makeover. There's an art-filled living room instead of a lobby; then, it's straight outside to the blue-sky-meets-Pacific-Ocean panorama.

What's the story?

Two local hoteliers bought this crumbling pile and undertook an extreme makeover to bring the Cape Cod structure in line with the expensive, barefoot-chic style of these SoCal surroundings, with interior designer Robert McKinley (who did Montauk's Surf Lodge) working his magic.

What can we expect in our room?

White lacquered walls, exposed beams, and McKinley's finds (mid-century modern chairs, naïve artworks) from the flea markets of Paris and Normandy. All are different. Some have bijou ocean-facing balconies, while two second-floor rooms, Mer and Ciel, are among the smallest yet have excellent blue views from the bed. Then there's a Marantz turntable in lieu of a television set and a selection from the 550-strong vinyl collection in the living room. Beach Boys or Eagles feel particularly apt.

How about the food and drink?

The guests-only Saline showcases the skills of chef Leo Bongarra (formerly of L.A.'s Sunset Tower Hotel), who adds shaved truffles gratis to his seasonal Med-leaning dishes such as grilled scallops on celery root and parsnip purée, and serves chlorophyll water with edible flowers. Much has been made on social media of his cerulean sea algae spirulina 'milk' which tasted divine over 'rawnola' with coconut and cacao shavings. Sous chef Kuo makes a mean seafood salad at lunch with the catch of the day plus basil, mint, and other herbs from the rooftop garden.

Anything to say about the service?

Uniformly impressive and seamless. It's very relaxed but guests are taken seriously.

Who comes here?

Everyone looks beautiful in the California sunlight. Up with the sun, early morning hiking, then back for 9 a.m. yoga in the organic garden. Handling surfboards, kayaks, diving gear, and Linus bicycles. Surf tees, no shoes, Celine slides for driving home in a convertible.

What's the neighborhood scene like?

This strip of coast is a laid-back bolthole for artists and surfers, with million-dollar beach shacks overlooking the Pacific. In-house 'adventure guru' George Vitolo will take guests up trails above Laguna, paddleboarding and sea lion-spotting at Shaw's Cove, or to the best surf breaks at Rockpile Beach, for serious wave riders only. Between the surf shops in Laguna, find the best empanadas at The Stand Natural Foods and tacos at La Sirena Grill.

And anything you'd change?

A few more Moroccan rugs in the rooms upstairs might muffle other guests' movements. Locals will wish they could dine anytime at Saline—but guests will love the exclusivity of it.

Anything else we should know?

The Road is a very impressive little paper in-room guide. It was unusually well written and full of valuable addresses and local secrets, such as Dartmoor Hike for its sublime blue views and reggae nights at The Dirty Bird a few miles down the highway.

Is it worth it—and why?

Yes—this is one of southern California's most appealing beach towns, and the Joaquin is a true original.

<https://www.cntraveler.com/hotels/laguna-beach/hotel-joaquin>