



First Look: Hotel Joaquin in Laguna Beach, California

A 1946 postcard in a private collection advertises Laguna Beach, California, as a quaint artists' colony where "ball players, columnists, writers (both 'pulp and slick'), painters, movie directors and stars... rub elbows with the rest of the townsfolk in happy anonymity." How little things have changed.

Laguna Beach is now lined with large luxury hotels, like the Craftsman-style **Montage Laguna Beach** and the **Ranch at Laguna Beach**, and old-school beach hotels have been re-conceived by companies like Joie de Vivre, whose hip Pacific Edge is the former Vacation Village, where my family decamped at least once a year for 45 years. But the artsy scene and laid back feel haven't changed much, thanks to strict city ordinances and the century-old Laguna Beach Art Association, which have kept commercialism in check.



But if you're looking for a sexy small hotel in Laguna, you'd be disappointed—that is, you would have been until **Hotel Joaquin** opened this fall (we were so excited about its arrival that we covered it in our monthly round-up of **hotel openings we love**). It's the concept of Paul Makarechian, CEO of Auric Road, a hotel company now opening and operating its own “petite resorts.” When he was CEO of Makar Properties, Makarechian built the **St. Regis Monarch Beach**, and bought and repositioned the Anaheim Hilton before setting his sights on smaller hotels, like **The Goodland**, a 160-room Holiday Inn in Santa Barbara that he transformed with Kimpton before selling in 2015. But, Makarechian says, he was thinking even smaller. “I really wanted to align what I’m doing with what I appreciate as a guest,” he says. “The experiences I love the most—the soulfulness of small, historic European inns and the sophisticated French style of St. Bart’s—were missing in the U.S.”

With the Hotel Joaquin, Makarechian and team have brought the former 22-room, Cape Cod-style Laguna Beach Motor Inn back to its California Riviera heyday glory—and then some. When I arrive, guests are lounging in the indoor-outdoor living room by the fire, browsing the vinyl collection by the McIntosh turntable, having a drink at the bar—much like you would as a guest at someone’s private beach estate. Those who know Auric Road’s Palm Springs hotel, Korakia Pensione, will recognize the “I’m cool enough to have discovered this place on my own” vibe, cultivated via word-of-mouth-only advertising. In fact, the place is designed to downplay the transactional nature of a hotel stay: Staff members function in every role, so you’re never passed off, and everything from breakfast to weekend yoga is included. Guests text with everyone from the front desk to George, Hotel Joaquin’s “adventure guru,” who is a retired EMT and major sportsman. Want a punishing uphill bike ride in the hills? George is your man.

“

The place is designed to downplay the transactional nature of a hotel stay: Staff members function in every role, so you’re never passed off, and everything from breakfast to weekend yoga is included.

Share
v Share
f Share
d via
Pinterest

SHARE THIS QUOTE



On my first night, George stops by at dinner to ask what kinds of things I'd be interested in doing during my stay, offering up everything from hiking to biking to kayaking. All the toys in the hotel's "adventure garage" are included. We settle on a hike to Laguna's Top of the World, a trail we reach via the hotel's restored '90s-era Land Rover. At the top, you get 360-degree views from the ocean to the Mission Viejo hills. The hotel's location is already one of the best in Laguna Beach, since it's right on the PCH and a short walk to Shaw's Cove, a quiet, mostly residential beach. All California beaches are public, but the cove is flanked by two big tide pools, making it difficult to get here from other stretches. It's a favorite spot for divers (and George can arrange dives with the nearby dive shop).

Natural strengths like these made bringing in Robert McKinley—whose Studio Robert McKinley is well-known for Montauk's Surf Lodge and **Ruschmeyer's**, as well as a multitude of restaurants in **New York City**, including multiple Sant Ambroeus and Felice locations—the ideal fit to handle the hotel's design. "He's a water man: He free dives and he surfs," Makarechian says. "He instantly got what we wanted to do, and he's the ultimate customer for this property."



For McKinley, the fun was in “making sure that [the hotel] had a human quality to it that blurs the line between contemporary and vintage,” he says. He took out all the sheetrock ceilings in the rooms to expose the rafters and left the kind of layered, whitewashed paneling that remained, while putting in hand-hewn tile baths (stocked with Le Labo Santal 33). He shopped flea markets in Normandy and **Paris** for mid-century modern chairs and artwork—like vintage camera pieces suspended in resin and two seductive, naively painted bathers. Rooms are blissfully free of televisions, and each one comes with a turntable and a selection of vinyl records. Even the minibars reflect the kind of care you’d get in a friend’s guest room: Domaines Ott rosé and half bottles of Macallan among the carefully chosen items. The whole effect is a kind of artfully undone St. Bart’s-meets-classic California bungalow style.

Makarechian lured chef Leo Bongarra, the former executive chef of LA’s **Sunset Tower Hotel**, to run the hotel’s own all-day kitchen, Saline, which for now serves only hotel guests. If for no other reason you were to check in to Hotel Joaquin, this should be it. Tellingly, Bongarra’s audition, he says, laughing, was cooking for Makarechian at home. On the day I visit the kitchen, Bongarra is tinkering with his dehydrator, bringing out concentrated tomato chips for an octopus carpaccio with harissa aioli; yuzu-infused salt that accompanies Fanny Bay oysters with absinthe jelly; and kale dust that’s liberally sprinkled on dishes like avocado confit. Bongarra swears by chlorophyll water for curing him of various ailments, which is why you’ll find it on the menu, served prettily with edible flowers in stemmed glasses. Blue Majik-infused almond milk, the gloriously cerulean sea algae spirulina derivative, screams for your Instagram feed as you pour it over “rawnola” with coconut. But just like the rest of Hotel Joaquin, its curb appeal is backed up by soul. ♦