

THE MAGAZINE  
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# Fore

GOLDEN GETAWAYS

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- **THE RANCH AT LAGUNA BEACH • LA VALLE**



An aerial photograph of a golf course nestled in a coastal canyon. The foreground is filled with dense green trees and shrubs. The middle ground shows a well-maintained golf course with green fairways, sand traps, and a small pond. In the background, a steep hillside rises, topped with a few houses and a large building. The ocean is visible in the distance under a clear sky.

By **David Weiss**

# COASTAL COOL

***The Ranch at Laguna Beach*** is an oasis of tranquility  
in a coastal canyon of Orange County.



**T**HERE IS A MOMENT at The Ranch at Laguna Beach when the hum and thrum of Southern California simply disappear. But pay close attention — you could easily miss this hidden gem of a golf resort altogether. I've passed it for decades myself without even knowing it was there.

Just one winding turn off Pacific Coast Highway and you leave behind the Bentleys, beach bums and boba-shop chaos of Laguna, and suddenly you're encircled by rocky canyon walls the color of toasted almond. Sycamores bend in the breeze. Then somewhere in the distance you hear the soft click of a wedge echoing through Aliso Canyon.

That has always been the magic trick at The Ranch. The property occupies a wondrous pocket of land tucked into the coastal canyons, where the terrain feels almost miraculously preserved from condo-mania. The nine-hole golf course — formerly known to locals as Ben Brown's — snakes through the Aliso Canyon valley floor with no houses looming astride the fairways, no townhomes peering over the greens and no freeway sound effects hissing in the background.

In Southern California, that kind of serenity and quietude is practically a luxury amenity. But these days The Ranch is becoming known for something else: a serious commitment to sustainability at a moment when golf is rethinking what the game is supposed to look like in the very near future. And oddly enough, some of the game's biggest governing bodies are paying attention.

Recently, the USGA expanded eligibility for short courses and executive-style layouts to receive official

course and slope ratings for handicap posting purposes, a significant shift that acknowledges the changing shape of modern golf. Suddenly, shorter courses that once existed in a kind of recreational side pocket are being welcomed into the mainstream World Handicap System™.

That matters because golf is increasingly moving away from the notion that every meaningful round must consume six hours, 7,400 yards and a sleeve-and-a-half of Pro V1s. At The Ranch, the golf experience is intentionally compact, walkable and pleasingly playable.

The routing measures a little over 2,200 yards for nine holes, but the course doesn't feel tiny. The par-3s are stout. The greens roll quickly and deceptively. Creek crossings and elevation changes demand attention. And when the canyon wind starts whistling through the property in the afternoon, club selection becomes less science than chance. You can make birdies here, but you can also absolutely rinse three golf balls in about 10 minutes. That unpredictability is part of the charm.

The entire golf course is irrigated with reclaimed water through a partnership with the local water district, dramatically reducing dependence on potable water supplies. The Ranch has also earned GEO Certified status, an

internationally recognized sustainability designation that evaluates golf facilities on environmental stewardship, resource conservation and community impact.

And unlike many courses where "sustainability" feels like a marketing department invention, the environmental ethos at The Ranch is genuinely woven into the property's identity. The canyon itself dictates that. You don't dominate this landscape, you coexist with it.

During an early morning walk around the property, deer occasionally emerge from the brush near the edges of the fairways. Lush native vegetation climbs the canyon walls. The creek system that threads through the course gives the property movement and sound. Even the maintenance approach feels restrained compared to the hyper-manicured perfectionism seen at many luxury resorts. The course looks like it belongs in the canyon rather than imposed upon it.

That distinction is becoming increasingly important in modern golf architecture and resort management. Players — especially younger ones — are beginning to value authenticity over excess. They want memorable experiences. Natural settings. Places with personality. The Ranch has personality in bulk. And part of that comes from the property's unusual balance between ruggedness and refinement.

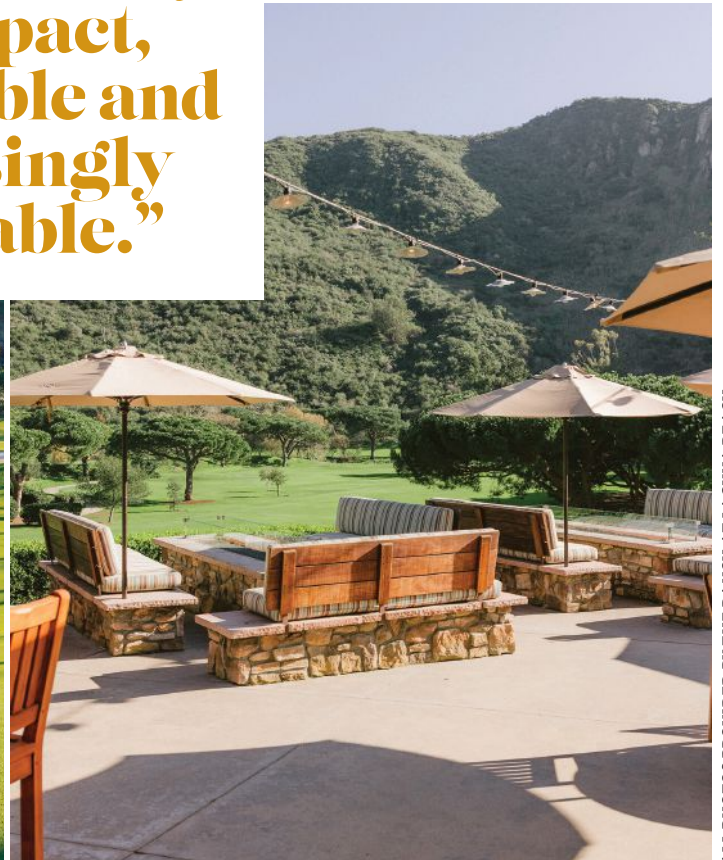
The adjacent hotel occupies roughly 87 acres and feels more like a relaxed canyon lodge than a traditional Orange County luxury resort. The rooms are understated and warm, filled with natural textures and muted coastal colors. Nothing screams for attention, which, ironically, makes the place more memorable.

Guests drift around the property in a remarkably unhurried way. Some head toward the spa. Others gather around the outdoor fire pits after golf. You'll see





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ALL PHOTOS PROVIDED BY THE RANCH AT LAGUNA BEACH



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couples nursing cocktails while looking back toward the ninth green, where somebody is almost certainly trying to save bogey in front of an audience. And the lissome young singer, Cassidy Paige, was a gentle presence rather than a dominating one: acoustic guitar and vocals rather than beat-box club beats — thank the golf gods for small favors.

Steps away from the outdoor terrace, Harvest, the property's signature restaurant, leans heavily into locally

sourced California cuisine without wandering into pretentiousness. The menu feels tailored to the setting: fresh seafood, seasonal produce, wood-fired touches, strong cocktails and the kind of outdoor dining experience that practically demands you stay longer than intended. The breakfast alone can derail an entire day's productivity — the Jidori chicken and waffles is a must-try dish, but will likely add a few strokes to your card. Buyer beware.

There is also something deeply civilized about finishing a canyon golf round and transitioning directly into an outdoor patio lunch with a cold drink while the marine layer burns off in the distance. At The Ranch, everything blends together — the canyon, the course, the restaurant, the rustic rooms and the fire pits. As for the hiking trails and misty salt air drifting inland from the sea — that's just frosting on the cake.

Laguna legend Mark Christy owns



The Ranch, as well as Hobie Sports, co-owns Tuvalu home furnishings and is a tireless philanthropist and booster of all things Laguna Beach.

"I learned to play golf here," Christy said, "probably since I was five or six years old, which is a long time! And I used to play with Hobie Alter, who the former owner always said she'd sell the place to. Instead, she sold it to Montage, who brought me in as an influencer in 2003 — I had never even heard that

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word before! Ten years later, in the middle of a ping-pong tournament, I got the word: We sat down around our red Solo cups and made a deal. I never owned a hotel before, but I knew just one thing — the place wanted to be authentic."

The timing couldn't have been more perfect. Short courses are booming. Walking golf is resurging. Municipal renovations are drawing acclaim and architects are rediscovering fun versus endless challenge. And players increasingly value time efficiency as much as exhausting championship yardage.

The Ranch, intentionally or not, anticipated much of this. Its compact footprint now feels forward-thinking rather than limiting. The USGA's embrace of handicap posting for more short courses validates something golfers already knew: Meaningful golf doesn't require maximum acreage. A properly designed short course can challenge skilled players, welcome beginners, encourage faster play and create a more social atmosphere all at once.

And if golf's future also includes environmental accountability, reclaimed-water irrigation, lower-impact operations and properties that respect their natural surroundings rather than overpowering them, The Ranch suddenly starts looking less like a boutique resort and more like an enlightened blueprint. Fun fact: the resort actually recycles glass bottles onsite, and uses the pulverized byproduct in some of the bunkers.

"In 13 years, we've become the cool, go-to place in Laguna," Christy said with obvious pride. "If you come in the afternoon, the patio will be full, and 70 percent of the people will be locals. They like the vibe, the music, the light on the hills and it just feels like home. I'm an accidental success in a tough business and I couldn't be happier." ■