

LAGUNA CLIFFS MARRIOTT RESORT & SPA



The Laguna Cliffs Marriott is set high on the bluffs overlooking Dana Point Harbor

From Doheny State Beach and Dana Point Harbor, the Victorian coastal retreat perched on the bluff sits like the grand dame of South County. But inside, the 376-room Laguna Cliffs Marriott Resort & Spa is anything but old fashioned. This AAA Four-Diamond property, with a luxurious spa, 55,000 square feet of meeting space and newly designed guestrooms and suites is the perfect getaway for locals who have not had a chance to experience this quaint seaport village. Two ocean-view pools offer guests the choice of tranquility and poolside massages or, in the summer months, poolside entertainment. Guestrooms and suites have recently been upgraded to reflect the nautical spirit of the region, with a palette of blue and gold to celebrate the surf and sun.

The orange-themed couples suite at the Spa includes a private patio with whirlpool



DAY TRIPPING? Starting in September, couples cooking and massage classes will be available to the public. Executive Chef David Scalise will combine recipes and cooking tips that infuse food with emotion and passion, urging couples to learn the real meaning of aphrodisiacs, from the imaginative use of spices to the combination of earthly delights available only from speciality micro farms and cheeseries in California. Spa Director Jane Lohmann has also created a hands-on massage class for couples who will learn the five basic moves to every soothing massage.

DISHING The former nautical themed Regatta Grill has been elegantly transformed into VUE, a contemporary restaurant under Chef Scalise's expert wing with vistas from every table. Black marble tables, cozy booths and romantic outdoor spots perched around a fire pit is the setting for VUE Chef de Cuisine Anton Cossi's gourmet menu. Don't miss his Marinated Wild Ahi Tuna, Loup de Mer, Jumbo Lump Crab and Braised Kobe Short Ribs paired with wine from the comprehensive list of boutique California wines. For dessert, even a full stomach will make room for the "Chocolate Dirt," a chocolate espresso *pots de crème* with crushed oreos.

DECOMPRESSING Orange is the color and scent of the spa, a 2,500-square-foot refuge that, for my girlfriend and me, turned out to be the highlight of our weekend. Couples or girlfriends can reserve the deluxe couples suite, with its two treatment tables, private steam showers, and private patio with whirlpool and dining area. After a glass of Champagne, we enjoyed the custom-tailored, orange-scented aromatherapy Signature Massage followed by a spa meal on the patio that equally pampered our palates. A blueberry pizza with Stilton Cheese served on flatbread; yellowfin tuna with chile oil served with spinach, walnut, cheese, Bing cherries and mango vinaigrette; and a delectable lump crab and chilled shrimp salad were among the blissful delights.

INSIDE TIP Play games here – from poolside ping-pong tables to croquet and bocce ball courts, basketball hoops, a lit tennis court, volleyball and horseshoes.

The Laguna Cliffs Marriott Resort & Spa, 25135 Park Lantern, Dana Point; (949) 661-5000, www.lagunacliffs.com –JUSTINE AMODEO