



# The Great Escape

Flyer's editor tours the balconies of Southern California, toddler and husband in tow.

As Juliet gazed down from her perch at the besotted Romeo, it probably never crossed her mind that her balcony—any balcony, in fact—might come in handy a few years down the line, after the little Romeo rug-rats had arrived.

Allow me to explain. If you are a traveler and also happen to be a parent of a young child, then you already know that you have two options when planning a getaway: 1) Convince another couple who have kids to go in on a rental house together, a win-win situation that provides post-bedtime socializing with other adults, preferably on a deck overlooking a large body of water; or, 2) Stay in a hotel room and turn out the lights at 8 p.m., silently sipping a glass of wine from the honor bar in the dark as you hiss to your spouse not to wake up the baby.

There is a third option. If you don't have friends with kids, or simply don't have friends, you may want to consider it. It's called: "Hotel Room with an Escape Clause," and this is where the balcony comes in. It goes without saying that if you do choose

this course, you'll be required to be *doubly* dutiful during waking hours, especially if you have a roving toddler in tow. But if you are diligent, if you are prepared to baby-proof and stand on guard when your little darling is exploring her new environs, and never, ever, allow said child beyond the watchful eye of a parent, then this is your ticket to romantic evenings after the wee one has zonked out in her renta-crib. Think lapping ocean waves, buzzy drinks, maybe even some *canoodling* beneath a blanket after the evening air turns cool.

With this notion in mind, my husband, 2-year-old daughter and I set out on a whirlwind Balcony Tour of Southern California, requiring nothing more of each booked room than an attached deck with glass doors. By far, our best experience occurred at **Shutters on the Beach** (One Pico Blvd.; 310/458-0030; www.shuttersonthebeach.com; standard doubles, \$480–\$775) in Santa Monica. And it wasn't just about the balcony—although the balcony was pretty good, if on the small side, with its beachy wicker furniture and direct line of sight onto the magnificent Pacific.

No, to a person, from the folks at the concierge desk to the pool's cabana boys, the staff at this hotel warmly welcomed not just the Big People Who Paid the Bill but also our Young Charge—remembering her name, asking after her at every turn, presenting her with rubber ducks and stuffed animals, and generally delighting her with goofy smiles and mime-like waves of hello and goodbye. It goes without saying that this delighted us, too.

We were equally impressed with our spotless, cozy guest room with its snow-white, custom-made sheets and duvet (changed daily, an important touch when you have a Mini-Me who jumps on the bed with sand between her toes), dark wood floors, whirlpool bathtub, dual-action shower and plasma TV. Weary parents that we are, we were thrilled when our small person asked for "nigh-nights" by 7 p.m. on both nights of our stay, allowing us to watch the sunset, which slowly diluted into pale pinks and oranges before dipping behind the horizon with an imagined *ssss-sizzle*.

Days were lovely, too. The hotel is located just steps from a beach trail that takes you south to **Venice** or north to **Malibu**. We rented bicycles on two mornings, tackling each direction respectively, and saw tattooed wonders and body builders one day, volleyballers and sun goddesses the next. The nearby **Santa Monica Pier** is also a major attraction for families, with its fanciful carousel, carnival games, a Ferris wheel and the Santa Monica Aquarium.

We stayed at another hotel in the area: **The Ambrose** (1255 20th St.; 310/315-1555; www.ambrosehotel.com; standard doubles, \$185), an elegant Asian-English fusion where dark Mission furniture meets a tea-green color scheme and minimalist décor. While we liked the enormous balcony very much—two large chairs, a table and a bench, and all for us!—we liked less the young crowd that came to whoop it up in the suite next to ours. Their balcony, twice as big as our own, had an outdoor fireplace, providing maximum party potential for chilly California nights. To be fair, if I was 24 and making the scene, this is where I'd want to be, but as a neighboring



(um, 30-something) guest with a toddler alarm clock triggered to go off at exactly 6 a.m., the set-up was somewhat less appealing.

Located 20 blocks from the beach, the Ambrose attracts the struggling-screenwriter-and-starlet set, and may not be the *best* spot for a young family to bunk down. However, it earns big points for its proximity to the **3rd Street Promenade** shopping district, and for its unique boutique vibe. One complaint: The plumbing fixtures, while certainly stylish, were shockingly loud. Every time other guests flushed a toilet—all night long—it sounded like a pro bowler scoring a strike. Still, major props must be given to the Continental breakfast served in the library: fresh-baked muffins, gorgeous fruit salad and Starbucks coffee, and all gratis, which perfectly prepared us for the rigors of retail-hopping on **Montana Avenue**, the aforementioned 3rd Street (closed to traffic), and the historic **Main Street** drag.

Further South, we set up house at the **Ritz-Carlton Laguna Niguel** (One Ritz-Carlton Dr.; 949/240-2000; www.ritzcarlton.com; standard doubles, \$475–\$775).

Set atop a dramatic cliff overlooking the ocean, the resort recently served as a beautiful backdrop in the cheesy and

## GETTING THERE

Daily nonstop flights to Long Beach Airport from Washington Dulles on JetBlue Airways.

addictive Bravo series, *The Real Housewives of Orange County*. Let's just say we noticed more than a few locals on nearby **Salt Beach** who looked like they shared the show's plastic surgeon.

But back to balconies. Ours was superb. Large enough to wheel our room service table through the French doors and dine as a trio in the evening sun, our daughter pointing excitedly at the bunnies (straight from cute central casting) nibbling on the manicured lawns below. Another grand ocean view added to the mix: From our vantage point, we witnessed dolphins leaping out of the water in teams of twos and threes, frolicking among the surfers. One morning, watching from a floor-to-ceiling window in the hotel's main restaurant, we saw a migrating whale, pausing long enough to spray from its blowhole and wave hello with an enormous splash of its tail.

The staff here also made us feel like this was our home-away-from-home. (Given the trail of cracker crumbs our offspring left in her wake, we obviously felt the same. In fact, my husband, who hails from Tennessee, jokingly called us "grits at the Ritz" as we tried to figure out how to best dispose of soiled diapers and empty boxes of Cheerios.) Still, as we raided the mini-bar and ordered room service with abandon, her baby snores audible from the room as we chilled on the balcony, I thought of Shakespeare's famous lovers and thought: "Ha. You have no idea what's coming. No idea at all."

—LAUREN PAIGE KENNEDY

## Hot Hotel

**The Regent South Beach** (1458 Ocean Dr., Miami Beach, Fla.; 305/672-4554; www.the-regentsouthbeach.com; standard rooms, \$500–\$2,000) opens this



September in Miami's historic Art Deco district. The property features 27 penthouses, each with a private rooftop terrace, outdoor hot tub, lounging bed, retractable sunroof, wet bar, stereo and dining area. The spa offers a signature "Hot Tub Detox" treatment, which includes a footbath, hot tub immersion, mud wrap, scalp massage and moisturizing treatment. Celebrity chef Govind Armstrong has been tapped to run the Table 8 restaurant; the restaurant's lounge is situated beneath the hotel's glass-bottom pool, which is sure to make a splash with patrons—but perhaps not with self-conscious swimmers.

—HEATHER MORGAN SHOTT