

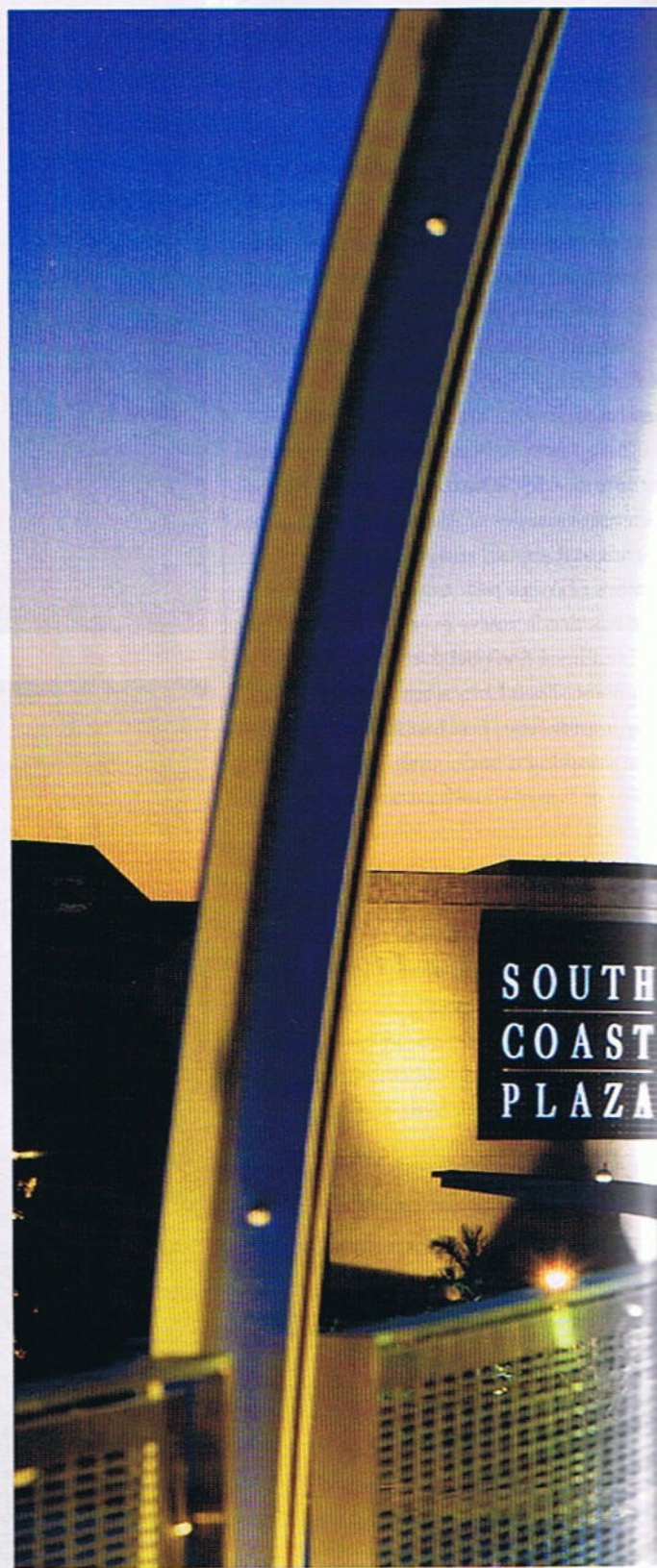
Culture and Couture

Orange County theater arts, galleries, shops and spas

By Lizbeth Scordo

Walking through Laguna Beach on a winter's afternoon, I'm faced with a serious decision every few dozen yards. Should I study a little longer the watercolor images of beach cottages in the window of the Laguna North Gallery, or gaze at the striking view of the Pacific's crashing waves playing peek-a-boo between the buildings? Luckily, there's time for both.

These days, Orange County—the O.C.—might be best-known as the scenic backdrop for reality shows such as *Laguna Beach* and *The Real Housewives of Orange County*, but the region—which lies between L.A. and San Diego counties, and includes several beach towns and the iconic Disneyland theme parks—is also home to art, theater and music. So this weekend I've set out to explore the O.C.'s rich arts-and-culture scene—in Laguna Beach, Newport Beach and Balboa Island—and



indulge in shopping and much-needed spa therapy along the way.

LAGUNA BEACH FIRST BEGAN attracting artists in the early 1900s, and is now home to hundreds of working artists. The pieces inside the city's nearly 70 galleries run the gamut from affordable seascape watercolors to rare sculptures from the Ming Dynasty. Laguna Beach also plays host to numerous annual art and music festivals, including the Festival of Arts' renowned Pageant of the Masters (July 8–August 30).

Yet despite the serious nature of Laguna's art scene, its galleries are also accessible. With each gallery I enter, I find enthusiastic art aficionados delighted to chat. At modern art co-op Sandstone Gallery, I meet former college art professor Howard Hitchcock, who is now one of six local artists splitting the rent and taking turns manning the co-op. In exchange, he gets to display his colorful acrylics and bronze sculptures. At Marion Meyer Contemporary Art, owner Meyer tells me about the monthly First Thursdays Art Walk, during which the city provides a free shuttle linking Laguna's three main gallery districts. Even at Rohrer Fine Art (which has broken records for some of the largest art transactions in city history, thanks to a few multimillion-dollar sales), manager Carey Conklin is welcoming and takes time to detail the history of a centuries-old Buddha statue and tell me about an increasingly popular young Chinese photographer—Zhang Huan—whose work is hanging on the wall with a \$250,000 price tag.



WITH A RAINBOW OF LANDSCAPE images flickering in my mind, I leave the art world behind and head south to my hotel—the oceanfront Surf & Sand Resort—where I check in for my massage at the Mediterranean-style Aquaterra Spa. The attendant leads me through an outdoor courtyard, past a row of lantern-adorned trees and a bubbling terra-cotta fountain and into the quiet spa. My premassage dip in the outdoor Jacuzzi—where I soak under the dimming sky, surrounded by potted citrus trees and ivy-covered walls—is exhilarating in the winter afternoon air.

Sipping cucumber-lemon water in front of a roaring fire, I overhear two women giggling enthusiastically about their treatments, which raises the bar for my signature massage. Luckily, my masseuse, Elizabeth, delivers. Using a

(Above) An artist gets inspiration from Laguna Beach's seaside scenery. (Below) Water colors the view at Aquaterra Spa.

locally made, lavender-scented grapeseed oil, she kneads me on the heated table with classic Swedish techniques, alerting me to the areas that need a little deep tissue work, then ends my treatment by wrapping my feet in hot towels before giving me a blissful foot rub, melting away the effects of all that gallery hopping.

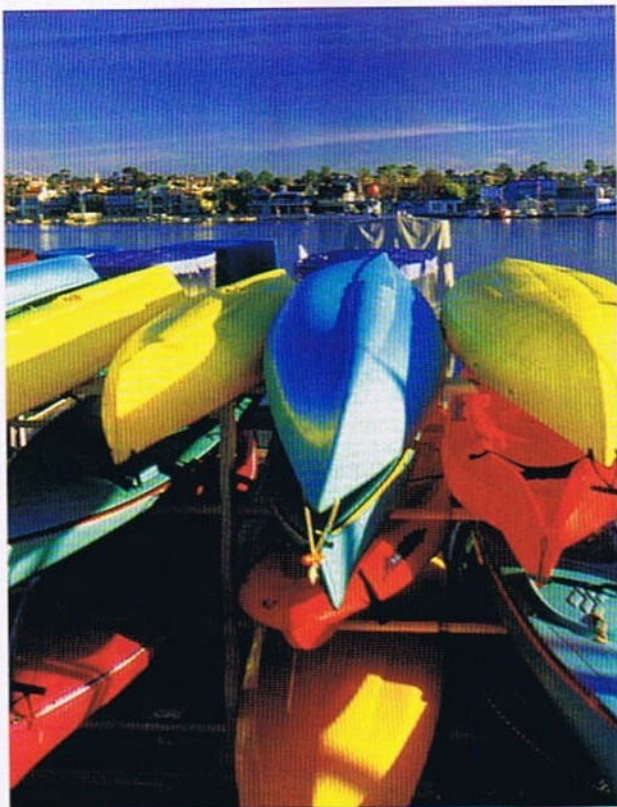
As evening sets in I explore downtown's Forest Avenue, a tree-lined street with upscale boutiques, hip eateries and galleries housed in a collage of Spanish-style, Tudor and contemporary buildings. The sidewalks are abuzz with strolling couples, locals walking their dogs, and mom-and-daughter duos. As with Laguna's galleries, the shopping scene varies wildly. Longboards hang from the rafters of Hobie—a surf shop offering bikinis, sundresses and surf-inspired clothing—while other women's wear, including silver-studded belts and intricately painted hoodies, adorns the racks at trendy boutique Envy.

I can't resist picking up a set of coasters



made of beach pebbles from Tuvalu, which sells an array of sea-inspired housewares, but after my purchase I quickly get back to my culture quest and make my way over to the Laguna Playhouse, the West Coast's oldest continually operating community theater, which pulls talent from the enormous pool of actors located just 50 miles north in Los Angeles. I'm here on one of Southern California's rare stormy nights, but a crowd of theatergoers has shown up for a performance of *Tranced*, a heady thriller about an African graduate student playing mind games with her psychiatrist for political gain. *Tranced* is indicative of the theater's commitment to new works. The seven-show 2008 season includes three world premieres and one Southern California premiere. The space is intimate, allowing me to feel close to the action and stay absorbed in every suspenseful minute.

RON NIEBRUGGE



LAGUNA BEACH DISAPPEARS behind me as I head up the coast toward Newport Beach. While a museum stop is officially first on my itinerary, I'm lured up a palm-lined drive to Newport Beach's Fashion Island, an open-air mall made up of tile-roofed stucco buildings nestled on a hill overlooking the sea. With its stone fountains, pots of overflowing geraniums hanging from lampposts, and wooden armchairs clus-

tered under sweeping umbrellas, Fashion Island feels more like a European plaza than a shopping mall. The complex, with retailers ranging from Neiman Marcus to Apple to a Chip & Pepper jeans flagship store, attracts visitors from around the country who get the bonus of basking in the California sun between purchases.

After a bit of retail therapy, I head up the road to the Orange County Museum of Art, inconspicuously located among a sea of business parks. The museum's permanent collection features California culture—including works by '60s pop artist Ed Rushca and the 2008 *California Bien-*

nial, which showcases works by some of the state's innovative emerging artists.

I'VE LINED UP A TREATMENT with a few more bells and whistles today—the Shell Therapy Body Ritual—at the Newport Beach Marriott Hotel and Spa, within walking distance of the museum and Fashion Island. The hotel's Pure Blu spa is all about integrating beach and ocean elements into the experience, and in the lobby, before I even enter the spa, I find a village of sand castles made with 14 tons of sand.

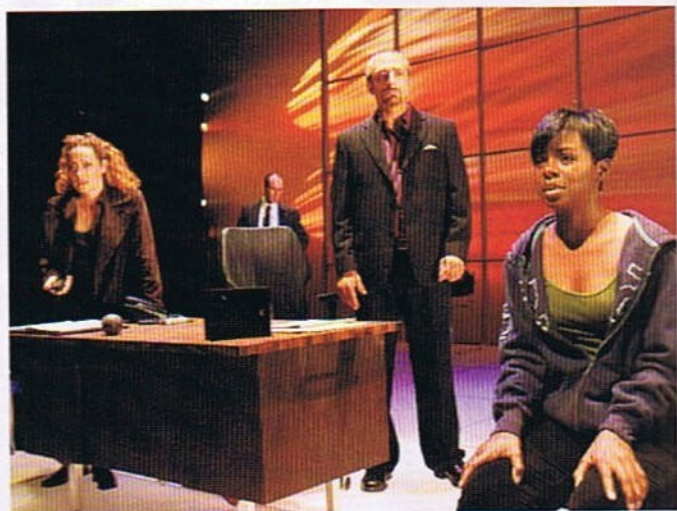
The spa boasts its own outdoor saline pool and a plush locker room equipped with a dry sauna, eucalyptus steam room, saltwater whirlpool and the spa's signature cold water "sole" revival—a shallow basin of chilly, flowing water said to increase circulation. After a heavenly steam, I plunge my feet into the 42-degree water and convince myself my blood flow is improving by the second.

My feet and I are soon rescued by my therapist, Karrie, who escorts me to my treatment room. As promised, my ritual includes therapies derived from sand and sea. First Karrie applies an exfoliating scrub

(Above) Boats await paddlers on Balboa Island. (Below left) An Eduardo Kingman mural and Sumatran decorative facade pieces at Rohrer Fine Art. (Below right) Performers in *Tranced* at Laguna Playhouse.



COURTESY: ROHRER FINE ART



COURTESY: LAGUNA PLAYHOUSE

of macadamia-seed oil and sea salt (ground fine enough to avoid irritation). Then, after I rinse off in my treatment room's private shower, she massages me using hot tiger cowrie seashells, the smooth shells pressing deep into my muscles. Finally, I'm lathered in a hydrating vitamin cream and wrapped in cellophane while Karrie rubs my neck and shoulders. The blissful 80 minutes goes by far too quickly.

Renewed and ready for a Saturday night on the town, I set out in search of live music. The choices are vast, with local venues featuring acoustic guitarists, lounge piano players and rock bands. I settle on a jazz duo at Newport Beach's chic Bayside Restaurant. It's here that I get a glimpse inside the well-heeled world of the O.C. I've seen on television. Outside, the parking lot is filled with BMWs and Porsches; inside hip couples sip martinis at the stainless steel bar, and well-dressed men and bejeweled women dine in velvet booths.

I'm thrilled to land a corner table where I savor a pinot noir and a wild mushroom-crust organic salmon, while listening to piano player Michael McKenna croon Frank Sinatra standards. When I notice the restaurant's walls are lined with a local artist's exhibit, I stroll the room and check out some colorful paintings of classic cars given a modern spin on the canvas. By the end of the night, I feel like I've hit the weekend trifecta: good food, cool music and admirable art all in one place.

I'VE HEARD THAT A TRIP to Orange County isn't complete without a visit to Costa Mesa's world-renowned South Coast Plaza, and when I enter what looks like an indoor Rodeo Drive, it becomes clear why. Tiffany sits across from Valentino, a few doors down from Hermès, Armani and Bvlgari, all filled with designer devotees and curious tourists. The mall may be a hotbed for the high-end, but there truly is something for everyone: Celebrities (and their personal shoppers) can flock to Chanel while the stroller set lines up for kid-friendly fare at the Rainforest Café. Until the first U.S. domestic Rolex flagship store opens at

South Coast Plaza sometime in March, it's the sensational new trendy-yet-affordable H&M that's uniting shoppers.

Though I try on some \$600 heels at luxury shoe boutique Jimmy Choo for fun, I end up buying a \$70 pair of heels upstairs at Aldo, before heading back down the coast for a final excursion.

THE ATMOSPHERE IS RELAXED and easy on Balboa Island, a quiet village just over the bridge from the glitzier "mainland" Newport Beach. The island is full of Cape Cod-style homes, independently owned retail shops, and restaurants where residents arrive by golf cart to mingle over coffee. While the shops hidden within the unassuming shingled cottages along Marine Avenue may not look like they sell much more than souvenirs, the shelves are stocked with designer fashions and posh home decor pieces: Zschoche sells luxurious, 400-thread-count bedding, while 5 Seas offers trendy women's fashions by Trina Turk and Rock & Republic.

"People come here because it's special and fun, and they love to be able to walk from store to store," says Debbie Nelson, owner of the women's boutique Basics.

I leave her shop with a bag full of Michael Stars T-shirts and take a stroll around the harbor, where, as I watch the boats bobbing along the docks, I realize that I've spent a whole weekend on a magnificent stretch of coastline and haven't even thought about the water. I also could have been swimming, sailing ... surfing. But now that I know about the cultural side of Orange County, I can't imagine heading out to sea without enjoying a little art, music and massage first. ↑

Lizbeth Scordo lives in Los Angeles, where she writes about business, lifestyle and travel.

GETTING THERE



Alaska Airlines (alaskaair.com, 800-ALASKAAIR) and Horizon Air (horizonair.com, 800-547-9308) offer daily service to five Orange County-area airports.