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HACIENDA LIVING, THE FOUR SEASONS BILTMORE

By Anne Z. Cooke, Tribune Media Services,
[World's Fare](#)

SANTA BARBARA, CALIF. -- The rambling hacienda on 20 oceanfront acres in Santa Barbara, Calif., invites one to wander -- and wonder. Who lives behind these leafy gardens, listening to the surf break on the sand and watching the morning sun creep over the upstairs windows? What luck, then, that this two-story Spanish colonial mansion, with its curved driveway, white stucco arches and scarlet bougainvillea is no private estate.

This is the historic Four Seasons Biltmore Hotel, evoking the nostalgia of yesteryear, a reminder of the Golden State's power to turn myth into reality. The hotel, built in 1927, when the revival of early California's colonial architecture was in its heyday, was a landmark from the day it opened. As exotic as it was comfortable, and as elegant as it was hospitable, it has remained so for eight decades.

During my recent stay -- a quietly uneventful getaway (and a pale imitation of the devil-may-care Hollywood frolics that once graced the grounds) -- the recently restored hotel's detailed interiors and casual luxury -- just the right blend of colors, shapes and art work -- struck an oddly familiar nerve, a sense of deja vu. After a dinner in the hotel's newly remodeled and renamed Bella Vista restaurant, a moonlit walk through the grounds and a truly dreamless eight hours on what must have been a dozen mattresses, I felt completely at home.

Yet, venerable as it seems, the Biltmore has grown over the years, evolving from a single main building in the front with guest cottages in the rear. While it remains only two stories high, the hotel now includes the main building and two attached wings, with 155 guest rooms, and a newly designed swimming pool and sun deck toward the rear. Behind that, and also facing the pool, is the latest addition, a state-of-the-art 10,000-square-foot spa, with treatment rooms, a steam room, lockers and fitness center.

The cottages, now reduced in number to nine, but enlarged and remodeled, have 29 additional rooms and 26 large and small suites. Tucked back into the foliage, these rooms are a hit with railroad train buffs, who thrill to the lonely sound of wheels on the nearby train tracks, a sweet reminder that railroading survives. In fact, the coastal train that passes the hotel grounds on the inland side is as historic as the Biltmore itself, one reason to request a cottage room early (or if trains aren't your thing, not at all).

The recent \$340 million renovation has either restored the original interior, or when that was impossible, recreated it to fit the period. Rare and custom-made stone, ceramic tiles, wood floors, ironwork,

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fabrics, furniture and art were specifically chosen to stand out on their own, and at the same time, to blend into the larger scheme. Local brick and hand-cut sandstone, quarried locally, for instance, replaced the asphalt driveways, a '50s addition. And the bathrooms were brought up to date -- but with restoration fixtures.

In the historic main lobby, the original details were carefully restored. Here, the ceiling's Mediterranean designs were brought to life with eggshell paint and 23-karat gold leaf, and the historic wall maps, of Santa Barbara and the Channel Islands, were meticulously repaired.

Contemporary improvements include heated floors in the Bella Vista Restaurant, both indoors and in the outdoor terrace. Old-time gas lamps light the walkways. Guest bedrooms have big-screen plasma televisions, CD/DVD players and wireless Internet access; bathrooms have "rain" showers, fogless mirrors and deep soaking tubs. Pets are welcome too, and provided with their own special toys and meals.

The highlight of my visit was a long walk on Butterfly Beach, in front of the hotel, followed by a lazy snooze on an umbrella-shaded beach chair, enthusiastically set out for me by Michael, one of the staff, who displayed all of the Four Seasons' typical top-notch service. I wasn't used to such luxury -- it was a nice change from lugging my own umbrella, beach chair and books from the parking lot to the sand, and back again. But I could get used to it. Someday, when I move in for good, I will.

INCIDENTAL INTELLIGENCE:

Reservations: Double Rooms start at \$550/night. Ask about Spa, B&B and golf packages. Prices vary from midweek to weekend, and by season.

Essentials: Fly to Los Angeles and drive 94 miles north to Santa Barbara. From Route 101, take exit 94-A, turn left toward the ocean and look for the hotel entrance.

Where: At 1260 Channel Drive, Santa Barbara, Calif. 93101. Call 805-969-2261, or 800-332-3442, or go to www.fourseasons.com.

Anne Z. Cooke and Steve Haggerty explore the world from Venice, Calif. They can be reached at TravelsWithAnne@cs.com.

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