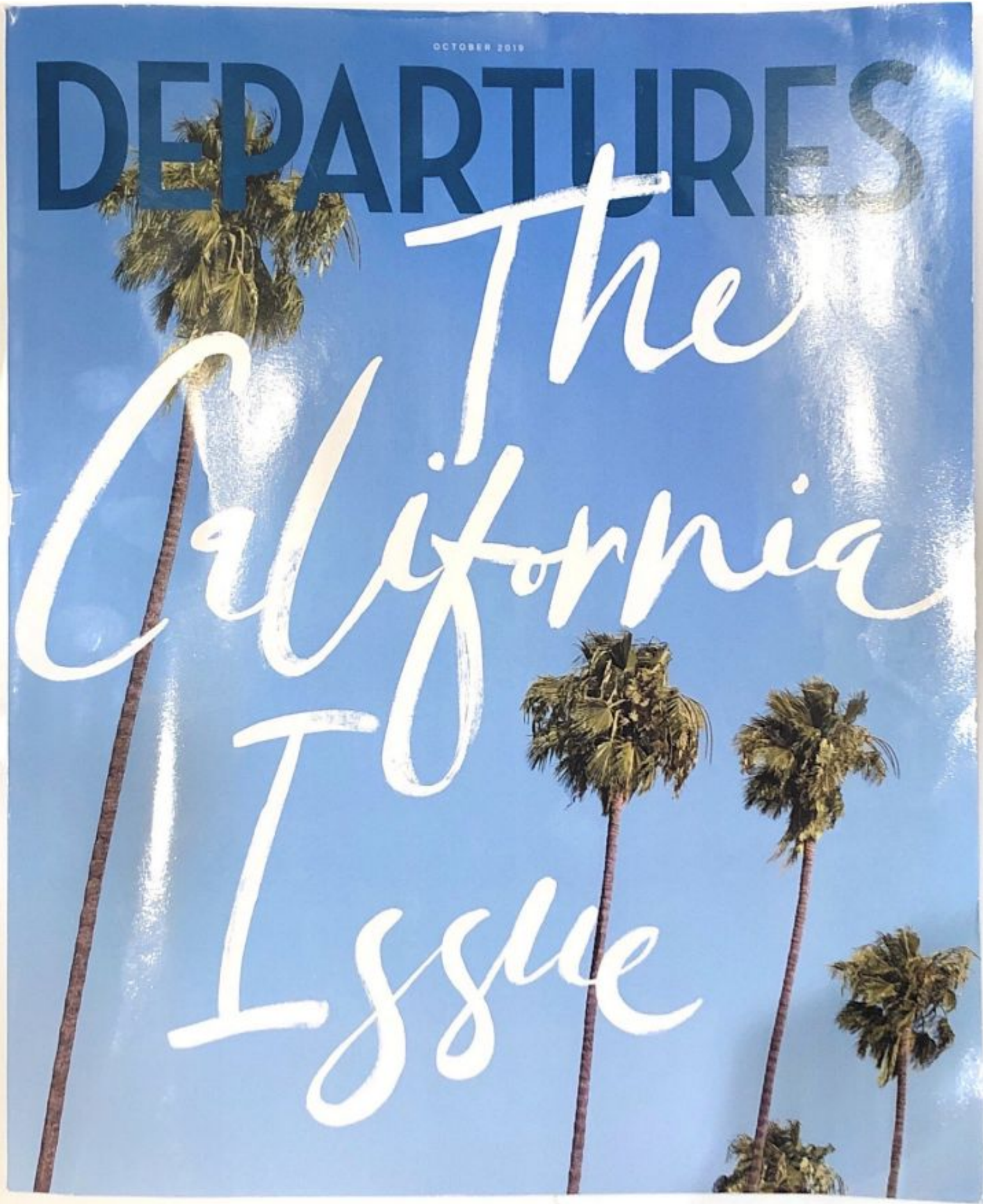


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DEPARTURES

The California TO Issue



El Matador
Beach, in
Malibu.



The Chillionaires of Malibu

Whether you're a movie star or lifeguard, this legendary private enclave brings out the inner beach bum in everyone.

by **Alex Bhattacharji**
Photographs by **Misha Gravenor**

AFTER YEARS OF VISITING Malibu as a journalist, I knew the coastal California town projected the image of a celebrity utopia—because I helped project it. For various magazines, I had documented Jon Hamm driving the Pacific Coast Highway in a Mercedes gull wing to the idyllic oceanside cottage he was renting at the time, and handing passersby beers from his cooler. Pierce Brosnan showed me his paintings and explained that his years of living in Malibu had brought out his inner Matisse. Even in my free time here, I would have surreal brushes with celebrities. Returning from a hike in Zuma Canyon one afternoon, I took a detour but was stopped by the sound of chanting. “This must be Shangri-La,” I said to myself—not the mythical Himalayan redoubt but the legendary spot where Clapton and Dylan laid down tracks in the 1970s and now the studio of music producer Rick Rubin. Soon the chants were joined by ethereal

acoustic guitars and a soaring, operatic female voice. It was just a Malibu local—Lady Gaga—singing in a neighbor's yard.

Many times, these moments made clear that parts of the Malibu fantasy were impossible to achieve (looking like Rob Lowe in a wet suit at 55 or any other age) or highly improbable (housing an array of 16 pets at my mansion, as Miley Cyrus did before it was lost to wildfires).

But when last year's Woolsey fire scorched the area—destroying homes, scarring hillsides—the beach was a staging area not just for celebrities but for every type of person in Malibu: ranchers, farmers, hippies, and surfers. They came with whatever belongings they could rescue, while yacht owners and surfers alike sailed in with supplies. I realized that Malibu was much more than this gated celebrity community; it was also this tight-knit beach town.

The shift from surf capital and counterculture hub is just the latest extension of an evolution that began when Hollywood stars first built cottages in the Malibu Movie Colony in the late 1920s. In 1933, novelist James M. Cain declared in the pages of *Vanity Fair*: “Whatever else may be said of Malibu, the place where the movie queens grow their sunburn, there is one thing that you have to hand it: It is probably the finest beach ever created by God.” That's no less true today. Like Malibu's 21 miles of coastline, the contours of the place shift slightly with each set of waves, but that underlying appeal endures: a rare combination of otherworldly natural beauty—picturesque canyons, majestic bluffs, secluded coves that provide a faraway feel—and relatively few people with whom to share it.

“It really is a small town,” says Rande Gerber, the nightlife impresario turned hotelier turned spirits magnate who moved to Malibu 20 years ago with his wife, Cindy Crawford. “It's a low-key beach town that just happens to have some high-profile people living there. I think sometimes the perception is, ‘Malibu, it's like St.-Tropez.’ You're looking for the megayachts and the beach clubs. We don't have that.”

While it may lack the oligarchic trappings, it's hard to miss the wealth that lies in much of Malibu. The southern border has

been unofficially marked by the Getty Villa, which has been a museum since 1974. More recently, Malibu's most affluent have been concentrated on Carbon Beach, a mile-long stretch lined with the oceanfront homes of David Geffen (who famously said: "Move to California. Malibu is paradise."), Eli Broad, Jeffrey Katzenberg, and Larry Ellison, who once owned ten properties there, among others. It's also where a chance meeting on the sand between hip-hop producer Dr. Dre and record exec Jimmy Iovine led to their launch of Beats, which they later sold to Apple for \$3 billion.

Farther up the coast, at the seafood shack and biker bar Neptune's Net, I spoke with a deeply tanned fortysomething local—he preferred to be known simply as Mike—who worked as a bartender

and carpenter to support his surfing habit. Speaking between bites of fried scallops, he couldn't disguise his disdain for Carbon Beach's nickname, Billionaire Beach. "They call it that, but the beach belongs to everyone," he says. "So you know what? We're all rich. We're all chillionaires here."

Indeed, everyone in Malibu is rich in the currency of relaxation and afforded the sort of barefoot luxury—before the term existed—that can level out the socioeconomic ladder.

"The great thing about Malibu is you *do* have an eclectic mix of people," says Gerber, whose Café Habana plays host to them nightly. "You have your Larry Ellison and your actors or musicians sitting next to your local surfer who's living in his van. Nobody cares who anyone is. Everybody's treated the same."

Strictly speaking, that isn't true. Some esteemed locals get a honk and a wave from passersby, like Coqui, a longtime fixture at the Country Mart shopping center. Others get their tabs picked up, like Skylar Peak, who grew up in town and worked as a lifeguard and surf instructor before taking over the family electrical-contracting business. He counts Mike Diamond—aka Mike D of the Beastie Boys—as a close friend, and was the youngest person ever elected to the Malibu City Council when he ran on an antidevelopment platform. He became a local hero a decade ago thanks to an incident in which he stopped a



From left: Little Beach House, part of the Soho House group; the lobby at the Nobu Ryokan.



Below: Cuban fare at Café Habana.
Right: Dining at Malibu Farms.



paparazzo attempting to photograph Matthew McConaughey on Peak's home beach, Point Dume. Peak was charged with battery. "I wish it never happened," says Peak, whose case resulted in a hung jury, but, he adds, "I will always fight for privacy."

These days, Peak, a passionate surfer, says locals are content to let the ocean police itself and welcome those who respect the sport. This wasn't always so. For years, surf lineups along the Malibu coast operated with a hard territorial edge that often carried over onto shore.

In that sense, the Malibu of today is less real and far more genial and genteel. It's not markedly bigger. Development restrictions, if not housing costs, have kept the population from exploding and mean that most reinvention happens in the same footprint—refacing, repurposing, combining, and upscaling. Though fewer in number, there remain gloriously unkempt shacks and gleaming Airstreams that carry as much cachet as any architecturally significant domicile. Other institutions endure, like Geoffrey's restaurant, originally known as Holiday House

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Malibu Essentials

STAY

Nobu Ryokan The 16 rooms are decked out in teak and glass and come with Japanese soaking tubs as well as Loro Piana cashmere robes. Rooms from \$2,000; noburyokanmalibu.com.

The Surfrider Malibu This revamped 1950s-era motel sits right across from the world-famous Surf Rider beach. Guests can rent custom-made boards and wet suits. Rooms from \$325; thesurfridermalibu.com.

Malibu Beach Inn The property has a Japan-meets-Scandinavia vibe and each of the 47 rooms offers ocean views. Rooms from \$565; malibubeachinn.com.

EAT

Go to **Café Habana** (habana-malibu.com) for Mexican and Cuban food. **Geoffreys** (geoffreysmalibu.com) is a classic seafood spot. **Malibu Farm** (malibu-farm.com) serves farm-to-table fare on the pier. **Neptune's Net** (neptunesnet.com) is a charming roadside place with excellent chowder. At **Nobu** (noburestaurants.com), the sushi is top-notch, the setting spectacular.

SHOP

For high-end shopping, it's all about **Malibu Country Mart** (malibucountrymart.com), **Lumberyard** (themalibulumberyard.com), and **Malibu Village** (malibuvillage.com).

BIG SUR

(CONTINUED FROM P. 135)

If Carmel Valley Ranch is heaven for families, and Ventana for young couples, you might say Post Ranch Inn is for anyone in need of spiritual uplift. The collision of natural elements, their sheer scale, inspires silence. When I note this to Gary Obligation, the resort's general manager, he nods. "People come here to unplug," he says. "You feel tiny in the best way." One female CEO comes twice a year just to read books, I'm told.

There are plenty of splendid places to eat in these parts. The cozy, candlelit dining room at Deetjen's is an enchanting throwback to 1930s Big Sur, when Helmuth and Helen Deetjen first started building the Shangri-La in Castro Canyon. Big Sur Bakery does magical things with vegetables and pizza dough—the first time I stumbled in, in 2007, ravenous after cycling the 17-Mile Drive, I couldn't believe pizza so delicious could exist outside of Italy, much less on a remote stretch of Highway 1. For views, you can't do better than Nepenthe, built around a cabin once owned by Orson Welles and Rita Hayworth. In half a dozen visits, I've never not seen a whale.

But once you check in to Post Ranch, it's impossible to leave. And anyway, I've been to the other spots. Where I haven't been is Sierra Mar, the cliff-top restaurant at Post Ranch. The fog begins to roll in as a succession of dishes arrives—beer-battered borage with Meyer lemon, asparagus with nasturtium gremolata, tagliatelle with English peas and morels—each more luscious than the one before. By the time I take the first bite of my desert, a heavy blanket of mist covers the sea below. It's a lot like sitting on a cloud. ☺

MALIBU

(CONTINUED FROM P. 155)

and designed by Richard Neutra in 1948. Nobu Malibu, on Carbon Beach, is the area's most scene-ish dinner spot. For lunch and brunch, area residents are often found next door at Soho House's Little Beach House, membership to which is restricted to residents or those who have an affiliation with Malibu only. (Forget the Bugatti: The real power move is rolling up to the valet stand on your bicycle, as Patrick Dempsey often does.)

In many ways, Malibu leaves a visitor no choice but to embrace the cliché: Live like locals. It's a maxim the folks who live in Malibu have taken to heart. The continuum of surfing, hiking, walking on the beach—rinse and repeat.

"If I have friends who come stay with us for two or three days, they usually say, 'It's so beautiful, but I don't know how you could live here. It's just so slow. There's just not much to do,'" Gerber says. Though that changes if they stick around. "If they spend six or seven days with me, they get it. We go on a mountain-bike ride, and we surf and we hike."

In that way, the Malibu Country Mart, home to Pure Barre and RRL, is a perfect reflection of rural life for a rarefied set. It, along with the Lumber Yard, home to Maxfield and Café Habana, which hosts karaoke each Wednesday night, and Malibu Village, with Fred Segal, clustered at Cross Creek Road, comprise the shopping district.

As in most small towns, accommodations are limited in Malibu, but you only need one standout property. By far the most exceptional is the Nobu Ryokan, a place where authentic touches from Japan—custom-made tatami mats,

stones for the Zen rock garden, and art from Larry Ellison's collection (he's an owner)—somehow unite in a serene experience entirely suited to the beachside vibe. It helps that it's exclusive—it has only 16 teak-walled suites, which start at \$2,000 per night, with reservations upon approval—and perfectly private.

If there is something visitors seek, it's access to secret spots, according to Josh Parr, a longtime hiking guide for Ranch Malibu, the wellness retreat, who now leads private hikes. "People think they want a view of the ocean they can take a picture of," Parr told me on a recent trek, "but they tend to want surprises and keep searching for the sacred spots. It can be transformative, like with surfing. When they find it, they don't want to post their photos." He has been offered handsome sums by clients to keep the trails secret, and though Parr refuses those offers, he understands the impulse: He reserves some trails and vistas just for himself.

Parr pointed me toward a well-trafficked path from the trailhead at Circle X ranch to the Grotto, a hidden cavelike waterfall in a narrow sandstone ravine. Partway there, he diverted to a trail I couldn't see looping above. I couldn't tell you exactly where we turned if I wanted to, or how many turns we took, but some time later, on top of a sandstone ledge, the Pacific came into view all the way from Point Dume to Ventura County. I understood the impulse to keep the reverie to myself, though I know it wasn't. Through the breeze, I could hear distant chanting. I didn't mind that a meditation group had settled on a rock outcrop somewhere above us. ☺

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