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A world away: Carmel Valley Ranch

Secluded in the forests of the Santa Lucia Mountains, Carmel Valley Ranch offers a sophisticated retreat rooted in nature.

Mere moments after driving onto the property, we were greeted with the sights of three wandering deer. My family and I ooh'ed and ah'h'ed like city folk getting out of the concrete jungle. We meandered a bit farther and spotted the luxurious lodge resort of Carmel Valley Ranch – complete with towering tree swings hanging from towering oaks and the wafting aroma of lavender in the air. It was dreamy, and we knew it was going to be a weekend enjoying the great outdoors.

Carmel Valley Ranch, near Monterey and a two-hour drive south of San Francisco, is tucked away in more than 500 lush acres adjacent to the 4,400-

acre Garland Ranch Regional Park. With quail, red-tailed hawks, hummingbirds, wild turkey, foxes and other wildlife part of the regular scenery, it's a retreat that truly makes you feel as if you've disconnected from life's everyday pressures and have discovered a niche of nature's nirvana.

We checked into our spacious Veranda suite, appointed with wooden cathedral ceilings, an assortment of travertine touches, rattan deck furnishings and a soothing color palette. It was a lovely blend of relaxed comfort and modern elegance. We quickly unpacked and headed out.

The resort's concierge told us about the pool area for kids, booked us for

the resort's signature Bee Experience, confirmed our dinner reservations at the Lodge Restaurant and directed us to the Vineyard Lawn, where we'd stroll the rolling hills and the resort's 2-acre organic garden. I don't recall if my kids skipped down the winding paths past the grapevines, but if they did, it was apropos, since Carmel Valley Ranch is much like something out of a luxe storybook.

Around every turn, we found charm, wildlife and an abundance of lavender plant life: More than 7,500 brilliant purple fragrant bushes are on the property. The local bees adore this heavenly haven of honey harvesting but leave the guests alone.

COURTESY OF CARMEL VALLEY RANCH



The locale was ideal for the kids with a pool of their own, a hot tub, a splash zone area, and tennis and basketball courts. The River Ranch Café was an easy spot to grab light cuisine while poolside.

A highlight of our Carmel Valley Ranch stay was the Bee Experience, offered weekly at the on-property apiary. The kids and I suited up in our cloth bee suits, donned our hats and face mesh, and covered our ankles and shoes. With wary intimidation, we trusted our Bee Whisperer – John Russo, the resort’s resident Beekeeper and Lavender Expert – as he opened the gate leading into the beehive houses. John was right: The bees didn’t bother us at all. They buzzed about their business while John explained their actions. It all was quite remarkable as we stood among 60,000 Italian honeybees that were diligently foraging for pollen and nectar. Everyone in our group was

calm, and no one was stung. We learned about the sophisticated structure of the bee civilization, and we had the intimate experience of a lifetime, which the kids would come to tell courageous tales about time and time again. We wrapped up the adventure with a taste of the honey, harvested directly from the hive.

Carmel Valley Ranch was such an unusual escape with aspects of nature and contemporary life. While we had a fantastic family vacation, the locale could also be ideal for an escape for couples, since there is the wonderful Spa Aiyana on the property and an 18-hole Pete Dye–designed championship golf course.

You really can do it all at the resort – everything from world-class golf, hiking trails and vineyards to honey bees, organic dining, mountain-top yoga and the pool – all at one of the finest hotels in Carmel. ∞

Organic eats

In the heart of California’s most fertile growing region, Carmel Valley Ranch offers a fabulous local organic-food experience during your vacation. The area’s rich history of wine growing and sustainable farming is reflected in Executive Chef Tim Wood’s seasonal menus. The resort’s Lodge Restaurant is perfect for relaxed upscale dining. Fresh seafood comes directly from the waters off the Monterey Coast and is delivered daily by Fisherman Jerry. Many of the fruits and vegetables included in the chef’s dishes are grown at the ranch’s on-site organic garden, picked within walking distance from the kitchen. Chef Wood enjoys a close relationship with the resort’s gardener, Mark Marino.

Dog day stay

When traveling far north, it’s nice to stay with peace of mind and no calls to the pet sitter. Carmel Valley Ranch is a perfect place for pups. Activities for four-legged friends are anchored by Roxy, the English Bulldog who presides over the lobby, and include dog-friendly hikes and dining options. Pets enjoy cozy pet beds, treats and a number of other surprises.

Road less traveled

Consider taking one of the most stunning routes in the country before arriving at or after departing from the Carmel Valley Ranch. Near San Luis Obispo, we hopped on PCH, saw wild zebras near Hearst Castle and enjoyed the Big Sur coastline, with its amazing coastal views. The route is simply breathtaking, though not for the faint of heart or those with a fear of heights. Take your time, let others pass as needed and enjoy the amazing cliff-side Pacific Ocean beauty.

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