

Orange County, California:

SUNNY SIDE UP

Redefining "rich" in the real-life land of the endless summer



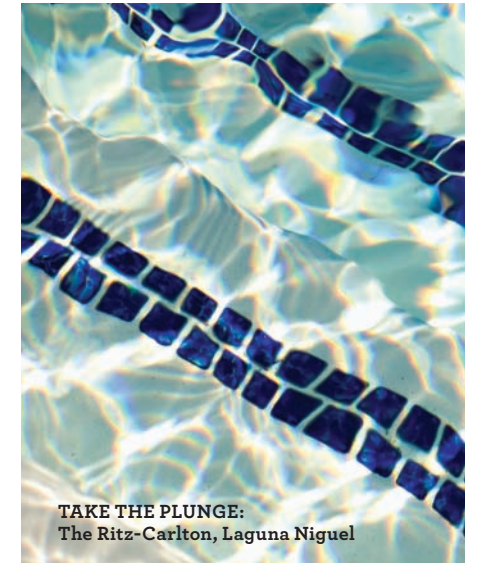
GARDEN PARTY: The lush grounds of The Ritz-Carlton, Laguna Niguel
Photo by Karyn R. Millet



ALL THAT GLITTERS:
The Ritz-Carlton, Laguna Niguel



TOP-TIER TATERS:
Ramos House Café



TAKE THE PLUNGE:
The Ritz-Carlton, Laguna Niguel

Photos Left and Right by Karyn R. Millet, Middle by Ty Mattson

Thanks to the entertaining hyperbole of *The O.C.* and *The Real Housewives of Orange County*, this colorful corner of Southern California has been typecast as the poster child of conspicuous consumption—a place that’s more façade than foundation. But there’s another side to this golden coin: a region whose quirky history, rich culture and unflinching sunny outlook make it perfectly ripe for exploring right now. O.C. native **Mary Ann Hemphill** takes us there.

DEPTH AND DIVERSITY

Orange County encompasses nearly 800 square miles of varied terrain and enjoys one of the most enviable weather patterns on the planet. Residents joke that local meteorologists have the easiest job in the world: repeating the words “sunny and 72,” day after blue-sky day. The region also boasts a full 42 miles of perfectly appointed Pacific shoreline offering any number of distractions: ocean-view hiking, championship golf, world-class surfing, year-round sailing and of course, extravagant beachfront lodging. In many ways, the O.C. is quintessential Southern California—

beautiful people, boundless per-capita, pretty places and perfect weather.

Yet, for all her surface perfection, Orange County is a place of surprising depth and diversity. With the Mexican border just an hour away, the region is peppered with delightful pockets of Spanish colonial and modern Latino influence. The arts continue to be a crucial component of the area’s culture. And, though its namesake groves are gradually giving way to upscale golf course communities, Orange County is still an agricultural community at heart—a place founded and focused on growth.

ORANGE COUNTY BY THE NUMBERS

- 42 MILES OF COASTLINE
- 34 CITIES
- 1889 AWARDED COUNTYHOOD
- 16 INTERSTATES AND FREEWAYS
- 6 PROFESSIONAL SPORTS TEAMS



BIKES FOR RENT
on Balboa Island

THE SHORELINE SCENE

Before freeway access and burgeoning business fueled Orange County's tremendous expansion, **Newport Beach** (www.visitnewportbeach.com) was a laid-back town sprinkled with quaint summer cottages. Today, the name is synonymous with conspicuous consumption, playing host to some of the world's most exclusive luxury communities and one of the largest retail centers in the country.

Fortunately, facets of the humble, original Newport Beach also remain—you just need to know where to look. Start on quirky **Balboa Island** (www.balboaisland.com), where a three-minute ferry ride will literally transport you back to another time. While you can drive directly onto the ferry deck, the Island is best experienced on foot or by beach cruiser; you'll find the latter available for rent in a number of local shops. As you saunter around the harbor and explore the funky boutiques and galleries along Marine Avenue, be sure to stop at Dad's

Donuts for the Island's namesake treat. The original "Balboa Bar" promises creamy vanilla ice cream, hand-dipped in warm chocolate and rolled in nuts.

In spite of lucrative development deals, much of the area's open space remains closely protected by various environmental groups. **The Upper Newport Bay Ecological Preserve** (www.newportbay.org) is one such place—752 breathtaking acres of pristine coastline, estuary and chaparral interrupted only by hiking trails. On a typical day, as many as 35,000 migratory birds may stop by for a bit of the good life. Start *your* visit at The Peter & Mary Muth Interpretive Center for a bit of background before exploring the Preserve's rich offerings in any number of ways: hiking, biking, horseback riding, kayaking and more.

Nestled between Newport and Laguna Beaches, **Crystal Cove State Park** (www.crystalcovestatepark.com) gives residents and visitors alike a unique opportunity to experience an authentic snapshot of retro California

beach life. Prior to becoming a state park in 1979, the cove was a ramshackle enclave of hand-hewn beachfront and bluff-top cottages (many dating back to the 1920s) where the four o'clock flag-raising signaled the start of Saturday cocktail hour. When the community's private leases ran out in 2001, the cottages were painstakingly restored with vintage fittings and furnishings; now just a baker's dozen of the painfully cute cabins are available for rent. Fair warning: Crystal Cove getaways are highly coveted by everyone, locals included! So, if you don't manage to snag a reservation, take heart. You can always stop by for a waterfront meal at

SURF CITY, USA

There may not be "two girls for every boy" as the old Jan and Dean song claims, but Huntington Beach is still known around the world as "Surf City" for its tasty waves and laid-back attitude. This year marks the 50th anniversary of the town's massive yearly surfing contest, now operating as the Hurley U.S. Open of Surfing—slated to kick off July 18, 2009 at the Huntington Pier. www.usopenofsurfing.com



PADDLE OUT in the calm waters of Newport Harbor

the Beachcomber Café, an exploration of the tide pools, a snorkeling tour of the 1,140-acre underwater park—or simply a stroll along the shimmering coastline.

Laguna Beach’s reputation as an art colony dates back to the early 20th century, when artists sold their works on downtown fences. Drawn by the picturesque town’s isolated coves and expansive vistas, artists made up half of the city’s permanent residents. Today, more than 40 galleries grace Laguna’s meandering byways, many of which welcome visitors during the town’s festive First Friday Art Walks. If a few hours downtown gets your creative juices flowing, head north on Pacific Coast Highway to the Bead Shop Boutique. Here you can craft your own souvenir from the shop’s lovingly hand-picked selection of wood, stone, glass and crystal beads.

Then head over to Taco Loco for a taste of Laguna’s trademark haute-meets-hippie California cuisine—the blackened mushroom quesadilla is, as the locals say, *to die for*.

FAMILY-FRIENDLY FUN

When I was young, Orange County was a wonderful place to be a kid, and the same holds true today; the area offers a limitless array of activities for teeny and tweeny alike. Not surprisingly, **Disneyland** (disneyland.disney.go.com) continues to be the cornerstone of Southland family fun. The original purveyor of the E-Ticket has evolved into Disneyland Resort with the addition of Downtown Disney (shopping, dining, lodging and more) as well as an adjacent boardwalk-style theme park—Disney’s California Adventure. Recent additions to the

park include *Toy Story Mania*, an interactive game that puts kids inside the action with Woody, Buzz, Rex and all their favorite characters. *To infinity and beyond!*

For a more authentic (and less overwhelming) boardwalk experience, take the kids to the **Balboa Fun Zone** (www.thebalboafunzone.com)—even in the age of PlayStation®, its old-fashioned arcade games, Ferris wheel and colorful carousel are always a hit. Or, if your kids are early risers, grab some fresh croissant sandwiches from the nearby Seaside Bakery and watch the dawn patrol battle the world-famous

BIRTH OF A BERRY



Though named for its juicy citrus, Orange County is also the birthplace of the boysenberry. In the late 1930s, local berry expert Walter Knott transplanted the as-yet-unknown hybrid (a cross between the raspberry and Pacific blackberry) to his Buena Park farm. He began selling the flavorful berries at his tiny fruit stand—now the popular amusement park Knott’s Berry Farm. www.knotts.com

Wedge. This steep, shovel-shaped wave, which occurs only when a substantial south swell hits the peninsula jetty at the perfect angle, challenges even the most experienced bodysurfers with up to 20 vertical feet of shore-slamming power. For a break that won't break you, try the beach in front of the **Newport Pier**; kids can splash around safely in the foam while surfers carve it up on the outside.

For an all-day family foray, catch the Amtrak down to historic **San Juan Capistrano** (www.sanjuan-capistrano.org). Tour the hamlet's historic centerpiece—Mission San Juan Capistrano, founded in 1776—then stroll into town for a day of off-the-beaten path fun. Stroll down



Photo by Karzyn R. Millet

PASSIONS IGNITE
at Mission San Juan Capistrano

BIRDS ON A MISSION



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Founded in 1776, Mission San Juan Capistrano was the first permanent European settlement in Southern California. Though the Mission is worth visiting any time of year, it's especially popular the week of March 19—when its now-famous flock of cliff swallows ends its annual pilgrimage by descending noisily upon the ruins of the original stone chapel.

www.missionsjc.com

Los Rios Street (California's first residential avenue), stop for lunch at the incomparable Ramos House Café, then walk it off as you peruse the town's outstanding antique shops.

CULTURE AROUND EVERY CORNER

With its massive footprint and multiple municipalities, you might not expect Orange County to be the cultural cornerstone of the Southland—there's no easily identifiable “arts district” or defining downtown area with a cohesive center. What you'll find instead is a fairly impressive collection of cultural activities, scattered throughout the region.

Near the bustling business and retail center of Costa Mesa, you'll

find the gorgeous **Orange County Performing Arts Center** (www.ocpac.org)—the region's virtuoso venue for Broadway shows, the ballet, classical music and more. Nearby **South Coast Repertory** (www.scr.org) serves up Tony® award-winning theatre in a more modest setting. Art lovers will also find temptation throughout the region. In addition to the thriving local art scene in Laguna, the **Orange County Museum of Art** (www.ocma.net) offers a comprehensive collection of 19th-century and contemporary art. The historic **Bowers Museum** (www.bowers.org), tucked away in the unassuming city of Santa Ana, is a treat just for its Spanish colonial ambiance—but it's also known for hosting top-tier cultural collections.

GOLD COAST GRANDEUR

If you're prepared to throw down some serious cash during your O.C. sojourn, you'll have your choice of sophisticated seaside lodging and superlative shopping—here are my top three picks.

At the pinnacle of posh stands the new 504-acre **Resort at Pelican Hill** (www.pelicanhill.com)—a beautiful Mediterranean-style village on a terraced ocean-view hillside. Choose from 204 bungalow suites and 128 two-, three- and four-bedroom villas, each with a full-size kitchen, butler service and access to the private clubhouse and pool. Hit the links at one of two Tom Fazio-designed courses, or opt for pure bliss at the



Photo by Karyn R. Miller

DOWN TIME:
The Ritz-Carlton, Laguna Niguel

23,000-square-foot spa. The Coliseum Pool is also not to be missed: more than a million hand-cut glass mosaic tiles line the circular saltwater plunge.

Perched on a 150-foot bluff with commanding views of sand and sea, the 396-room **Ritz-Carlton, Laguna Niguel** (www.ritzcarlton.com) is the grande dame of O.C. luxury hotels; its rich, cream-colored arches have become an inextricable part of the coastline. It's everything you'd expect from the luxe Ritz-Carlton family, with a few California-style extras: *al fresco* pilates in the Pacific-view gazebo, surf school in the gentle breakers beyond the shore, and more. After a full day of exploring, the ENO wine bar is the perfect place to watch the sun slip into the sea; ask your server about perfect wine pairings for your gourmet cheese and chocolate plate.

Within the shopping industry,

there's a specific category reserved for the utmost in trendy and spendy: "destination retail." It seems the term was coined especially for **South Coast Plaza** (www.southcoastplaza.com); indeed, the word "mall" doesn't begin to cover this sprawling consumerist mecca. If you thrive on retail therapy, plan on at least a half-day session with it-list brands like Marni, Balenciaga, Tory Burch and Jimmy Choo—as well as luxury staples like Tiffany, Cartier, Chanel and Ferragamo.

Planning an O.C. getaway? The Orange County Tourism Council (www.visitorangecounty.net) can provide a comprehensive listing of accommodations, attractions and events. 📖

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Mary Ann Hemphill is a freelance travel writer and a longtime resident of Newport Beach.

A MODEL WORLD



Pulitzer Prize-winning author **Michael Chabon** (*The Mysteries of Pittsburgh, Wonder Boys*)—who studied creative writing at the **University of California, Irvine**—has set several of his wonderful short stories in Orange County. Originally serialized in *The New Yorker*, they are now collected in the book *A Model World and Other Stories*.

www.amazon.com