



SWIMMING POOL



DINING AT VELADORA



SPA

Home on the ranch

WHERE DO AMERICA'S UBER-RICH GO WHEN THEY WANT A HOLIDAY? A PLUSH (BUT NOT POSH) RESORT IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA. *Max Anderson* CHECKS IN TO THE ULTRA LUXE RANCHO VALENCIA.

BILL GATES HAS STAYED here" is a cliché used in reviews of luxury retreats to imply a property has been blessed by the planet's second-richest man.

I'm no fan of travel clichés, but for this review I'm going to plead the fifth.

Scene: Rancho Valencia resort, half an hour north of San Diego – palm trees, shady eucalypts, tut-tutting lawn sprinklers. A scruffy but appealing dog is stood with its owner in the entrance to the resort's walled courtyard and I look down at the unlikely-look-

ing mutt. This is when I notice a couple at my elbow similarly giving the dog a second glance...

Yes, it's odd to be strolling beside Bill and Melinda, but the truth is they look very, very at home. Actually they are at home in the suburb of Rancho Santa Fe, which is America's third richest postcode. The resort is part-owned by the Jacobs brothers, the men who put chips in America's mobile phones. Next door is the house of the chap who invented the magnetic stripe on the backs of credit cards. And next door to that is a racetrack where Jenny Craig has her horses trained. >>





STAYING THERE
Suites are priced from US\$715 (about A\$758) per night plus taxes including breakfast. If you're looking for more space, stay in the three-bedroom private guesthouse, Hacienda, from US\$5,000 (about A\$5,300) per night plus taxes. ranchovalencia.com

GETTING THERE
Virgin Australia flies direct to Los Angeles from Sydney daily, from Brisbane four times a week and from Melbourne three times a week. Return economy fares are priced from A\$1,561 and business class fares from A\$6,977. Total flight time is around 14 hours. virginaustralia.com Rancho Valencia is two hour's drive south of Los Angeles.

So what's it like inside a private retreat built to satisfy the richest men and women of the world's richest nation?

Well, when I leave the scruffy dog and pass into the courtyard (the stucco painted a burnt apricot) I'm in for a shock. There's no petro-tower excess loved by Gulf State princelings, no rococo gild favoured by Russian oligarchs, no ascetic modernity preferred by unsmiling Swiss bankers. It's tasteful, modest even. And it's surprisingly communal – inspired by the Spanish hacienda no less, where people traditionally share company rather than guard their privacy.

The courtyard sees thickly upholstered sofas and generous fires fringed with blue glaze. The adjoining restaurant, Veladora, is all heavy timbers and wrought iron, looking across treetops and tennis courts that constantly issue a muted pop-pop-pop.

The fact is American money has been around for a long time and it's quite at ease with itself. Of course, the trappings

Everything's big, even in the smaller suites, with giant timbers holding up the roof, beds the size of aircraft carriers and bathrooms that will keep you entertained for days.

Above, clockwise from top left: The Hacienda private guesthouse; Veladora restaurant; The yoga pavilion at The Spa; The Wine Room.

are there if you care to look. The artwork featuring metallic butterfly wings hanging at the back of the restaurant is a US\$2 million original by Damien Hirst. The wine room houses the finest Napa reds, French champagnes and more than a little Australian Grange. And for every guest looking laid back, there are six staff working hard to make it happen.

But the biggest surprise is the openness of the place. Open house, open collars and, thanks to San Diego's super-reliable balminess, open sky.

Al fresco lunch is a lively, voluble affair, a mix of people fresh out of their leather-upholstered Mercs and Maseratis mingling with people just returned from working out on the courts.

When it's time for evening cocktails, the outdoor fireplaces (which ignite at the touch of a button) warm the fragrant air and, as if to order, hot air balloons rise to hang like fat exclamation marks in the clarion sky. When the candles light in the restaurant, the kitchen disgorges the likes of slow poached Maine lobster and Texas wild boar ragout, brilliantly turned out by chef Eric Bauer. Nightcaps are taken in the Pony Room where a generous slab of bar-top is attended by startlingly attractive staff in riding breeches and t-shirts. Again, almost counter-intuitively, it has a proper American bar vibe, complete with ball games playing on TVs overhead.

It doesn't feel like a resort, you could very happily live here. In fact, not a few of

the guests do. Surrounding the resort are 49 villas, all continuing the Santa Fe style and issuing a sort of grandee welcome. Everything's big, even in the smaller suites, with giant timbers holding up the roof, beds the size of aircraft carriers and bathrooms that will keep you entertained for days. (When my US\$17,000 toilet senses my approach, it automatically raises the lid on a warmed seat and offers an electronic menu of administrations. I'm appalled, yes – but undeniably fascinated.)

Resort life in southern California means lots of golf and tennis, and the business of improving strokes in both is taken seriously. On one of the 18 courts I meet Robin White, the vivacious resident pro who skillfully coaxes some performance from my frying-pan forehand. She's delightful company, though I learn she may not always have been so forgiving: although slightly surreal to contemplate, my lame non-tennis is being addressed by a woman who holds two US Open titles in doubles tennis. As a

Above: Veladora, Rancho Valencia's fine dining restaurant.

singles player she also won titles against Pam Shriver, Hana Mandliková and Gabriela Sabatini.

No half-measures either on improving my golf swing, despite having only ever played a single game in my life. I'm taken to the R&D headquarters of Callaway outside San Diego and given the latest X-hot Driver. On the company fairway I'm coached by a technician and assessed by a computer that measures yardage. It's the same team that represents Phil Mickelson on the PGA Tour – and one of the reasons ranch guests gladly pay US\$10,000 for a two-day package, not only enjoying tutelage but also departing with a set of Callaway clubs tailored to their game.

Oddly, as a bona-fide non-golfer, I discover some aptitude and get invited to hop in the resort's Porsche Cayenne and go play 18 holes. That afternoon I play my second-ever game of golf on Torrey Pines beside the Pacific. Next day, Rancho has me playing my third-ever game on the Del Mar Country Club, a stunning private

course that costs US\$160,000 just to join. It's all terribly American: *Y'wanna do it? Well, less do it!*

And it doesn't stop there. I do an evening of tasting US\$200 tequilas under the tutelage of Rancho bar manager Chris Simmons. I receive a spa treatment to undo all the golf and tennis action. And I spend a day in a private room at the Del Mar racetrack, "where the turf meets the surf", as Bing Crosby had it.

Of course there's an obvious question going begging. Do you have to be Bill Gates to afford to stay here?

Well frankly – no. In October, a villa costs from US\$815 per couple per night, which includes US\$120 per person dining credit. Yes, spa action, golf action, tequila tasting and tennis coaching will be added to your bill. But we're talking around A\$450 per person to be living the lifestyle of one of the richest, most famous men in the world.

To be perfectly honest, I didn't think it was something that money could buy.