



BEACHSIDE BEAUTY

Veteran band tour manager Rick Marino - who hosts a travel TV show called "State x State" that airs on the Planes, Trains + Automobiles network as part of Delta's in-flight entertainment - drives us to **LAGUNA BEACH** for seaside eats and local art.

WORDS BY **RICK MARINO**
PHOTOGRAPHS BY **RHIANNON COOPER**



I never met a cove I didn't like in Laguna Beach. I know that summer trips to the beach are a bit cliché, BUT who cares! Let's go to Laguna Beach for this month's road trip!

Laguna Beach is a very unique and special part of the Southern California coastline, with more than 20 beaches and coves in its 7-mile stretch. The color and clarity of the water, and the tide pools and cliffs have been drawing people in for a long time. With approximately 6 million visitors a year, Laguna is a very popular destination indeed, with activities and accommodations to fit anyone's budget and that is what I like most about this seaside town: There is something for everyone.

My first stop is to grab some lunch at Carmelita's Kitchen de Mexico. A block from the beach, this place was recommended to me several times. Steak tacos and ceviche make for a great surf and turf lunch, and after washing it down with a fresh lime juice margarita, I'm ready to hit the town. Walking around, I discover some great independent stores like North Menswear, featuring their own and other local designers, plus Brass Tack, which is full of homewares and fair-trade goods from around the world that the owner finds on her travels! There is no shortage of surf shops around town as you might expect, and the Hobie Surf Shop turns out to be my favorite. It's huge, carries everything from surfboards to souvenirs, and is locally owned. As a matter of fact, I met the owner at my hotel! But more on that later.

I check in to my hotel for the night, The Ranch at Laguna Beach, tucked away from Pacific Coast Highway back along Aliso and Woods Canyons. Laid back luxury is the best way for me to describe the resort. The rooms and cottages are spread out across the lush grounds, and within walking distance to the Sycamore Spa, Harvest restaurant and terrace, where I find myself at the monthly Vino & Vinyl event. There, I meet owner Mark Christy, who, yes, is the owner of Hobie Sports, too! A lifetime Laguna resident and all-around great guy, Mark is an amazing innkeeper who happens to share my love of tequila. I have a great time and even run into some friends on a family vacation. I was meant to be here! The Ranch is also a member of National Geographic Unique Lodges of the World - I get it.

After a great night's sleep, I am up early and off to explore Crystal Cove, a place surprisingly I had never heard of before a friend told me about it. Part of the State Park system, Crystal Cove is an exciting discovery. I feel very much like Huell Howser as I walk the path (there is also a shuttle bus for \$1.50) into the historic district of this seaside colony of bungalows built between the '20s and '40s. Tiny beach shacks line the cove and the beach, and about half of them have been restored and are available to rent. I'm told it's a six-month wait, but you could get lucky!

Stop at the visitor's center and museum to get the real flavor of where you are, and then head to the Beachcomber Café for brunch on the beach. No word short of epic describes this slice of California history. I can't wait to go back next time I'm in the area. The rest of the park has backcountry trails into the canyons, camping and RV sites, plus 3.2 miles of beach, coves and tide pools.

The rest of my day is spent exploring the beaches and coves. Main Beach in town is always pretty crowded, but you can stroll north to Shaws Cove or to the south where many of the hotel beaches are located. Aliso Beach near the Ranch is famous for its skimboarding, and has a large parking lot. There are also several amazing coves that require some stairs, like Thousand Steps Beach and Moss Point. Parking is limited as they are located in residential areas, so I highly recommend using a ride share service to get to them – then you don't have to worry about it!

Art is a huge part of Laguna Beach. My earliest memories here are weekends with my parents, when we would come down to the many art festivals this town is known for. The Sawdust Art & Craft Festival, held for nine weeks during the summer, is where you can shop all kinds of local arts and crafts, as well as participate in workshops from glass blowing to macramé. Then, there is the Festival of Arts, which is home to Pageant of the Masters: a live production recreation of works of art, with real people posing to look like the original paintings! But, there is much more to this town than the big festivals. The two things I enjoy most are browsing all the art galleries – which are everywhere – and the Laguna Beach Art Museum.

As with any road trip I go on, food is a great way to enjoy the ride. On this trip, I take in a sunset and burger at the Las Brisas patio. This is old-school Laguna Beach but worth it for the view. Driftwood Kitchen is another epic view. At Sergio's Empanadas, the eats are all handmade and great to grab and go for a beach trip. Plus, Zinc Café and Market is also great for a healthy breakfast or some picnic supplies, and Shirley's Bagels does not disappoint!



More Mexican you say? Try Javier's Finest Foods of Mexico for fancy or La Sirena Grill for OG tacos and burritos. There is never enough time to eat it all – dang it!

With the Main Beach lifeguard tower in my rearview mirror, I head out on Laguna Canyon Road to make my way back home, and make a quick stop at the Laguna Canyon Winery tasting room. They make all their wines onsite, with grapes from up north. They are very well done – so well done that I buy a couple of bottles. I figured sharing a glass of Laguna Beach wine with some friends is a great way to share what I've learned along the way. After all, it's just a road trip away! 🍷

Follow Rick Marino's travels on rickmarinotravels.com or on Instagram @rickmarinotravels. You can also write to him with questions at rickmarino@att.net.