

RANCHO PESCADERO - A Different Kind of Dude Ranch

Outrageous Oceanfront Oasis are the words Lisa Harper the owner of Rancho Pescadero has chosen to market her recently opened luxury boutique hotel. Her choice of the word outrageous piqued my interest.

Heading up Highway 19 from Cabo San Lucas on my way to interview Harper it was easy to find the marker for KM 62 and the dirt road to turn left just before the Pemex Station in Pescadero. As my car joggled and bounced along the washboard road, while dodging crater-sized ruts, I wondered if this was the outrageous part of the experience.

Later on, I learned from Harper that she loves the idea of guests arriving to her little oasis via the unexpected. As you drive the mile long dirt road passing farmers fields sprouting tomatoes and basil; past scattered houses, some finished some not, she imagines your puzzled, questioning look, asking yourself “where am I going?” Then finally past a hedge-grove of Pistachio trees you enter the Rancho Pescadero gate and you have a WOW moment.

Harper has been wowing people all her life. Her education is in fine arts and design, and her dream was to work for Levi Strauss. She moved to San Francisco and found that the only job available with Levi was as a fit model. She grabbed it. The prerequisite to be a fit model is to sign a contract whereas you can be let-go if your measurements change by a fraction within grueling parameters. Her boss joked that when Harper failed the measurement test one day, she had two choices, fire her or promote her to Levi’s new division called Dockers. Soon the industry was buzzing about the fit model who grew Dockers into a 300 million dollar a year business. And, as the saying goes, the rest is history.

While on a road trip in 1998 she purchased six hectares of farmland bordering the beach in Pescadero, just north of Los Cerritos. Back then she didn’t have a plan for the land. Harper started working not long after as CEO and Chairman of the Board for Gymboree. Still, she would often tell colleagues that someday she would quit corporate life and open a hotel in Mexico. This wasn’t a definite ambition, it was a vague idea that sounded to her like it would be “exotic and fun.”

When on a sabbatical between corporate career changes, she camped out for nine months on the beach fronting her six hectares. She contemplated selling the land. It was her partner in life, George Lilinoe who persuaded her to keep it. Lilinoe grew up in Hawaii, a person at one with the water with his love of surfing and fishing. The beach running alongside Rancho Pescadero with its sand dunes and emptiness reminded him of what his birthplace had been like before major development stepped in.

It was during this transitional time in 2008 that Harper woke up one February morning with a clear vision of what she wanted to do. She sketched out her now existing twelve suite hotel and a separate six bedroom estate home. She hired an architect and contractor to complete her plans

and by May they were under construction. Eighteen months later on November 14, 2009 Rancho Pescadero opened, billing itself as, “A different kind of Dude Ranch.”

Harper is a person who trusts her intuition and it is obvious, she is not adverse, to taking risks. If she thought at all about the economic crisis, or the cloud of bad press enveloping Mexico, she didn't let these factors slow her down.

She also didn't subscribe to the idea of having a cautious soft opening to give time to work out small logistic details. They opened with a wedding for two-hundred people. Followed by a sold-out Christmas and a New Year's Eve, Beach Blanket Baja celebration crowded with hotel guests and people from the community. Harper believes this garnered them a years worth of experience in their first two months. With a smile she adds, “It's good to be a little naive.”

Rancho Pescadero is a low density hotel, built back behind the dunes to preserve them. Every suite captures the best of indoor - outdoor living. The patio doors disappear into the wall and the beds are positioned so that you can spot the whales in the Pacific without getting up. The furnishings and decorations are a blend from her travels to mainland Mexico and Indonesia. For Harper, “Part of the joy of designing is discovering.” Every purchase has a story about where she found it, or about the artesano who made it.

All the amenities you would expect from a luxury boutique hotel are offered at Rancho Pescadero. The Beachfront Spa Pavillion is run by three sisters, *tres hermanas*, from Curnevaca. If you want to have lunch on the beach, no problem, have a surf-lesson, you say when, horseback riding, deep-sea fishing, desert hikes, jeep tours, and evening cocktails around the fire pit, they have it all. You can also kick back and do nothing but breath in the sea air and enjoy a siesta.

What you might not expect is the immediate Zen-like sense of relaxation when you first step into the small, open-air lobby. Aihibed (pronounced *eye-eebed*) the receptionist and newest addition to the twenty-two staff members is the first to greet you. Christine or her husband Josh the hotel management team will make sure you feel at home. Rancho Pescadero takes Mexico friendliness and service to another level.

Jeff Mall the executive chef of Zin Restaurant and Wine Bar in Northern California was a recent hotel guest. Mall has just published a cookbook featuring his recipes using fresh farm ingredients. He was impressed with the abundance available here from our local markets and happily donated a few helpful hints to the kitchen during his stay. The menu at Ranch Pescadero is ever changing taking advantage of the local flavors, organic produce, fine herbs, fresh fish and *carne asados*.

Rancho Pescadero isn't a place just for tourists to ‘relax, revitalize and romantically reconnect’. It is also a perfect place for locals to have an afternoon outing. Dawdle over lunch, walk the beach and book a spa treatment. Summer temperatures in the Pescadero area are much cooler than La Paz and Cabo, so watch out for some special getaway prices during that time.

What's next for Harper? She is talking about growing their own produce and thinking about increasing the hotel size to twenty-six suites. During our interview she made a comment that she likes to "Under promise and over deliver." With Rancho Pescadero she has delivered more than she could have ever promised.

It was a pleasure visiting Lisa Harper at her Outrageous Oceanfront Oasis. I now understand how well suited her choice of wording is. To build on her words, I would like to add to the branding - Spirited Spunky Sophistication - yes, Rancho Pescadero is a Different kind of Dude Ranch.

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