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Del Mar for a Family Vacation Where the Turf Meets the Surf by K. Pearson Brown

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We'd heard about Del Mar in the radio commercials for the race track, "Where the turf meets the surf," which was an intriguing proposition. The horses weren't yet in town for the races, but we found there was plenty more to do in this adorable seaside village just a 90-minute drive from LA.

To the Plaza please

The Camino Del Mar strip is the hub of town life and commerce, and the centerpiece is Del Mar Plaza. The Italian piazza-inspired plaza hosts a plethora of boutiques and restaurants, all boasting beautiful sea views. There are a few mall standards, like Banana Republic and Chico's, but the rest of the shops are unique, such as Peaches in Regalia or Georgiou for Fashions or Saratoga Saddlery for Kids, where my partner and I picked up some rad riding boots for our three-and-a-half-year-old son.

The restaurants at the Plaza offer a great variety, from burgers to fine dining. We ended up spending a great deal of our time in Del Mar at the Plaza, or not far from it. The great thing about Del Mar and its intimate size was that everything was close by.

The "in" inn

Our hotel, the Stratford Inn, less than a mile from the Plaza, was in the midst of a remodel, so we literally had bags of concrete and stacks of lumber outside our door. Inside, our room was newly refurbished with an all-new kitchenette, large flat-screen TV, tasteful paneled walls, sitting area with a pull-out sofa and a fluffy down-comforted king bed, with all the décor coordinated in warm earthy colors. Our room overlooked one of the two outdoor pools and a whirlpool spa, and most delightfully, we had a gorgeous ocean view.

The inn is soon to be a Hotel Indigo, by December 2011, and I learned from the Del Mar Village Association website that it was the first hotel in town, built in 1910, and it was once a magnet for Hollywood silent film stars. Despite the work in progress, it was easy to see the allure of the place, and I can only image how fabulous it will be when the remodel is complete.

The Place360 to be

To start my day off right, I headed a few doors down from the hotel to health spa Place360 for a massage. From a small seaside town I was transported to Bali. I could see the influence everywhere -- Balinese woodcarvings decorating the walls, a hand-carved bench in the quiet room, a shower tiled completely in stones imported from Bali - an aesthetic and spiritual inspiration that immediately puts one in a mode for rejuvenation.

My therapist Keisha was wonderfully personable and professional. She informed me at the start of our session that she would be silent, unless I wished to talk. She explained that she instilled this policy after she herself experienced a very chatty therapist on a [vacation](#) in Hawaii when all she wanted was a quiet retreat from the world. We ended up talking very little but about very meaningful things. We shared stories of lost love ones, and the hereafter, and I began to feel like she was my therapist in more ways than one. Like her conversation, her treatment was intuitive and soothing. By the end of my 90-minute treatment I was so completely relaxed that I nearly dozed off.

Breakfast course

For brunch I met a representative from the Del Mar Thoroughbred Club for a briefing on the horse races, which will begin July 20 and run through September 7. I'll be bringing my family back to town for the opening weekend festivities, which include a variety of family activities on the infield, from pony rides to arts and crafts and Camp Del Mar for ages 5-12.

We met at the Stratford Café, a quaint and very popular patio eatery on the grounds of a 1900s Cape Cod home. The place filled up quickly after I got there just after 10:30 am, and I could see why folks flock there after I tasted the delicious acai bowl, a smoothie over organic hemp granola, topped with fresh strawberries, blueberries, bananas and coconut. If it had not been so filling and wholly satisfying, I would have ordered more.

A Breezy lunch

While I was still feeling well fed by late afternoon, my family was grumbling for lunch, so we went to the Pacifica Breeze Café at the Plaza, a trendy and happening place popular with both tourists and locals. We had to stand in line to order at the counter, which was a bit hectic, and then we had to scout out a table where our food would be delivered to us. We were lucky that a family was just leaving, and we scored a table in the sun on the patio with clear, stunning views of the ocean in the distance.

We each ordered something completely different from the eclectic bistro-style menu so we could sample a variety of tastes. We ordered one of the café's most popular dishes, the sugar spiced salmon with mixed greens, carrots and roast pepper-peanut dressing, which was so delicious my son - who normally doesn't care for fish, ending up eating most of it. No wonder the café offers the sugar-spiced salmon in so many dishes -- for breakfast in hash and also in a lunch wrap with slaw and a sandwich on a torta roll with lemon mayo.

We also ordered grilled lamb gyro, which was highly recommended by another customer at the counter. It was messy, as gyros often are, but the lamb was tender and juicy and soaked the pita bread, which was dripping with tangy tzatziki sauce, crisp lettuce and fresh tomatoes. It was truly a hot mess, down to the last bite.

For my son we ordered the most gourmet grilled cheese I have ever tasted, with white cheddar and fresh sliced tomatoes on sourdough bread. Though I am never a fan of cooked tomatoes, these were not overdone and mushy and still had flavor. My son would have finished it all, had he not already eaten half the salmon.

We finished off our lunch with three scoops of creamy pistachio ice cream which we all shared in a large bowl.

By the time we left, the line was twice as long and the place was packed, so I would recommend going off peak hours to this popular eatery or plan to wait for a table; but it's definitely worth it for the food and the view.

the birthday, returning for the ride, and the return.

Fun under 42 inches

The main event of our day was a [trip](#) to nearby Legoland -- amusement park mecca for my son. Legoland got it right by making the majority of the rides suitable for young, small children. Not too scary, not too fast and with most height requirements below 42 inches. On a Sunday afternoon the lines averaged 15 to 20 minutes for the most popular rides, and the waiting was made easier by the play stations of Legos for kids to entertain themselves with while parents stood in line.

After a day of rides, including several rounds on my son's favorite, the Coastersaurus, we found our energy waning, evidenced by my son's willingness to ride in a stroller and even to sit for a caricature of himself as Aang, the Last Airbender. We even snuck in a bit of [shopping](#), picking up a souvenir knight's costume, complete with cape and foam sword, which my son wore the rest of the day. Luckily everyone was ready to go just as the park was closing down at 5 pm.

Enjoys long walks on the beach ...

It was a quick trip back to the hood by our hotel for a walk along the beach. Despite signs indicating the rail road tracks and surrounding area was private property, plenty of tourists, walkers and joggers were on the paths and cliffs overlooking the sandy beach. It was literally a picture perfect day as we snapped away capturing panoramic shots with a backdrop of the gorgeous clear blue sky and colorful wild flowers along the cliffs and dunes.

Burger up

For dinner we went back to Plaza Del Mar for burgers at Smashburger. Always eager to indulge in the spice of life, we ordered a variety. The Spicy Baja with pepper jack cheese and chipotle may and fresh jalapenos was a favorite for my spice-loving son. While in San Diego, sort of, of course we had the San Diego Smashburger, along with the decadent BBQ, bacon and cheese burger. To make it a meal, we ordered the yummy sweet potato smashfries and signature crispy smashfries with rosemary olive oil and garlic. To top off our hardy comfort food, we shared a handspun Haagen-Dazs chocolate shake and malt, delivered to our table in a silver tumbler along with a frosted mug, a real treat to our son who played mixologist and came up with some delicious concoctions with his shake and my soda.

Fair game

The next day it was off to the San Diego County Fair at the Del Mar Racetrack. The event was no small-town affair. It was all you would expect and more from a major regional fair of a major Southern California county. Of course there was traditional fair food of Kettle Corn, [cotton candy](#), bockwurst on a bun, and also the beer gardens, where you could get a draft of just about every kind of brew, but patrons could also enjoy casual or gourmet meals and table service at cafes on the fairgrounds or in the track's famed Turf Club.

Many of the rides were impressive and of the magnitude that I would not have expected at a fair, but alas, all but a few had a minimum height requirement of 42 inches, and my 41-inch son disappointedly accepted that he would have to wait until next year to ride.

Games were another matter. My son pleaded with me to try my hand at a ball toss, and by pure luck I got three balls into a metal tub and won an enormous stuffed Clifford the Big Red Dog. Because the prize measured larger than my SUV rear cab, the nice game boy allowed me to exchange it for a more reasonably sized stuffed tiger, which despite being half the dog's size still thrilled my son.

'Night sweet knight

After taking in all the junk food and excitement we could handle in one afternoon, we headed back to LA. The ride home was particularly quiet as my sunkist and exhausted son snoozed away in the car, wearing his knight costume and clutching his new plush tiger pal. He slept the entire way home, and then through the night. As every parent knows, this is a sign of a truly great vacation.

About the Author

K. Pearson Brown is a travel writer and blogger living in Los Angeles.