

MALIBU'S

NEW WAVE

Idealised for its celebrity appeal and rebellious surfer culture, the close-knit coastal enclave is experiencing a luxurious sea change.

Words MARINA KAY · Photography TANVEER BADAL



I**N THE BOOK** *Stories I Only Tell My Friends: An Autobiography*, actor Rob Lowe describes the Malibu of his childhood as ‘a wellspring of counterculture group think.’ But the Californian city’s penchant for rebellion formed long before Lowe arrived with his family in the 1970s, before The Beach Boys began harping on about good vibrations, before Gidget brought fame to Surfrider Beach and before the glitterati decamped here from Hollywood.

It started in 1892, when businessman Frederick Hastings Rindge and his wife Rhoda May Knight Rindge bought the 133,000-hectare Rancho Topanga Malibu Sequit, a Spanish land grant in the Santa Monica Mountains, stretching to the ocean. The couple found solace in the canyons and craggy cliffs that fringed a coastline ruled by the tides. It represented a final frontier, or it did until the population exploded, inciting land disputes that escalated all the way to the Supreme Court. The battles proved tumultuous and crushing, but if the Rindges hadn’t fought to preserve their prized parcel, its south-facing shoreline might have turned into a glitzy resort town long ago.

Such is the nature of Malibu that its denizens are fiercely protective of their lifestyle. And yet, a moneyed tide seems to always flow through, creating world-class restaurants, wellness centres and a wine region on a par with Burgundy.

Sitting pretty about 30 kilometres from Santa Monica, the sleepy city feels a world away from LA’s freeways. Only one road snakes along its shore, the Pacific Coast Highway, not much wider than when it was built in 1929. On both sides stand slate cliffs and homes on stilts that command a small fortune, especially along Carbon Beach, aptly nicknamed Billionaire’s Beach, made even more famous for its residents: philanthropist and art lover Eli Broad, Dreamworks’ Jeffrey Katzenberg and Oracle co-founder Larry Ellison, who years ago bought up 10 of its 70 lots, one of which houses Nobu. Originally co-founded by actor Robert De Niro and helmed by chef Nobu Matsuhisa, the restaurant buzzes with a power crowd — from film star Leonardo DiCaprio to the CEO of ultra-popular indoor cycling studio Soulcycle, Melanie Whelan — well past Malibu’s usual turn-in time of 9pm.

By day, natural beauty is the main attraction. “There’s such a special energy with the mountains being so close to the ocean,” says Whelan, a frequent visitor to the area since Soulcycle opened a workout space in the city in 2014. Hovering above that sea is Malibu Pier, offering sensational 360-degree views across the Pacific and the Santa Monica Mountains. It’s here you’ll find Malibu Farm, a farm-to-table spot Whelan stumbled upon a few years ago with her Soulcycle team. Run by chef Helene Henderson, and split across two sections of the pier, Malibu Farm has transformed what was once a neglected historical gem, as Henderson calls it, into a meeting place for locals and tourists. “It’s the perfect venue after a day in the sun. We spent an incredible evening there of conversation, team building and planning for the year ahead,” says Whelan.

When scouting for a location in 2013, Henderson had considered opening Malibu Farm next door to Nobu in a beautiful all-teak building (which incidentally, boasts stellar views of the pier at sunset). She didn’t but, in May 2016, ➤

CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT Alfresco dining at Nobu Malibu; the rugged terrain of the Santa Monica Mountains; Malibu Farm founder Helene Henderson; relax poolside at The Ranch Malibu; the wellness centre’s exterior; chill out in front of the fire after a day of boot camp; watch waves crash from the deck of Nobu; a chef prepares sushi at the world-renowned restaurant; the luxe Malibu Beach Inn; colourful meals at Malibu Farm. **PREVIOUS PAGE** Residents have fought for years to keep Malibu’s coastline unspoilt.

DRINK

Colcanyon Estate Wines 2375 Latigo Canyon Rd; www.colcanyon-estate-wines.com. **Cornell Winery & Tasting Room** 29975 Mulholland Hwy; www.cornellwinery.com. **Dolin Estate Wines** www.dolinestate.com. **Little Beach House Malibu** 22716 Pacific Coast Hwy; www.littlebeachhousemalibu.com. **Malibu Wines** 31740 Mulholland Hwy; www.malibuwines.com. **SIP Malibu Grapes** 2598 Sierra Creek Rd, Agoura Hills; www.sipmalibugrapes.com.

STAY

Aja Malibu 1821 Latigo Canyon Rd; www.ajamalibu.com. **Malibu Beach Inn** 22878 Pacific Coast Hwy; www.malibubeachinn.com. **Nobu Ryokan** 22752 Pacific Coast Hwy; www.nobuhotels.com. **The Ranch Malibu** 12220 Cotharin Rd; www.theranchmalibu.com.



British-based private club Soho House (backed by US billionaire Ron Burkle) took over the two-storey space, establishing Little Beach House Malibu. “The patio was always spectacular, and Soho has built a huge outdoor bar, with lights and heaters. It’s super trendy, but also very cosy and inviting,” says Henderson.

Designed with the affluent Malibu creative community in mind, Little Beach House requires an exclusive standalone membership, granted solely to those who either reside in, or have ties to, the coastal city. As a resident of Point Dume — a promontory on the northern end of Santa Monica Bay, about a 20-minute drive from Malibu Pier — Henderson has a membership and has watched the club rapidly turn into *the* weekend hotspot. Not that Malibu has ever had trouble drawing a hip crowd — it’s just that between Little Beach House and Nobu, there’s now a lot more partying going on.

If this new lease on nightlife provides a reason to visit, then Nobu Ryokan will offer a fresh incentive to stay. Due to open this month, the Japanese-style inn completes the trifecta of modernist wood-slatted buildings on this prime tract of beach, adding 11 suites and five ocean-front bungalows, all rooted in Japanese design. It’s been a windfall to a city short on plush accommodation, as the only other luxe option is Malibu Beach Inn, located just down the highway. The 47-room hotel now boasts a refreshed look by designer Waldo Fernandez, who pared down the interiors to amplify the full-frontal water views.

For longer stays focused on wellness, health enthusiasts are taking to the mountains. The Ranch Malibu, sprawled over 80 hectares and riddled with trails, is where the well-heeled trek to get red-carpet ready. Founded by husband-and-wife team Alex and Sue Glasscock, The Ranch offers intensive seven-day programs of hiking, yoga, circuit training, afternoon massages and self-defence classes. Nearby, on a nine-hectare knoll once owned by Teddy Roosevelt, the even more boutique Aja Malibu also offers week-long retreats, but with a spiritual slant. Dreamt up by Australian Inannya Magick, the menu lists chakra tune-ups, vibration therapies, sound-healing meditation and wisdom workshops.

Cruise the Pacific Coast Highway. **OPPOSITE PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP** Enjoy wholesome fare at Malibu Farm; horseriding in the lush green valleys; Little Beach House Malibu looks over Carbon Beach; the polished exterior of Nobu Ryokan.

EAT

Malibu Farm 23000 Pacific Coast Hwy; www.malibu-farm.com. **Nobu Malibu** 22706 Pacific Coast Hwy; www.nobu-restaurants.com.

Over the ridgeline from Aja Malibu, the land looks as if it’s drawn with lines. A closer inspection reveals these to be grapevines and, in 2014, the Malibu Coast was designated an American Viticultural Area (AVA), sparking fresh interest in the region’s 50-plus vineyards. John Freeman, a director at Malibu Coast AVA, says, “The AVA recognition sends the message that our wine producers are serious about making quality wines and committed to the whole process — from growing through completing the final product.”

Steep canyon walls and hillsides make the idea of large-scale production near impossible, limiting a vineyard’s output to about 300 cases of wine per year. But with challenges come rewards. Dolin Estate’s 2012 pinot noir earned an impressive 95 points from *Wine Enthusiast* magazine, while Colcanyon Estate Wines’ 2008 cabernet sauvignon scored a double gold medal at the 2011 San Francisco International Wine Competition. To counter the issue of low commercial availability, Malibu’s tasting rooms function as cellar door collectives, with Colcanyon supplying bottles to SIP Malibu Grapes and Cornell Winery and Tasting Room. Meanwhile, the region’s biggest producer, Malibu Wines, extends its offering beyond the traditional pour-and-sip to wine hikes and safaris that traverse the Saddlerock Ranch vineyards and zoo.

The popular notion that California’s wine production started in the north of the state is a misconception — it actually originated in greater LA following the arrival of Spanish missionaries during the 1700s. When Frederick and May Rindge bought Rancho Topanga Malibu Sequit, they also inherited Rising Sun Vineyard — planted in Solstice Canyon by former owner Matthew Keller. In the decades to come, northern California would eclipse its southern counterpart in wine production, prompting Napa to gain AVA recognition in 1981 — that’s 36 years before the one-time frontrunner, Malibu. But this should come as no surprise, for history has shown that this coastal enclave, always biding its time, has never been one for rules and conventions. 🍷

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