

HOTEL CASA DEL MAR A HISTORIC RETROSPECTIVE

Santa Monica, Calif., 1926: America was experiencing an economic boom, and the lavish “good times” were soaking up West Coast beaches. Once the sleepy community of Santa Monica constructed its famed pier for passenger and cargo ships in 1909, and later began opening amusement attractions to the public, beginning in 1916, the town joined other beach communities in welcoming guests during the glory days of seaside resorts.

By the early 1920s, the surge in construction of hotels, ballrooms and attractions, housing thousands of tourists and beach goers, fueled the reputation of Santa Monica as the Atlantic City of the West. Exclusive beach clubs, where the city’s gentry dined and danced, dotted the Santa Monica shore. These luxury clubs and hotel accommodations came to define the new Santa Monica, and in 1926, the grandest of them all – Club Casa Del Mar – emerged.

On Saturday, May 1, 1926, the Harter brothers, “Jack” and “Til,” who owned the H&H Holding Company, opened an incomparable palace by the sea, sparing no expense. Building the club for the then-incredible sum of \$2 million, Club Casa Del Mar housed fine furnishings, Oriental rugs, brass fixtures, bronze statuary and hand-painted ceilings unrivaled by any beach club in America. Designed in an Italian Renaissance Revival style, by noted Los Angeles architect Charles F. Plummer, Club Casa Del Mar offered luxury beach facilities, a sea-level esplanade, an Olympic-sized indoor swimming pool, a salon, dining rooms with ocean views and 129 elegant hotel rooms.

The Club was instantly the Grande Dame of the shore, attracting elite membership of the well-heeled, including leading business executives and Hollywood starlets. It was the place to see and be seen, as it was known for its swinging parties and festive affairs – Saturday night dinner dances, Sunday afternoon concerts in the Grand Ballroom, Sunday night operas, barbecues on the beach, elaborate floor shows, volleyball tournaments and championship aquatic events.

Looking to surpass its Atlantic City of the West reputation, Santa Monica’s beach clubs also provided its members with gambling and cavorting that lasted throughout the night. Club Casa Del Mar lined its balconies with illegal slot machines and offered horse betting at its “Race and Sweepstakes Buffet” on Thursday nights. Thursday evenings became known for small fortunes changing hands, skinny-dipping in the heated indoor pool and flowing illegal “hooch” (with Prohibition still enforced). Such activities were kept “hush-hush” by club members and media alike.

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Though the “good times” lasted through the Great Depression for Club Casa Del Mar, World War II, and the fear of the Japanese storming the area beaches, would force the elegant club to convert to military housing for the thousands of U.S. Navy stationed along the Southern California coast in 1941. Following World War II, the Grande Dame spent decades struggling to resurrect itself, but failed, closing its doors again in the early 1960s and later becoming a shell for rigid diet and controversial drug rehabilitation programs, including Charles E. Dederich’s Syanon Foundation (1967-1978) and Nathan Pritikin’s Pritikin Longevity Center (1978-1997).

Finally, in November 1997, the Edward Thomas Hospitality Corporation, also owners of the neighboring Shutters on the Beach, acquired the historic landmark and invested more than \$50 million in the painstaking restoration of Club Casa Del Mar’s interiors and exterior. While none of the original furnishings remain, the décor of the Hotel Casa Del Mar, reemerging in October 1999, evokes the opulence and grace of the 1920s original and provides the same beach luxury to today’s elite.

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