

# VOGUE



Photo: Courtesy of Sea Ranch

TRAVEL

## At Sea Ranch, a California Classic Gets a Sophisticated Refresh

BY JANET O'GRADY

It's a gorgeous day as I turn onto [Highway 1](#). I'm focused on the curves of this legendary road, but dramatic views of the Pacific are screaming for my attention. The drive from [San Francisco](#) is part of the adventure of visiting [Sea Ranch](#), a 1960s-era one-of-a-kind place with cult status for design and nature lovers like myself. Its main public center, the Lodge, recently reopened with a refresh, including a remodeled restaurant, a new café, expansions to its lounge, bar, and general store, and cultural programs like jazz concerts and art shows.

In the '60s, Sea Ranch was where an emerging environmental movement collided with Modernist design. While many of its ideas later became mainstream, this planned community was a radical departure from conventional luxury resort and suburban real estate developments of that time.



Maverick developer Al Boeke assembled a visionary team of Bay Area architects, young turks Charles W. Moore, Joseph Esherick, William Turnbull, Donlyn Lyndon, Richard Whitaker, and landscape architect Lawrence Halprin. Their job was to transform a run down sheep ranch, located on a remote 10 miles of wild Sonoma coast. The notion of “living lightly on the land”—a practice attributed to the Indigenous Pomo people of Northern California—inspired their designs. Sea Ranch embraced sustainability long before the word became part of our everyday vocabulary. A covenant even promoted owners as stewards of the land. Cooperative living meant oceanfront, fields, and walking trails were designated “commons” areas.



When I first see the original homes—small and rustic, clad in redwood, with sloped roofs, and cypress hedgerow buffers—I’m struck by how timeless they look. Today there are larger houses on site, but for purists

the ideal building was “one you don’t see.” These original houses really do blend into the landscape of wide meadows surrounded by dramatic cliffs. I learn that with increased wildfires, alternative materials are being used, such as concrete and Cor-Ten steel, and many trees planted near houses are trimmed for fire prevention. Select rentals are available of its 2,200 private homes, from spacious to small cottages. Next year, visitors will have another choice when the Lodge opens 17 guest rooms, currently under renovation. The interiors will feature sleek Modernist furnishings, with every room offering big ocean views.

Any concerns I had of entering a '60s time warp fade when I arrive at the Lodge. The look and feel is contemporary inconspicuous luxury. Imaginatively updated by the Seattle-based Mithun design firm, the sophisticated revamp keeps the spirit of the original space while opening up the flow and spectacular ocean views. A bold and homey fireplace with concrete and river rocks commands the lounge; on a rainy day I will contentedly curl up there with a book. The interiors by San Francisco designer Charles de Lisle dazzle the eye with forest-green tufted sofas by Arflex, Martino Gamper side tables, and Hans Wegner wood rocking chairs. There’s even a post office with old fashioned mail boxes and its general store sells local history books. It’s a welcoming gathering spot for homeowners, locals, and travelers.



I breakfast at its café on rich lattes and avocado toast. The bar is cozy and packed. Every table has an ocean view at The Dining Room, quick becoming a destination restaurant on the coast. It’s run by the charming Julie Rossi, the kitchen helmed by the talented Chef Eric Piacentine, formerly of Big Sur Bakery. His seasonal menu takes its cues from Sonoma’s bounty, with dishes like Sonoma duck and local seafood such as black cod and halibut ceviche. The food is complemented by a wine list focused on discoveries from the Sonoma Coast and Russian River Valley.

I’ve also come to Sea Ranch to commune with nature along this mystical coast. It teems with wildlife, from deer to seals and birdwatching. The Sea Ranch ritual of sunset watching becomes my personal ritual too, both from the restaurant, and from one of the Adirondack chairs on the redwood deck. One afternoon, I spot a whale spouting. The next morning, fog begins to lift as I walk down along the Black Point headlands, bundled in my Barbour. I pass vestiges of the land’s agricultural past like the heavy timbered Black Point Barn. It’s one of the only remaining buildings from the late 1870s, restored in the 1980s (the vernacular barn shape also features in many home designs here). Cormorants soar on ocean thermals overhead. I’m looking across to the original Condominium One, now on the National Register of Historic Places. (Condominiums were a new building type

when these were constructed in 1965.) The complex is situated on an exposed bluff, with hedgerows to mitigate the wind. I vow to stay in one someday. Wandering along its grassy oceanfront path, en route to the wooden steps leading to Black Point Beach, I pause at the celebrated Hedgerow Houses. These six dwellings were the first detached homes built here, all with signature sloping roofs—I love the sod-covered roof with sprouting native grasses. As I savor the solitude of exploring some of Sea Ranch’s 50 miles of trails, I realize this place could have become another Malibu—but thanks to its new owners, it remains an environmentally conscious slice of paradise.

