

LUXURY SPA FINDER

THE SPA LIFESTYLE AT ITS FINEST

SPECIAL ISSUE

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Surrender terms

A FIRSTHAND REPORT ON MONTAGE RESORT'S NEW SURRENDER RETREAT,
IN WHICH THE GUEST PUTS HIMSELF IN THE HANDS OF THE SPA
BY GARY WALTHER • PHOTOGRAPHY BY SUSAN SEUBERT



Relaxation Central

The hydrotherapy pool and outdoor relaxation lounge (this page) at the 20,000-square-foot Spa Montage hide behind high, handsome walls of stacked fieldstone. Opposite: Fitness director Dru Barrios guides a Surrender Retreat participant on a Bosu ball during a private fitness session, an integral part of the program.



My Surrender Team

Each Surrender participant works with the same spa staff during the four days. My team (below) consisted of (left to right) facialist Mary O'Sullivan, fitness director Dru Barrios, massage therapist Suzanne DeFranco, fitness instructor Shane Kern, and therapist Deneece Gabbard.

Candlelight Ceremony

The bathtub in the Gallery, the couple's treatment room (opposite, bottom right), dressed for an Elements of Life treatment, and (opposite, top left) a close-up of two of the orchids sprinkled around the candles.

Day two, just after 1 p.m. I'm sitting in a \$35,000 Bouvier hydrotherapy tub, up to my neck in a nice warm consommé of algae. The lights are low, the candles are guttering, and all that's on my plate for the rest of the day is this two-hour treatment—yet I'm peppering my therapist, Suzanne DeFranco, with questions about the bath, the resort, and the Surrender Retreat, which I am halfway through without yet having capitulated. (It's just temperament, not dissatisfaction.) Suzanne, who is mine for the duration (four days), has been forbearing, the patient mother indulging the child who won't go to sleep. But now she lays down the surrender terms. Leaning in close, she says, "If you'll just relax and give yourself over emotionally to this, I'll answer all your questions when we're done."

And with that, I raise the white flag.

Like going to live on a South Seas island or intelligently disposing of jackpot lottery win-

fornia, about an hour south of Los Angeles. The four-day program is offered four or five times a year. (See the sidebar on page 102 for 2005 dates and details.)

The Surrender Retreat combines the workout and therapeutic regimens available at destination spas such as Canyon Ranch with the luxury pampering that is the stock-in-trade of resort spas. It's on the forefront of one of the biggest spa trends today, customizing the guest experience. And it shows just how congenial a roost fitness, wellness, and relaxation have found in luxury resorts—and this is a very good one, indeed. (See the Montage Resume on page 104.)

Surrender grew out of spa director Barbara Schultz's conviction that the traditional spa menu is more impediment than expedient. Guests don't understand many of the treatments (and don't ask about them for fear of looking green), much less have the self-knowledge necessary to determine which treatments would work best for them. Moreover, the spa menu tends to promote superficial interaction with the spa staff, the sort of conversation you might have at a Häagen-Dazs store. ("What does that treatment taste like?") The result: Guests default to plain vanilla (a.k.a. Swedish).

That's why Surrender seeks to sideline the menu by catching the guest before and upon arrival. (Schultz would like to drop the menu completely but fears that could result in mere spa-narchy.) A week or so before a participant arrives, one of the spa staff calls to do a preliminary assessment and get the guest to think about what he would like to accomplish. Once at the spa, he goes right into "Art of the Spa," a one-hour hot-cold hydrotherapy session designed to jump-start the circulation and flush out the system, followed by a two-hour Aroma-Balancing session in which reflexology, dermal-zone, and lymphatic-drainage techniques are used to pinpoint problem areas and organs that are out of balance. ("Balance between organs equals good health," says Suzanne.) On day one there is also a fitness assessment. Out of these sessions comes your program, which includes two hours of spa treatments and



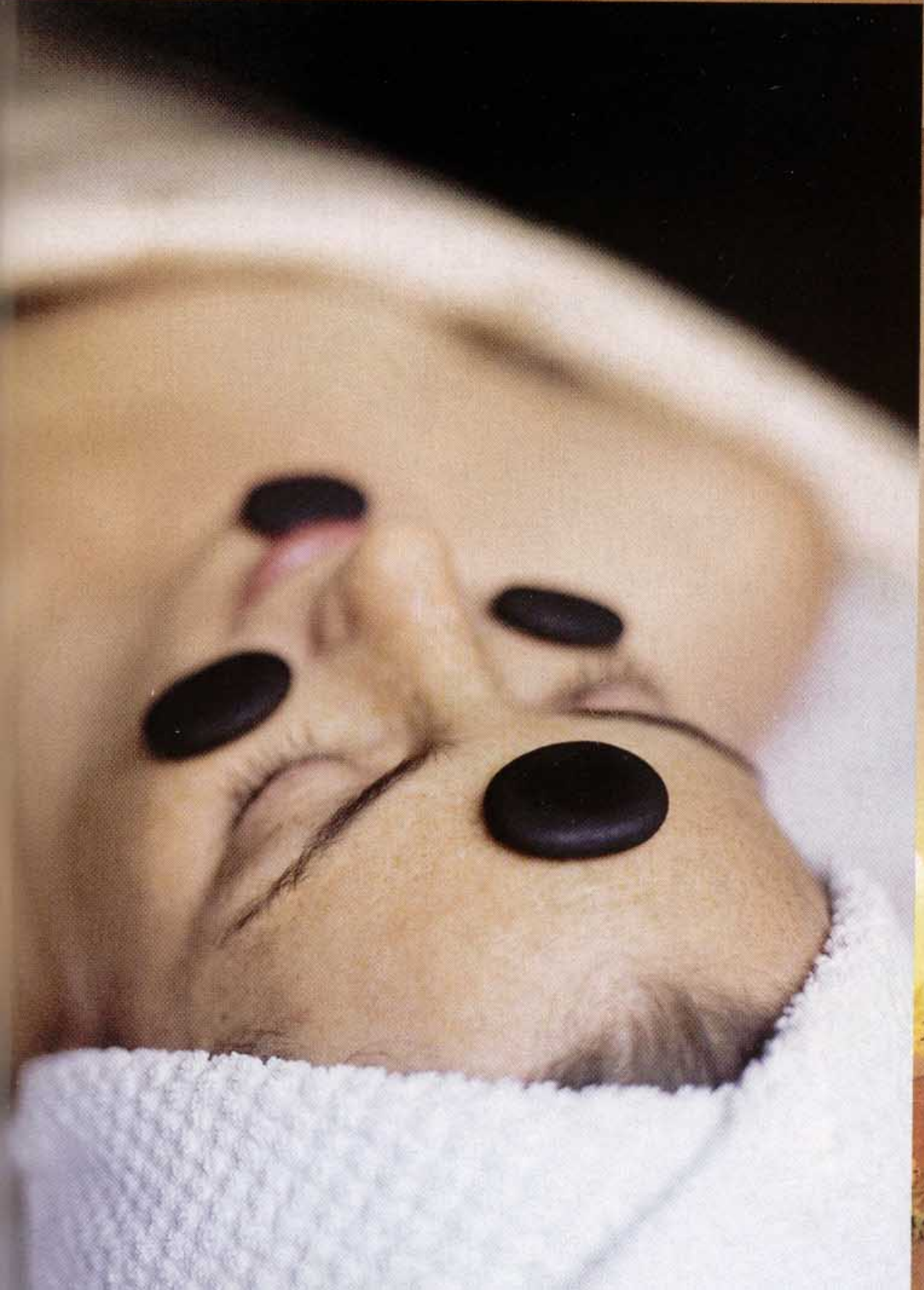
Cool as a...

Cucumber flocs (opposite, top right) cover an ice bath containing towels just outside the steam room and sauna.

Stone Cold (and Hot)

The Toning Stone Facial (opposite, bottom left) uses both to stimulate circulation.

nings, letting a spa "just take care of you" is not as easy as it sounds. I am accustomed to having a say in my life—I suspect Spa Montage's clientele is, too—and the habit doesn't disappear just because a spa says, "Leave it to us." But getting you to drop your guard, furlough your need for control, let their fingers do the walking—that's the gist of the nearly one-year-old Surrender Retreat at Montage, the 262-room resort on a spectacular bluff-top perch in Laguna Beach, Cali-





Strong Viewpoint

The resort lobby (left), on the fifth floor, commands a sweeping view of the property. (Dress by Citrine, shoes by Francesca Giobbi, pearl choker by Marissa Schwartz.)

Secluded Perch

The resort's main pool is more glamorous looking, but the spa pool (top right) is less used, its chaises first-row-orchestra seating on the ocean.

Architectural Record

The richly arched, pillared, and balconied facade of the hotel (bottom right) alludes to the Craftsman style of architecture that was popular in California in the early 20th century.





two hours of fitness training daily.

As for handing over the keys to your self, "some people take a good day and a half," says Schultz. "Some arrive already there." But terminal type A's take note: For you the spa suggests the Laguna Beach Kur as the overture—a warm mustard-seed hydrotherapy bath followed by a wrap in a sheet soaked in ice water. "It immediately puts the person in a relaxed state because the body slows down to warm up," says Schultz. "They often conk out."

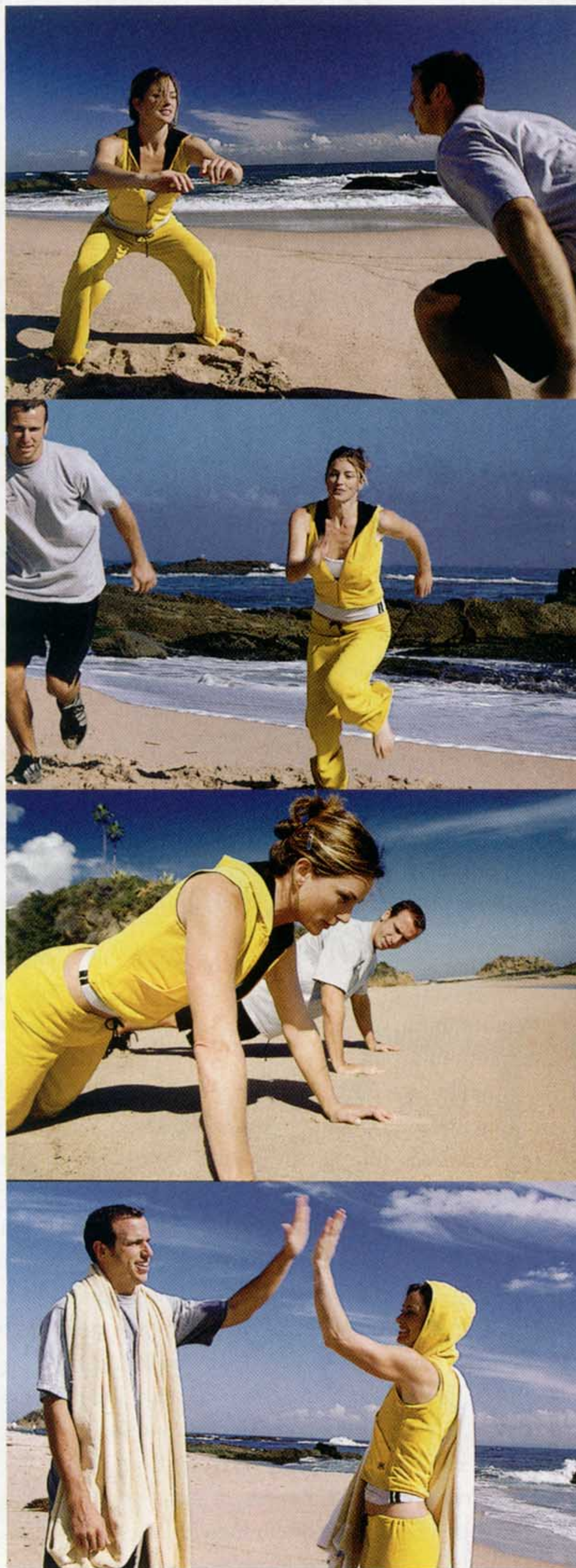
A SEA CHANGE

"Dimethyl sulfide," says Montage spa consultant Anne Bramham, as if she's acknowledging an old friend. We've just come down to the long beach adjacent to the resort for the Thalassic Beach Walk, which kicks off each day for most Surrender participants. Naming this compound, which is formed when seawater mixes with air and is rich in trace elements and minerals, will turn out to be the prelude to a rhapsody on the ocean that Bramham will deliver extemporaneously during the walk. (My favorite line: "We are a low-salt version of the ocean.")

In fact, "The sea is key" might be the unofficial motto of Surrender because the retreat relies heavily on seaweed mineral baths, algae products, and the classic hydrotherapy principle of Ping-Ponging the system from hot to cold to hot to improve circulation. The beach walk is a version of that. The fast walk down in the deep sand ups your heart rate and sends blood to the extremities, whereas the walk back in knee-high surf keeps the heart working but summons the blood back to the torso to warm the body.

The British-born Bramham, a 25-year veteran of the spa industry and the founder of the Bramham Institute in West Palm Beach, Florida, a spa consulting and post-graduate training company, helped develop the treatments at Montage. She also returns each month to train Surrender staff and those who aspire to be. Therapists who want to join the team must complete an 18-month program and pass a two-day exam, both written and hands-on. Of the spa's 32 therapists, 9 are currently qualified to par-

Beach Boot Camp



Gimme 20!

Beach Boot Camp uses the sand, sea, and ingenuity of the spa's fitness staff to create a cardio workout. Shane Kern puts a Surrender participant through her paces (left, top to bottom): squat-and-jumps, a plyometric exercise that wakes up fast-twitch muscles; wind sprints between two lines in the sand; two sets of push-ups; and the finale, a great feeling of accomplishment. (Yellow workout suit by Crunch, white tank top by Puma.)

On the Waterfront

Both Boot Camp and the morning Thalassic Beach Walk include a long wade through the surf (opposite), to push up the heart rate and pump up the circulatory system.



Gallery View

The couple's treatment room (above) is a serene salmon-colored marble space with a deep soaking tub.

Period Feel

Montage guest rooms (opposite, top and bottom left) continue the Arts and Crafts-era theme but leaven the style's dark palette with ivories, taupes, and sages.

Lobbyist Hangout

The lobby (opposite, top right) feels like a big living room—and guests often use it as such, playing board games and conversing, especially in front of the fireplace.

Soak It Up

Guest-room bathrooms (opposite, bottom right) are particularly well done, with the tubs set in marble surrounds and ensconced in arched niches. Towels are custom-made for the resort by Lisadell.

2005 SURRENDER PROGRAM DETAILS

Dates March 27–30 and April 24–27. More dates to be set.

Rate \$3,890 per person, double occupancy; \$4,790 per person, single occupancy. Price includes ocean-view room, all meals, a two-hour spa treatment and two-hour one-on-one fitness session daily, healthy cooking classes, valet parking, taxes, and gratuities.

Room Tip The 02- to 06-series rooms are closest to the spa—in fact, they overlook the spa pool.

ticipate in Surrender and 7 others are in the training program.

I am in high dimethyl-sulfide spirits, gambling in the surf like a Labrador and hectoring Bramham to wade in farther—and I get wacked by a wave for my impertinence. After three laps we go to a tidal pool at the head of the beach for Nazya, the Hindu practice of snorting oil through alternate sinus passages—except we're using seawater. Just up the sand, a sinewy guy with a backpack and a dog is doing sun salutations—is this little tableau a Southern California caricature or what, I can't help thinking. As we walk up the path from the beach, Bramham sums up our outing in a final wave of eloquence.

"You've toned your skin; you've pushed

your cardio; you've inhaled iodine, which elevates your mood; you've pumped your Venus and lymph systems; and you've had a good time." And so I have.

BE CAREFUL WHAT YOU ASK FOR

During my telephone interview with Suzanne, I list five goals I'd like to focus on during my retreat: rejuvenation, integration (as opposed to isolation) routines, advisable adjustments in my weight-lifting regime now that I'm over 50, having a posture and alignment evaluation, and "getting my butt kicked a bit in fitness."

In Dru Barrios, the head of fitness, I get the last four in one dose. Just a shade over five feet tall, Dru is a vivacious, bantamweight brunette with electricity sparking in her eyes—an energy molecule in workout clothes. We're introduced in the lobby a few hours before our first session, and she is already on point, as it were: "You have weak hips," she'll tell me later in the gym. "I noticed that when you stand, your toes point outward slightly."

I end up learning to do a lat pull-down properly—I'd been doing it without having my shoulder blades down and in place—as well as a new cable exercise for my shoulder and upper back that isn't as susceptible to improper form as single-arm rows. On subsequent days we'll work with a foam roller—I'll lapse into flop sweat doing some routines that involve hardly any movement at all—and a Bosu ball, a mushy hemisphere that forces you to rebalance yourself constantly while assuming various yoga-like poses. It quickly makes me see how one-dimensional weight lifting is.

Dru also sends me out to Beach Boot Camp with fitness instructor Shane Kern, who moonlights as a writer of inspirational verse. We run down the beach, then do sprints (forward, backward, grapevine, high-kick), jog back through the surf, and then do it again, and again. Finally, we finish off with a few sets of push-ups. At which point I'm wondering if he shouldn't be writing perspirational verse.

ONE-ON-ONE

"I'm doing this like Braille," says Suzanne, up to her elbows in the turbid algae broth. "I



Toques of the Town

The team (opposite, top left) at the helm of Studio, the resort's gourmet restaurant, consists of head chef James Boyce (right) and sous-chef Randall Jacob. Boyce characterizes the menu as "modern French with California influences."

Rise and Shine

The restaurant, which occupies a cottage at the bluff edge (top right), has become one of the top resort dining rooms in California in a little less than two years. The dining room (bottom left) has a 20-foot tongue-and-groove cathedral ceiling and large windows that look down the coast and out to the sunset.

Super Bowl

My healthy breakfast pick from the menu at the Loft, the resort's casual restaurant: the Cantaloupe Bowl (bottom right), a melon filled with low-fat yogurt and berries.

MONTAGE RESUME

Location On a bluff top in Laguna Beach on the Orange County coast, 10 minutes south of Newport Beach and 20 minutes from John Wayne Airport.

Resort Forte Offering great comfort without ostentation, and big resort amenities—25-meter pool, large spa, dramatic public spaces—with snap-to-it service.

Rooms Spacious—the smallest is 500 square feet. Most suites have two balconies.

Top Room The Catalina Suite (\$4,500), a 2,800-square-foot suite overlooking the spa pool, has a two-hearth fireplace (one facing the living room, one the bedroom) and his and her bathrooms.

Best Views The 11-series rooms look out over the pool and down the coast. The 40-series rooms, smack in the middle of the U-shaped facade, look right down on the main pool.

You Should Know That... The Horizon View Rooms (\$560) are actually on the ground floor. The Coastal King and Surf King Bungalows (\$1,800–\$4,800), the second-best rooms, are quite close to the public promenade in front of the hotel. Room 521 is one of the only rooms in the main building with a fireplace.

Cultural Note The paintings in the public areas, mostly landscapes done by California plein air artists in the early 20th century, acknowledge Laguna Beach's past as an art colony.

Local Trivia Before Montage was built, this site, called Treasure Island because the movie was filmed here in 1934, was occupied by a trailer park. Among its occupants were Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz. The pair of palms outside Studio are named Lucy and Desi because they stood near the couple's erstwhile parking spot.

Golf Guests have access to the Pelican Hill Golf Club, which has two Tom Fazio courses.

Rates \$560–\$4,800

Reservations 888-715-6700

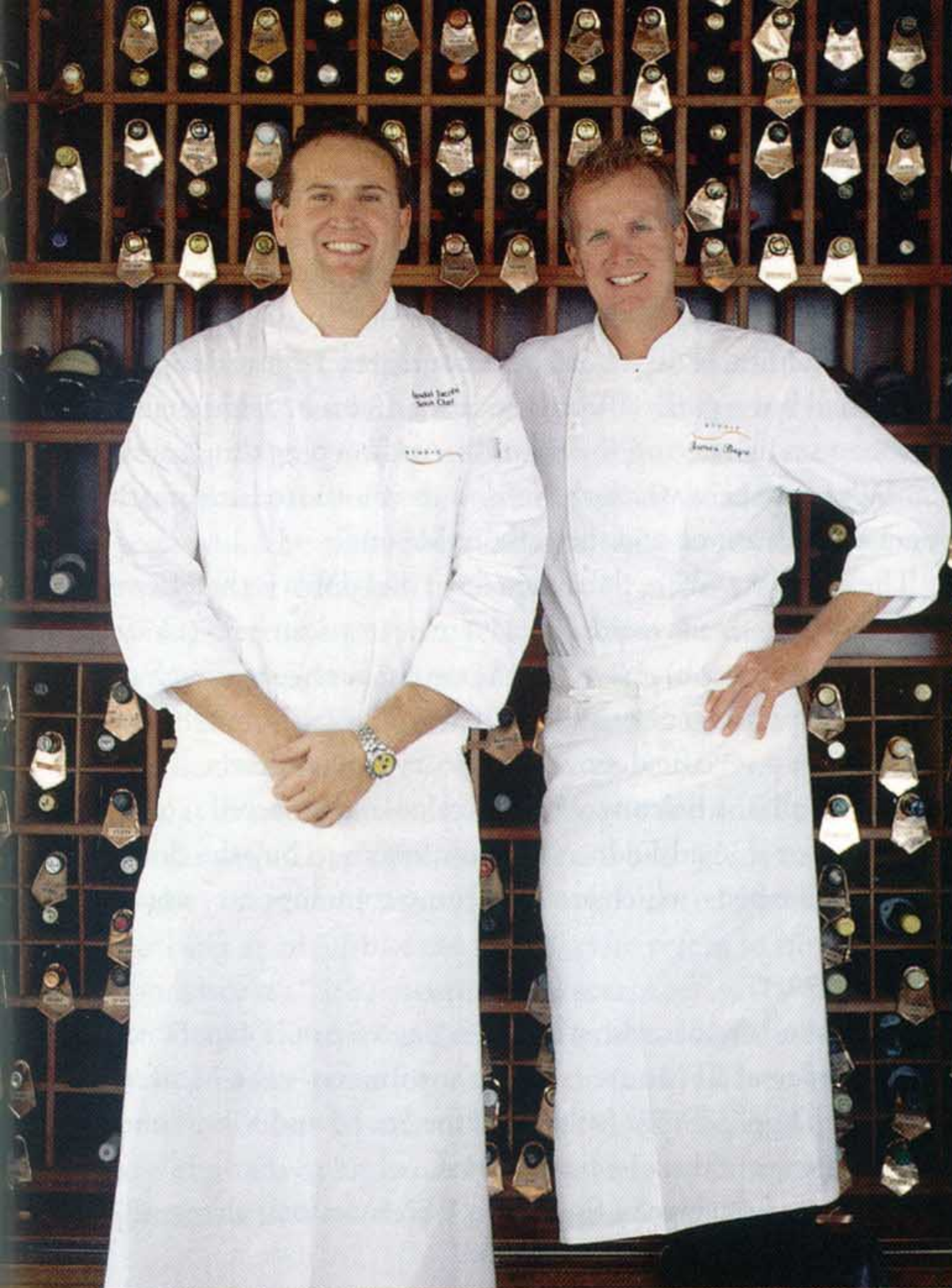
Website www.montagelagunabeach.com

can't see what I'm doing." And as she's headed up my inner thigh with a powerful massage jet, in effect flying blind close to a no-fly zone, I should probably have started some sort of evasive maneuver seconds ago. But I'm quite blasé because I have come to trust her. And, indeed, at the right moment she peels off, deftly rolls me 90 degrees, and starts in on my back. I'm almost liking this.

Some therapists are born, and Suzanne, who grew up in Laguna Beach, is one of them—and she has all the spiritual seeker's campaign ribbons to prove it. She learned massage at 18 in Hawaii from Auntie Margaret Machado, a revered teacher of lomilomi (and the first to share the technique with non-Hawaiians). Then she took up acupuncture in Santa Monica and practiced it in Hawaii for nine years, during which time she met the Dalai Lama—he actually came to her house. She lived in an ashram in Pune, India, for a year, surrounded by a cohort of therapists from Esalen, and she spent six months on horseback riding from New Mexico to Colorado. "John Wayne was my dad's best friend, and I've always had this thing about cowboys," she says by way of explanation. For 14 years she worked for the daughter of King Faisal, Princess Johara, who gave her a blank check to go anywhere in the world to study modalities, which allowed her to add chakra balancing, polarity therapy, and emotional release (among others) to her quiver. Somewhere along the way she managed to marry, have a son (now a glassblower), and get divorced. She's been doing bodywork for 29 years, and while she's sometimes given to oracular utterance ("the body opens and then the rest of it opens"), for the most part she's pretty levelheaded for someone who has been around all the blocks she has.

And she has good hands. Confident hands. Hands that speak a dozen massage languages and dialects. She works hard on my upper back, gives me a connective-tissue massage that feels like an eyebrow pluck—she calls it the pizza cutter. "I go into the fascia with two fingers to open them and make way for greater circulation"—this being the Grail quest of

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Surrender Terms

Continued from page 105



Montage's main pool.

Spa Montage, which is consistent with its classic hydrotherapy underpinning. She tells me my kidney and spleen need support, my system needs alkalization, and I should have cranio-sacral work to release attachments C1, C2, and C3. On my last day she gives me a hug and hands me a one-page handwritten to-do list for these concerns and a host of other things, and then she calls out of the blue six weeks later to see whether it's working for me—the first time that's ever happened.

AQUA FINALE

For my last morning I decide to take advantage of an off-menu special, Watsu, or water shiatsu. As the resort doesn't have a proper Watsu pool, it commandeers the men's or women's (depending on the client's gender) hydrotherapy pool for the purpose. (This is why the treatment has to be done when the spa opens at 6 a.m. or after it closes and why the spa requires 24 hours' notice.)

It's still dark at 6 a.m. when I meet massage therapist (and erstwhile movie

producer) Deneece Gabbard at the men's hydrotherapy pool. I feel like a mail-order groom because in a few minutes Deneece, to whom I've just introduced myself, will be lightly embracing me as she moves me around the pool in a "water breath dance" designed to induce deep relaxation.

We go over the threshold and into the 96-degree water—the temperature has been ramped up a bit for the treatment. She tells me to take deep breaths and then sink down to shoulder depth. And from there things get very soft focus and sometimes fade to black.

At times I'm being gently cradled; at times I'm space walking. At one point, with floats under my knees and around my neck, I'm sitting in the water as though it were a Barcalounger. There's a long sequence when my legs feel like crepe-paper streamers and another when Deneece is shimmying my spine. "You liked that," she tells me afterward.

There's a light in the pool area, and sometimes I track the experience by the duration of brightness on my eyelids—a Watsu day, as it were, although I feel happiest when she slides me back into dusk and night. I thought I was conscious the entire time, but in retrospect I can see that there are blanks on my tape. I must have really surrendered.