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THE FINICKY TRAVELER

Some Like It Musty

**Coronado Once Had Monroe,
 Now Needs a Makeover;
 The Shampoo Struggle**

By **LAURA LANDRO**
June 16, 2006; Page W5

From my whitewashed balcony at San Diego's venerable Hotel del Coronado, I've got a great view of the Pacific and rugged California coastline. But for a few modern elements -- like Navy Seals training for helicopter-rescue missions just offshore -- I imagine it looked much the same a century ago, when sophisticated travelers came from the East Coast to "The Grand Lady of the Sea."

Grand she still may be, but this lady's just a bit rickety these days. Getting on the balcony wasn't easy -- the latch on the screen door was hanging by a screw -- and getting back in again proved even harder, because the outside handle was missing altogether. The hotel may reek fin-de-siècle charm, but the rooms smell like they haven't been aired out since Marilyn Monroe, Jack Lemmon and Tony Curtis filmed "Some Like It Hot" here in 1958.



Joe Paschke


The classic San Diego resort Hotel del Coronado is undergoing a facelift.

Though it was a showcase for modern technology like electric light, phones and bathrooms with water pressure when it opened in 1888, the hotel is just starting to take a much-needed leap into the 21st century. It recently added Internet access, flat-panel TVs and an excellent new restaurant, but a \$10 million upgrade of guest rooms completed last year made the barest of cosmetic improvements, hardly justifying the \$735-a-night rate for a dark, dank suite with a postage-stamp-sized bathroom, sparse furnishings and slipshod maintenance. The good news: New owners KSL Resorts and Strategic Hotels &

Resorts are embarking on a major expansion, with a new luxury wing.

With peak summer season nigh, high-end oceanfront hotels on both coasts are upgrading their facilities or have recently added amenities. The Ritz-Carlton in Laguna Niguel, Calif., recently completed a \$40 million renovation including a new spa and fitness center, and the Breakers Hotel in Palm Beach, Fla., just spent \$15 million on two pools, a beachfront grill and 20 fancy private cabanas. Another historic Florida spot, the Boca Raton Hotel and Resort, is adding luxury bungalows near its golf course, after building a yacht-club wing and the posh Spa Palazzo.

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BEACH REFRESHMENT

As for the del Coronado, it's getting a "Beach Village" of

See a [sampling](#) of beach-view resorts that are revamping.

78 luxury rooms and suites with fireplaces, hot tubs and pool, along with a state-of-the-art spa with 22 treatment rooms and fitness center. The construction project, right next to some of the ocean-facing rooms in the old hotel,

is fairly noisy and unsightly -- and will go on for another year. But KSL and Strategic hope to bump "the Del" up to the oceanfront-luxury level of properties like the Montage Resort and Spa in Laguna Beach, Calif.

The Del has one big advantage: its spectacular beachfront location in Coronado, a peninsula with an island-village feel just over the high-arching bridge from the city of San Diego. The hotel has 381 rooms in the original site and 326 rooms in its mid-rise Tower and Cabana buildings, built in the 1970s. I stayed in one of those rooms on a first visit more than 20 years ago but had always wanted to stay in the red-shingled Victorian building, with its imposing cupola, turrets and gingerbread trim.

A Sea View... Finally

I arrived in the early afternoon to check in, and since the place was busy with a group from Intel, I found my own way to a first-floor junior suite off an inner courtyard. The musty smell hit me as soon as I walked in, and I found the suite dark and unappealing, with no windows in the bedroom. A seating area with a desk at the front of the room led out to a small porch just above an awning covering the noisy main restaurant. The bathroom was so small I could barely turn around in it.

I called the front desk, told hotel staff I wasn't terribly happy with the room or the smell, and asked for something lighter and airier on a higher floor. The very accommodating front-desk manager offered to move me to a one-bedroom suite on the third floor at the same rate (as usual, I don't disclose my Wall Street Journal affiliation). I waited about a half hour for a bellman who showed me to the new room. While it smelled equally musty, this one had a more appealing layout: The bedroom was at the front of the suite, with a picture window looking out to sea, and a marginally larger bathroom.

The living-room area was large but windowless and dimly lit and had a couch and a couple of chairs. Though the red-and-gold-toned furnishings and carpets were put in just last year, the carpet seemed worn and dirty. The hotel didn't provide slippers. Early guests may have found the water pressure revolutionary, but I found it so low I could barely get the shampoo out of my hair, and had to lie in the tub with my head under the spout to rinse it off.



Back When: A cross-dressing Jack Lemmon, Tony Curtis and Marilyn Monroe in the

A spokeswoman for the hotel says it is usually vigilant about fixing things like my screen door, and isn't aware of any water-pressure issues; without a major structural change, nothing can be done to enlarge the bathrooms, and the owners have no plans to do anything more to the main hotel for another three years. While the all-wood building's age may account for the mustiness, not everyone minds; the spokeswoman says guests often ask for rooms in the Victorian-era building year after year, "because they just love the feel of it -- even the smell."

I enjoyed wandering around the hotel, with its rich wood paneling in the lobby and historic photos. The hotel feels more like a convention and tourist spot these days than a luxury retreat with fine service, but it still has the charm of period detail such as the famous Crown Room, where Sunday brunch is served, with its arched ceilings and crown shaped

1959 film "Some Like It Hot,"
filmed at the Hotel del
Coronado.

chandeliers. The hotel's creaky main elevator, with the original operator-controlled gilded cage, had lots of charm but sometimes took so long to arrive that I just sprinted up the stairs. But the wide, worn-looking guest hallways felt a bit creepy when no one else was in them. I kept thinking of Kate Morgan, whose ghost has supposedly haunted the place since the young woman committed suicide at the hotel in 1892.

The pool proved nicely sized for lap swimming, and has private cabanas for rent, but a temporary tent with fitness equipment, which will be removed when the new fitness center opens early next year, obstructed part of the seating area.

Oceanfront settings added flair to the convivial Babcock & Story Bar, named for the founders, and the main restaurant, Sheerwater, but the not-terribly-appealing buffet -- the only breakfast option -- was a letdown. (The hotel says it can't provide menu service because of the crowds at breakfast.) An arcade has several shops and food stands, including a nice little bakery with coffee and muffins.

Sunset Dinner

My favorite experience at the hotel was sunset dinner at the new 1500 Ocean -- opened by Jason Shaeffer, a former sous-chef for Thomas Keller's Per Se in New York -- which delighted a business group I took there. Sitting on an outdoor terrace under heaters to ward off the evening cool, we enjoyed imaginative dishes like puree of artichoke soup, with chanterelles and a parmigiano foam, steamed Pacific halibut with wilted spinach, and California lamb porterhouse. There was a great comfort-food side dish, fusilli and aged cheddar mac-n-cheese, and some unusual but tasty desserts including a Medjool date-and-almond tart with orange-blossom honey and crème fraîche.

On my final morning, I strolled the long beachfront walkway that runs in both directions from the hotel, admiring the eclectic Coronado homes and waving at Navy Seals, who have a base nearby, as they ran by me on their morning workout. Then I went back to my room, called room service and had a nice breakfast on my terrace. I left the screen door open.

I also kept an eye on the Beach Village construction project. Next time, I'll enjoy the view from the new century.

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Beach Refreshment

Like San Diego's Hotel del Coronado, beachfront and beach-view resorts across the country are revamping. Here's a sampling, with rates for a standard room:

HOTEL / LOCATION / RATES	COMMENTS
The Breakers Palm Beach Palm Beach, Fla. \$259 through	Resort just spent \$15 million on development and is running its three-year-old off-season sale, with rates as much as 24% off. New day-use-only beach bungalows are as little as \$219, down from as much as \$795 in season.

September	
Hotel del Coronado San Diego \$335	Amid its beach-villa building project, the hotel is running some promotions, such as a \$295 "Del Zoo" package that includes two passes to the San Diego zoo and requires a two-night stay.
The Cloister Hotel at Sea Island Sea Island, Ga. \$725	It took \$200 million and three years to tear down the resort's 1928 main building and rebuild it 100 yards west, incorporating parts of the old structure, designed by Palm Beach architect Addison Mizner. That project ended in March; next, a big spa this fall and a new beach and pool area set for 2007.
The Kahala Hotel & Resort Oahu, Hawaii \$395	Guests have complained about old furnishings and the lone, relatively small pool. The hotel will start a \$25 million interior renovation this September. A spokeswoman says the resort plans to eventually improve the pool area.
The Ritz-Carlton, Laguna Niguel Dana Point, Calif. \$475	A \$40 million revamp, completed in November, added a spa, gym, salon and oceanview restaurant and overhauled all 393 guest rooms. After guests complained about too many summer weddings, the hotel is cutting back.
Ventana Inn & Spa Big Sur, Calif. \$400 through October	Adult-only retreat in northern California overlooks the Pacific Ocean 1,200 feet below. (Nearby woods supply ambiance and insects; the hotel provides spray.) A renovation of its spa and all 60 guest rooms ended last year.

-- Christina S.N. Lewis

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