

San Francisco Chronicle

NORTHERN CALIFORNIA'S LARGEST NEWSPAPER

Cass House Inn and Restaurant

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Thursday, March 12, 2009

Cass House Inn and Restaurant Cayucos, the self-described "last of the California beach towns," isn't an obvious home for a luxury inn. But it's at the hub of the Central Coast's most popular attractions, and a 14-year renovation has turned the 1875 home of the town's sea-captain founder, James Cass, into a real stunner. Its handsome decor, which varies from room to room, respects the house's origins and feels opulent without being claustrophobic. Also impressive: The managers are twin sisters (innkeeper-restaurateur, landscaper) and their significant others (executive chef, dining room manager-wine tour director) - and all have yet to see their 30th birthdays.

Comfort zone

Capt. Cass never had it this good. Our Ocean Terrace Room was toasty on a bitter night, the Anichini linens were silky, and the queen-size bed would send Goldilocks straight into the arms of Morpheus. The red-and-black theme recalled the Victorian obsession with all things Asian, though the light penetrating the attractive red and gold shades on the bedside lamps was only just adequate for reading. Didn't matter, because we also had an appealing nook with a chaise longue, floor-to-ceiling window and a suitably bright lamp. The terrace overlooks the main drag to the ocean. I anticipated some street noise, but nary a honk nor a shout penetrated my coma. Around Cayucos' popular and intermittently raucous Fourth of July, though, I'd opt for a room in back.

Bath and beyond

The well-lit bathroom's newly minted 19th century-style details - small hexagonal floor tiles, wainscoting, classic curvy fixtures - made a pleasing backdrop for Molton Brown bath products and waffle weave robes. The standard-size tile shower is angled in between two narrow alcoves, one for the pedestal sink and another for the toilet. Moving around required some choreography, and the arrangement doesn't allow much shelf space within reach of the sink.

Grounds for approval

Expansive gardens surround the house: in back, organic vegetables and herbs that you'll meet later in the complimentary full breakfast; wrapping from side to front, a more formal lawn - croquet, anyone? - festooned with cottage plantings and stone

walkways. The centerpiece is a Victorian-style gazebo. No spa, but in-room treatments are available. The inn's destination restaurant serves three- and four-course prix-fixe menus, changing daily depending on the season and the selection available from local farmers and foragers (closed Tuesday and Wednesday).

Geared up

For a luxury inn, the wide-screen flat-panel television, telephone and Wi-Fi are fairly standard; the retro, refreshingly basic alarm clock is less so.

In the vicinity

The public pier across the street is designed for serious fishing, and the calm waters are ideal for skin divers, swimmers, surfers and kayakers. Cayucos is fun to explore - borrow your room copy of "The Cass House and Cayucos" and follow the historical driving or walking tours. Hearst Castle is less than a half hour north and San Luis Obispo an equal distance south; Paso Robles' wine country is a quick jaunt over the hills.

Good to know

This is a couples kind of place, but a thoroughly delightful one-bedroom cottage at the edge of the property sleeps as many as four people. It was recently remodeled and has a roomy, well-equipped kitchen.

Highs and lows

Carving out bathrooms for every guest room while staying true to the original structure produced some disjointed layouts (all have showers, but only three have tubs). The bright and generally delightful Ocean Peek room has a divided bath with the lavatory in the bedroom. It's a small blip in one of the most stylish and intelligent historical restorations I've seen, and the young staff's passion for their endeavor infuses the whole place.

Vitals: 222 N. Ocean Ave., Cayucos (San Luis Obispo County). (805) 995-3669. www.casshouseinn.com. Five rooms (one wheelchair accessible), \$150- \$275 weeknights, \$200-\$325 weekends. Two-night minimum some weekends, three nights all holidays.

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