



STAY ALONG *the* Coast

As Crystal Cove Conservancy nears completion on its historic cottage renovations, Laguna Beach residents and visitors alike can book overnight stays to step back in time.

By ASHLEY RYAN

PHOTO COURTESY OF MIKE FENDERSON



Nestled along one of the most pristine stretches of coastline in Orange County, Crystal Cove State Park feels straight out of a dream. From the misty morning fog rolling in over the waves and tide pools teeming with sea life to blufftop views, back-country hiking trails and sunsets filled with vibrant color, the park has remarkably diverse landscapes just waiting to be explored.

In recent years, much of the appeal of this area has been the Crystal Cove Historic District, the 12-acre plot of land where vintage cottages sit. Built 80-plus years ago, this wear and tear from being near the saltwater has taken its toll and, over the last 20 years, the Crystal Cove Conservancy—initially called the Alliance to Rescue Crystal Cove—has overseen phases of renovations to restore the structures to their original glory.

“The interesting thing about the structure here at Crystal Cove is that ... we were the first nonprofit attached to California State Parks that was also awarded the concession contract,” says Kate Wheeler, president and CEO of Crystal Cove Conservancy. “So, we have the concession contract to operate the cottage rentals and the food service in the park. And the purpose of that was really twofold: One, so that we could always maintain the restoration of the historic buildings, but also to support conservation and education programs in the park.”

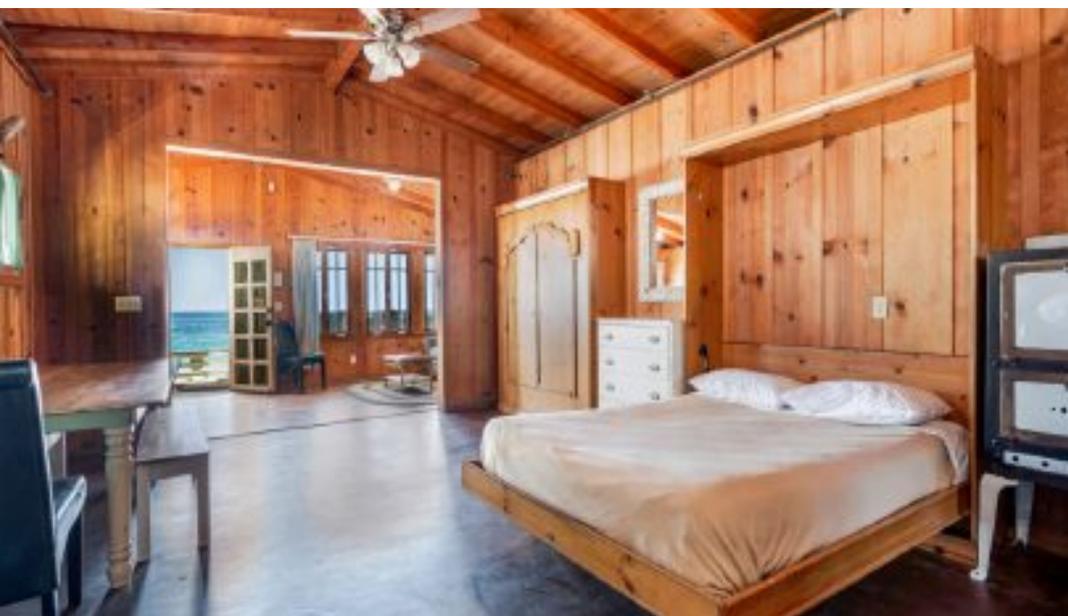
Now, as the restoration nears completion, you can book a stay in the cottages to wake up to the sound of the crashing waves.

“So the aesthetic that we try to capture is exactly the aesthetic that these cottages had during that period.”





Kate Wheeler. Photo Courtesy of J. Christopher Launi



Photos Courtesy of Crystal Cove Conservancy

A Glimpse of the Past

Equal parts intimate and awe-inspiring, this area also has a storied history. Originally home to the Tongva and Acjachemen tribes, who occupied the region as long as 9,000 years ago, its modern heritage can be traced to the 1920s, when Pacific Coast Highway opened between Corona del Mar and Laguna Beach. Quickly becoming a beloved recreation spot for those visiting the coast—as well as a popular destination for Hollywood filmmakers looking to shoot on location—some of the regulars began constructing cottages along the beach, then owned by the Irvine Co.

Soon after, Japanese farmers started leasing land to build homes as well, planting fruits and vegetables in the hills above the cove to sell at roadside stands. By 1936, Crystal Cove was a thriving community with 47 cottages and a language school. But, after the U.S. became entangled in World War II in the '40s, the farmers were relocated to an internment camp and the military took over use of part of the land.

Finally, in 1979, the Irvine Co. sold the land to the State of California and the park was born. But the 1990s brought another challenge, as a luxury resort was planned.

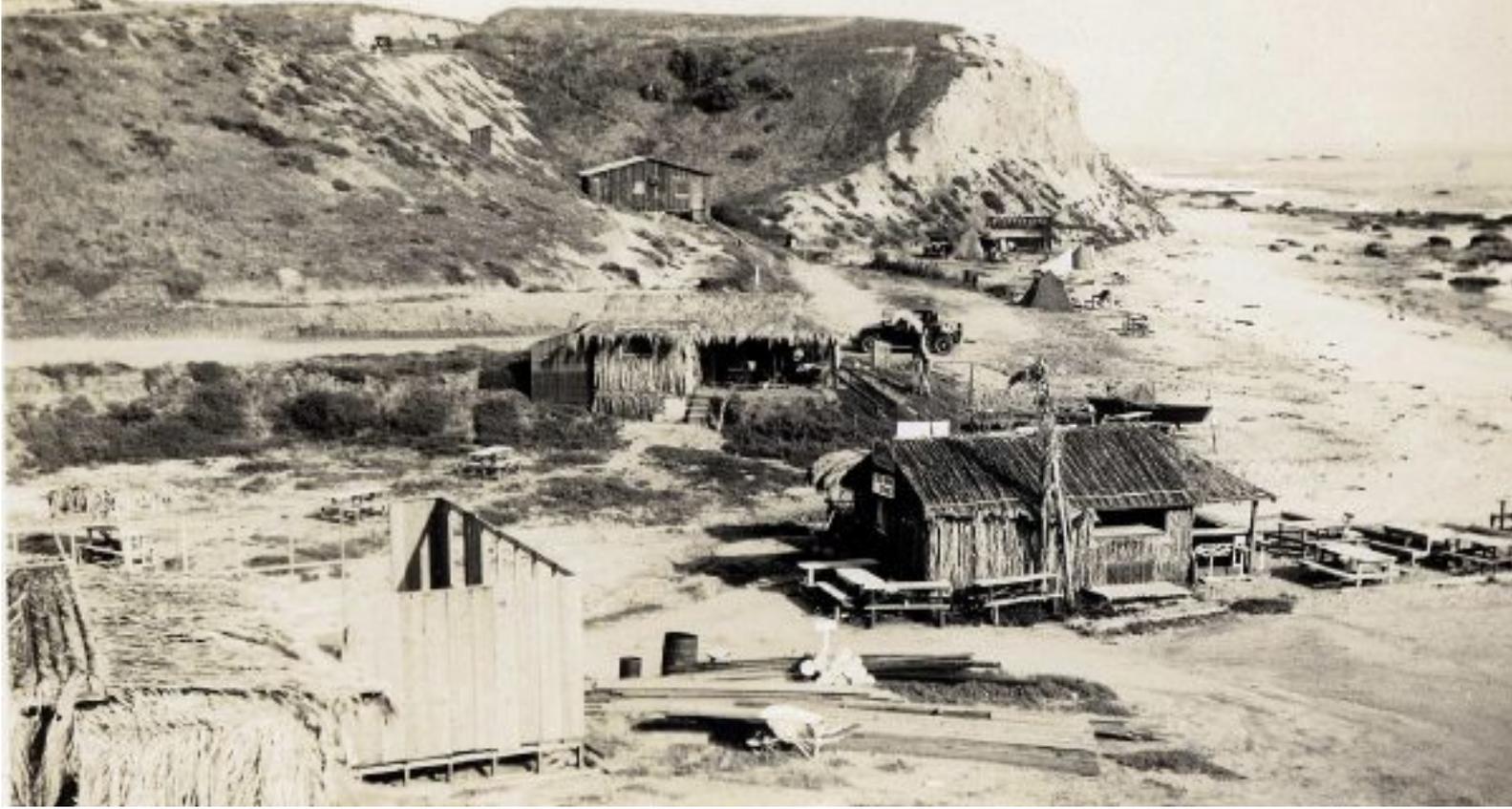
“The community did not think that was the right path,” Wheeler says, “so that’s when the conservancy was born.” This effort to preserve the pristine beauty of the coastline led the organization and many other supporters to band together to buy out the resort developers’ contract and save the historic district and, with an official public use plan in place, the renovation on the beach cottages officially started in 2003.

One-of-a-Kind Restorations

After only three years, the first phase was completed, with roughly half of the cottages open. This is also when The Beachcomber at Crystal Cove made its debut, serving up breakfast and California favorites right on the sand. The second phase, finished in 2012, saw the restoration of some additional cottages, including those used by the park to tell the story of the region’s history.

“We really had always had an eye on the last phase, which is on the North Beach,” Wheeler notes. “It’s the area furthest north in the park and the cottages in the North Beach [area] run right along the beach. And we knew that that was going to be the most challenging part of the restoration—and, frankly, the most expensive.”

A good portion of the cost stemmed from making sure that the cottages could stand up to sea level rise and that they wouldn’t be



negatively impacting the cove's natural surroundings by doing so, she explains. Obtaining the development permits from the California Coastal Commission took seven years, likely a challenge due to their dedication to protecting the coastal environment and access to it. "They really take that mission seriously and put us through our paces to ensure that the work that we were doing would benefit all Californians," she adds.

Once the permits were issued, work began on the final phase, with some cottages opening in late 2023 and four more unveiled in 2024. "The entire restoration of the historic district—that North Beach project—will be complete early next year," Wheeler says.

"I joined the conservancy as the CEO in 2019 and they ... were already underway on this North Beach project, but they did it in a way that was really unusual," she notes. "It was very much a leap of faith in the community and the state in that they started the project before they had all the funding secured, and it actually put us into a really good position to capture some state funding during COVID when there was a budget surplus and the state was looking for some shovel-ready projects to invest in around the state. So that really gave the project a boost and sort of a second tranche of funding, and then we were able to secure the last tranche of funding through historic tax credits with Bank of America as the investor." The investment made up \$10 million of the project's total \$80 million cost.



Photos Courtesy of Laura Davick Crystal Cove Archive Collection Crystal Cove Conservancy



Although they are in the midst of being refurbished, you won't find ultramodern design and decor in these quaint cottages. Instead, each stay will have you feeling like you've been sent back in time, as Crystal Cove's period of significance remains 1935 through 1962. "Our efforts are always aimed at restoring the cottages back to what they were during that period," Wheeler reveals. "Our work is to remove evidence of any other period and to really try to replicate that period. So the aesthetic that we try to capture is exactly the aesthetic that these cottages had during that period."

This is accomplished in a variety of ways, from looking back at old photographs to listening to oral histories from the builders or talking to State Park historians, she says. Each cottage is entirely different, though all draw on vernacular beach architecture as their base. "The buildings really reflect a sense of geography, a sense of place," Wheeler adds. "They [were] ... built with locally sourced materials—materials that are easy to find or on hand, and without things like architects or building codes or foundations. ... So each product is incredibly unique."

The furnishings, too, are well thought out. When decorating, they often seek out antique pieces that represent the period or enlist the help of former residents—some of whom still have original items from when they lived there, which help bring the past to life even more.

"If we know they're around, we try to bring them in first, before anybody else, and show them the restoration," Wheeler says. "And I can tell you that when they see it, some of that heartache of having to leave is relieved because they see the place that they built, that they loved, that they raised their families in."

The uniqueness of each cabin is part of what has made the project so interesting—and so fulfilling. "Going into any historic restoration, you just never know what you're going to find," she says, "and you have to leave space for uncovering [the] story and treasures."

Looking to the Future

As Crystal Cove Conservancy approaches the finish line of this decades-long project, there is even more to look forward to.

"The North Beach restoration ... is fully funded, so we are not seeking contributions for that project at this time, which is a really wonderful position to be," Wheeler said. "It allows us to focus our fundraising on what's next for



Photos Courtesy of Crystal Cove Conservancy

us, which is really redoubling efforts around education and conservation.”

One of the cottages has been designed as a dormitory, used for engineering programs that welcome students overnight as well as low-cost, hostel-style stays when not hosting youth. Those in kindergarten through college can visit the park for field trips and science-based learning experiences.

Along with the standalone cottages and a few duplexes, the dorm-style rooms are offered on a six-month rolling basis through the state’s camping and accommodations website, Wheeler says. The variety of cottages allows space for anyone to find a place to enjoy Crystal Cove for a weekend or even longer. No matter which you opt for, the tranquil environment and scenic beauty surrounds and inspires at every turn.

“My office is on the second floor of one of the cottages and I keep my door open, and every now and then I’ll hear a ruckus outside and peek out and it’s a group of students heading to the tide pools or heading to the beach,” Wheeler notes. “One day, I just sort of dropped everything and followed them out there and it was a group of first graders who were participating in our Trouble With Trash program, which is an early engineering program. I followed them out to the tide pools. ... One of them turned around, and I said, ‘What do you think?’ And he said, ‘This is the best day of my life.’

“And you know, that’s what this experience is for almost everybody who visits, whether it is a cottage guest or a first grader exploring the tide pools, and some of them seeing the beach for the first time in their lives. ... It changes things for students. It did for me when I was ... a kid. I was really fortunate to experience some of those kinds of outdoor education programs. And even though I was always the slowest hiker and allergic to everything and didn’t have the right gear, as soon as I was on trail, it felt like mine—those parks that my school took me to—and they still do. ... That’s why I’m here, because I hope that we could give some of those kinds of experiences to students like me who just didn’t have that access outside of school. It’s really, really transformative.”

To book a cottage stay, go to reservcalifornia.com and, to learn more about Crystal Cove Conservancy and its educational programs, visit crystalcove.org.



Photos Courtesy of Crystal Cove Conservancy