

The 8 Day Challenge: Orange County - Irvine

Tuesday, 21 March 2017

The OC 8 Day Challenge started in Irvine, which I call "the Singapore of California;" it's clean, safe and has a large ExPat/Asian population.

It began life in 1878 when James Irvine acquired 110,000 acres (450 km²) of ranch land which stretched 23 miles (37km) from the Pacific Ocean to the Santa Ana River. His son, James Irvine, Jr, incorporated it into The Irvine Company (which owns Hotel Irvine) and shifted the ranch operations to field, olive and citrus crops. While the crops are long gone and it's considerably smaller at 66 miles² (170km²), Irvine is now 'one of the nation's largest planned urban communities.'

It's the perfect base for your OC vacation as the ocean is only 7 miles (11km) away and more than one-third of the entire City of Irvine is permanently preserved as parks, natural open space and trails. By all means, head out to the theme parks and beaches, then come back to the peace and quiet of Irvine with its wide streets and ample space.

Voted #20 of 50 "America's Best Small Cities" to live by Money Magazine, the FBI has rated it "America's Safest Big City over 100,000 population" **every year** since 2005.

I had a ball and highly encourage you to visit this unique part of California.

Experience

[Pedego Electric Bikes](#)



This is the first time I've been on a bike since the 'Stanley Park incident,' which we will never mention again. Thankfully, this was an entirely different experience.

As I finally arrived at [Pedego Bikes Irvine](#) inside the Woodbridge Shopping Centre (my GPS thought it was further down the road) I was met by the owner, Bob Bibee - electric bike evangelist and all-round good guy - who was to give me a personal tour of the many miles of bike trails around Irvine.

Pedego bikes are no ordinary bikes, they are battery assisted. This means you can get help climbing those hill and I did, time and time again, I'm not ashamed to admit. The most surprising thing was not that I used the assist but that Irvine has the most amazing area of - mostly unknown - bike trails.

Alas, not everything went smoothly. I decided to get off the bike and take the picture above right and in doing so, I dismounted and kept hold of the bike with my right hand...where the throttle is. Yep, I was revving the engine and making the bike do a wheelie all the while aware something was going wrong but not that I was causing it. Bob came to my rescue, removed my hand and the bike took a header in the arroyo. If he hadn't jumped in I would have done the same! I was assured that I wasn't the first to do this and I'm going to believe it. Aside from that little misadventure, it was loads of fun and good for you, too. Not often you can say that!

[ChocXO Chocolatiers](#)



If you have ever wondered how chocolate is created, then come straight here and learn everything you ever wanted to know. For instance did you know that the pulp that surrounds the beans inside the pod is delicious? Or that it is used to ferment the bean?

The chocolatier who gave our tour was positively evangelical about the process of 'bean to bar.' They work with small independent farmers in South America, following every step of the process for quality control, yes, but also so that they know what to do with the different beans as they arrive. You get to taste every step of the process, some bitter some sweet, and leave with a greater sense of what really goes into those chocolate bars - and four pieces of the gorgeous finished product (see above). A sweet deal all around!

Consume

EATS Kitchen & Bar



Located in the lobby of the Hotel Irvine, this lovely restaurant boasts outdoor seating, seasonally fresh menus and budget friendly prices. The service is welcoming, quick and a little spooky...I was very surprised when the waiter mentioned my allergy when

suggesting items. The pizza and salad were delicious and the apple crisp was divine!

I was too busy to avail myself of the Happy Hour, but I looked in on the way out one evening and it looked like lots of fun.

Urban Seoul



Nowhere is the 'Singapore of California' highlighted more than at the [Diamond Jamboree](#) shopping centre billed as 'Orange County's International Dining Destination' which it seriously is.

[Urban Seoul](#) "celebrates a passion for food and its remarkable ability to adapt." The menu is a SoCal take on traditional Korean bibimbap with a nod to Spanish tapas or small plates. The dish I chose (above) exemplified this: Chorizo Kimchi Fried Rice. (So filling, I didn't finish it and it tasted even better the next day.)

85°C Bakery Café



This Pan-Asian bakery has some delectable surprises for the more European/American run of the mill palette. Located within the Diamond Jamboree centre there is a set process. You grab a tray, a pair of tongs and go crazy, as the prices are budget friendly. They total you up at the end and then you can order drinks. They're famous for their Ice Sea Salt Caramel Coffee and deservedly so. I loved the sweet breads, so soft and delicious...mmm.

Rest

Embassy Suites by Hilton Irvine Orange County Airport



This comfortable hotel is perfectly located for those flying into John Wayne Airport or even LAX. Located on Main Street in Irvine, they offer onsite parking, a comprehensive breakfast and happy hour every night. The full-height interior atrium with mature trees and lots of light makes for a guest filled lobby day and night. There's also a Starbucks in the lobby.

The rooms are large and comfortable and the stylish bathroom has a walk-in shower. My room had a fridge, microwave and Keurig beverage machine. To make my stay truly comfortable management kindly provided me with an electric kettle so that I could make tea, which is vital to my survival. Anyone from Australia or England, knows what I'm talking about.

Hotel Irvine



The people behind this super stylish hotel really have thought of everything. As soon as you arrive you'll be immediately intrigued by the busy public space. Here you'll find [Red Bar+Lounge](#) which is a day to night hang out place. Next door is the [Marketplace](#) where you can get all the goodies you want to fill the fridge (not minibar) in your room. From freshly made hot food, customisable salads (bring your chosen green mix to the chef and they'll add the protein of your choice), to healthy yoghurts and sneaky treats. As the website states, "It's one part farmer's market, one part gift shop and 100% inviting." Next door again is [EATS Kitchen & Bar](#) (mentioned above) which is the all-day restaurant.

The amenities continue outside where you can choose from a swimming pool, basketball court, bike rental or the outdoor picnic area with family games lawn where they show movies in the summer.

Now it's time to get to your room - all 536 of which have recently been updated and upgraded. If you're smart, you'll book access to the [Club 12 Lounge](#) floors where valet parking, check-in and out, breakfast and happy hour are included. My spacious room on the 12th floor came with a balcony and a bed so good, I hated to leave it.

Recuperate

[iSpa \(Irvine Spa\)](#)



This Korean spa is an experience for the first-timer. Called a jjimjilbang, it's a large, gender-segregated public bathhouse with hot tubs, showers, saunas and massage tables. You are instructed to arrive 30 minutes before your appointment time to get suitably stripped and clean.

There should be a sign above the door saying "Abandon all modesty ye who enter here!" They want you good and naked and, after about 5 minutes of holding the clearly inadequate towel, I got with the program.

First you must shower off all foreign substances, then plunge into the hot tubs, spend time in the mist sauna, cool off in the 'yank and douse' cold shower - which immediately brought the scene from Flashdance to mind when she pulls the lever on stage and gets soaked - then move into the dry sauna. Then you have to dry off completely with the postcard-sized towels. Seriously, they're not even long enough to wrap around your head.

Now for the main show. I was here for a scrub and what a scrub it was. It was not unlike being a cadaver on the autopsy table. You just have to play dead as they manipulate you and scrub in hard to reach places. I just lay back and thought of Theo James.

Funnily enough I experienced absolutely no embarrassment as these ladies are all business all the time. They have seen every body type from here to Sunday and none of us were special to them. The reward for all of this violence were the buckets of perfectly warm water that are thrown at you periodically. Of course, once this happens, you then become a freshly landed fish trying not to slide off the plastic covered table as they continue to contort you this way and that getting to everything as yet unscrubbed.

After the scrub is finished they wash you all over with liquid soap - with more slipping and sliding ensuing as you roll over - then wash your hair rather vigorously. I walked out of there feeling a little shell-shocked but I'm sure I probably glow from all the increased blood flow, well, everywhere.

NB: Entry to the main area with saunas & hot-tubs is an extra fee for shorter bookings, as mine was, however, if you get a scrub and massage combo, for example, the entry is included in the price.

The Packed Bag was a guest of Destination Irvine.

