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Pendant lights and dark beams say Spanish colonial more than they do. Trader Vics, but witty additions such as driftwood horse sculptures, a corner full of kids' games and the colors of sun and surf keep the mood light.

DESIGN & REALTY
design

KING of CLUBS

After a posh renovation and expansion, the legendary Kona Kai Resort & Spa embarks on a second golden era.

By Casey Hatfield-Chiotti

In the 1950s and '60s, the Polynesian-inspired Kona Kai Club was the toast of San Diego, a place where legendary figures from John F. Kennedy to Dick Van Dyke to Princess Margaret would come to hobnob. Located at the tip of Shelter Island, a man-made peninsula created to protect boats from high waves and storms, the private club and hotel (guestrooms were added in the late '50s) drew celebrities wishing to relax in utter seclusion. Its deep channel marina attracted the superyachts of such stars as Clark Gable, Jack Lemmon and Gregory Peck. The resort changed hands a half-dozen times in 50 years, and by the early 2000s, it had fallen off of many San Diegans' radars.

Seattle-based Noble House Hotels & Resorts added the property to its collection in 2012 and has been methodically restoring

its former luster. In 2015, it unveiled refreshed guest rooms, a luxury spa and the renovated waterfront restaurant Vessel, which serves elegant fare such as porcini-dusted sea bass and heirloom apple salad. An entryway softened with tropical gardens and draping bougainvillea debuted last year and 41 new suites have been added in 2018. "We are breathing life into an icon and giving the city a legendary hotel with a fresh, contemporary perspective," says Scott Colee, creative director for Noble House.

After WWII, soldiers and sailors returning from the South Pacific brought photographs and souvenirs from the islands that captured the imagination of the general public. It was at the peak of Tiki popularity that Shelter Island was developed; along with many of its neighbors, Kona Kai's Polynesian flavor contributes to the distinct character of the peninsula.



Clockwise from top left: The pool and Tiki bar at Kona Kai overlook its private beach and the marina; Kona Kai's SpaTerre brings together Fijian, Indonesian and Thai rituals in a space whose sleek walls are offset by beachy accents; Vessel Restaurant's lit-from-within onyx bartop and 360-degree bar with video wall are high-tech updates to a room that's served guests for a half-century; the private beach.

« *“We want to be known as the living room of the community... We pulled the best from the area with nods to surf culture and lifestyle.”*

—SCOTT COLEE >>

The Colee-designed lobby is complete with large lantern chandeliers, driftwood accents and digital nautical displays, and guests can still see photographs of its early days around the hotel. “We want to be known as the living room of the community, and welcome guests with a design that is residential and elegant,” Colee says. Eight new suites feature Coastal Revival-inspired decor with Spanish-patterned wall tiles, rustic wood-beamed ceilings, and indoor-outdoor fireplaces with colored LED lights. Thirty-three additional suites, open since March, include private balconies, custom-made sofas, ombre feature walls and teak patio furniture, as well as oversize Kohler bathtubs with views of the marina or the bay.

“We pulled the best from the area with nods to surf culture and lifestyle,” says Colee. But this is not to say that Kona Kai’s Tiki heritage has been erased. Colee points to a fire water feature that adds drama to the resort’s entryway and a poolside Tiki bar. Kona Kai still offers club membership (\$2,500 plus monthly dues) that includes access to poolside cabanas, a health club with state-of-the-art

equipment and the only beach in San Diego where alcohol can be served.

Since acquiring Kona Kai, Noble House has endeavored to make it more luxurious for members and overnight guests. In 2016, it became one of only two resorts in Southern California to offer treatments on a \$250,000 sand quartz bed. Spa guests lie directly on warmed sand and enjoy a relaxing massage with cloth-covered stones. Beneath the fronds of a royal king palm tree planted in the '50s, a new outdoor event space can accommodate lavish parties and weddings.

The exclamation point to Kona Kai’s renovation and expansion is the Paloma Pool and Bar, which opens this month. Landscaped with tropical gardens and water fountains, and featuring a fireside lounge and bar with natural rope swings where guests can sip the resort’s signature Paloma cocktail and top-shelf tequila, it’s an adults-only hideaway that will marry Kona Kai’s alluring past with its modern present. *Rooms from \$175, 1551 Shelter Island Drive, San Diego, 619.221.8000, resortkonakai.com* ■