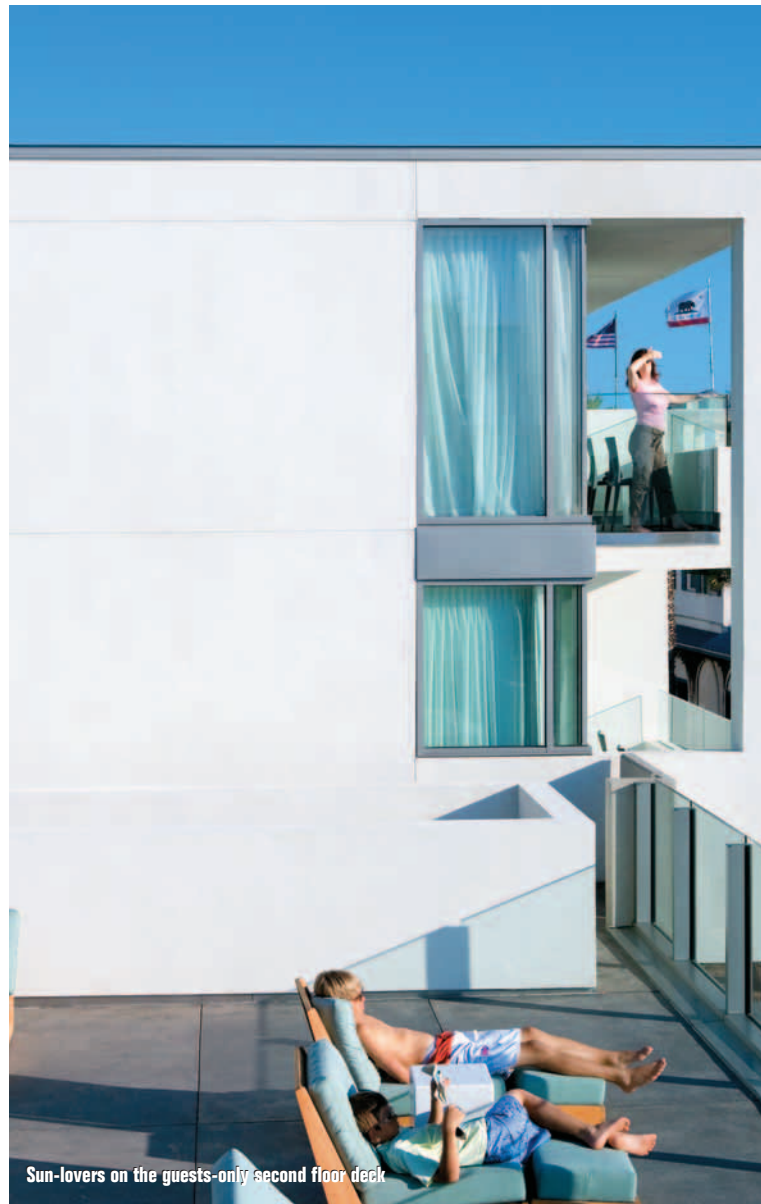




Brett Miller in "The Gallery" just off the elevator landing



Sun-lovers on the guests-only second floor deck

BEACH BOUTIQUE

TOWER23 IN PACIFIC BEACH OFFERS A STYLISHLY CHIC HOTEL ON THE SAND. FINALLY!

BY KEDRIC FRANCIS PHOTOGRAPHY BY GARY PAYNE

It's the question we've always dreaded when hip, successful friends visit from cities like New York, San Francisco or Sydney. "Can you recommend someplace cool to stay on the beach?" We know what they want—an architecturally significant, highly stylized and luxurious boutique hotel like those that pepper every cosmopolitan city. "No," we've been embarrassed to answer. "We can't do cool." Not on the beach, at least, not along the coast in San Diego, Orange County or L.A. Not in all of California, unless we count the Post Ranch Inn in Big Sur—and it's on a cliff, not the shore. We try to steer them to our favorite surf-side historic hotels, luxurious resorts, funky motels or ubiquitous chains, rather than admit that as far as modern and unique boutique hotels on the water in California go, there is no "there" here.

Enter Tower23, which opened in July and instantly became *the* destination hotel on the West Coast for those who like their hospitality on the high side of hip. The small hotel (only 44 rooms and suites) makes a big statement on the boardwalk just north of the funky Crystal Pier. The clean lines of the deceptively simple design give the hotel definite curbside appeal—boardwalk, beach and pier-side appeal, too. At night the place acts as a beacon, its glowing lightbox design drawing the curious from the surrounding streets, while during the day boardwalk promenaders stop in their tracks and stare, as if gazing at a beach beauty of a different sort.

"We're trying to bring something to Pacific Beach that no one's ever seen before," says Brett Miller, the hotel's developer and



co-owner with Vern and Mary Taylor. Miller teamed up with veteran hotelier Robert Watson to form Bond Urban Habitat to manage the hotel. Watson, now president of Bond, was previously an executive with W Hotels and the Kimpton Group, both pioneers in the world of highly stylized hospitality venues.

Tower23 is all about location. Unlike some hotels that sit grandly atop SoCal bluffs seemingly indifferent to their seaside digs, Tower23 is all about the beach. San Diego architect Graham Downes' confident design takes full measure of this quintessential California coastline location, while resolving severe legal design restrictions, especially a 30-foot height limit on all coastal buildings. The result is a design ambitious in its lack of scale, creating a simple beauty that at first suggests a minimalistic civic building—a library, perhaps—giving the new structure a sense of permanence and importance. "I give Graham a lot of props," Miller says. "He did great things with what limited space we have. Everything he did on paper looks better in person."

Named after a nearby lifeguard tower, the hotel reflects its beachfront locale with subtle design choices rather than kitschy or too clever references. From the beach and boardwalk, the mass of the hotel gives the impression of floating above the glass-enclosed restaurant (called Jordan—as in number 23—get it?) on the first floor, where diners and drinkers enjoy stunning views of the sand, surf and sea beyond, while those outside can see directly into the restaurant. The open indoor-outdoor design, with its generous use of glass, is beautiful and utilitarian (what's an oceanfront restaurant without white water views?), while also reflecting the nearby Crystal Pier with its rambling vacation cottages set above the waves on the pier's spindly-looking, uneven columns.

In the bar, there's a low wall of Plexiglas and teak (all tropical woods are reclaimed or farmed), with the clear acrylic sanded to white, recalling beach glass worn smooth and opaque by the sea and sand. There are no portholes, bells or puffer fish hanging from netting here. The nautical touches are light and thankfully lacking the overly themed approach some boutique hotels insist upon.

Between the lobby and the restaurant there's a small incline. The walk up is over slats of teak set perhaps an 1/8th of an inch apart with a glimpse of blue below, a subtle allusion to walking on a pier or perhaps up a

gangplank onto a ship. "We just provide a little bit of the palette and let people's imagination fill in the spaces," says architect Downes, a colorful expat from South Africa. "We're trying to move somebody's marbles, create a little stirring in the soul."

The overall structure is intriguing in its scale and connectivity. The floor plan references and repeats the natural north-south coastal delineations that we often fail to notice—the boundaries and borders formed by the surf, the sand, and the boardwalk are continued with the edges of the property line, the patio, the restaurant, the kitchen, parking garage, the alley and onto the streets of Pacific Beach beyond. "When you have a small space, the way to



make it seem as big as possible is to break it up as little as possible," Downes says.

Tower23 is a harbinger of inevitable change coming to Pacific Beach, where properties used as rentals over the past decades have appreciated and are selling to owner occupants who insist on more luxurious amenities. For those worried that Tower23 is the narrow wedge of a broader gentrification that will ruin PB, Downes reminds us of similar SoCal beach towns: "Think of Venice beach, where there's some really good architecture, but it still has a delightfully seedy nature," he says. It's a delicate dance to maintain the character of a beach town known for its energetic nightlife as the neighborhood evolves. "I wouldn't like to see over-gentrification," says Miller. "You'll break down the character of the place." He believes his hotel will draw affluent and sophisticated travelers, as well as Southern Californians who may have once partied in PB. "They'll remember why they loved it here, but Tower23 is more about who they are now." **R**

Above: One of 44 rooms with partial or full ocean views, and Tower23's patio viewed from the boardwalk.

Tower23, 4551 Ocean Blvd., Pacific Beach, 866.869.3723. Rates from \$269 to \$1,100.