

## HOTEL REVIEW

### San Diego's Sè hotel puts a premium on luxury



**With its spa, welcoming cocktail and 'experience consultant,' the new hotel aims to up the ante on contemporary design and comfort.**

By Beverly Beyette  
Reporting from San Diego  
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It may have been Valentine's Day, but it was definitely not love at first sight when I checked into Sè San Diego. The recently opened hotel couldn't find my reservation; then I was told the restaurant was fully booked for dinner.

The room reservation was straightened out as I relaxed in the lobby and was offered the house welcome cocktail: Champagne and vodka with essences of rosemary and cucumber. Although I declined the vodka, I felt much happier after Liz, my "Sè experience consultant," took me to my room.

I had booked at an unveiling rate of \$299 a night. The double-bedded room was stylish, with a high ceiling and a wall of windows, flat-screen TV, iHome for an iPod, Wi-Fi, two phones, a mini-bar and a safe.

High-tech doesn't trump comfort. There were pillow-top mattresses, custom linens, silky robes and limestone baths with the Zen-like touch of pebble borders in the oversized stall showers. There were suites with balconies and knockout views.

My room, on the front, faced an ugly multistory parking garage. But the 450-square-foot room was well designed with a comfortable corner chair and reading light and combination desk/bureau. The floors were dark Brazilian walnut. The duvets were white, and the built-in headboards were soft blue-gray Ultrasuede. Although the House of Blues is next door, double-paned windows blocked out noise.

Not everything was perfect. The safe was set so low in a poorly illuminated corner that only a contortionist with a flashlight could deal with it. Unable to make the pod-style coffee maker work, I called for help. The front-desk clerk hadn't a clue, but said he'd send coffee. It arrived promptly, on a tray with an orchid -- no charge. You also get 24-hour room service and very slow valet parking at a hefty \$36 a day.

The Sè, which was the Setai San Diego until a deal with the Setai Group went awry, changed its name five days before opening on Dec. 27. It's on a site known to generations of San Diegans as J. Jessop & Sons Jewelers, in the financial district at the gateway to the touristy Gaslamp Quarter.

Part of the old façade is intact, but the building is now 20 stories of glass and steel. This is a hotel that announces itself. Guests enter through a double-wide, 1,000-pound pivoting bronze door that, surprisingly, can be opened with the slightest touch.

Look to the right in the lobby and there's a see-through fireplace with the bar/lounge beyond. Look up through the two-story opening and there's the mezzanine restaurant, Suite & Tender. A chandelier of many pleated-silk-covered lanterns moves slightly, like an Alexander Calder mobile. Look straight ahead and there's a deep red wall, a jolt of color among earth tones. A floating staircase leads to the restaurant.

The idea, said the hotel's designer, Ed Bakos of New York's Rockwell Group, was to create "a sense of discovery" in a small space. "We didn't have grandness, so we tried to orchestrate a sense of luxury through refinement and celebration of crafted detail," he said.

The unisex bathroom off the restaurant, said to have cost a cool half-million, is at best a conversation piece, at worst a folly, but worth a peek.

The hotel's basic earth-toned color palette is punched up with accents of jade, blue and red. Texture abounds. Wall treatments include paper, wood blocks, bronze-toned tiles, woven leather and, backing the staircase, a ceramic art installation. The bar and reception desks are covered in baby stingray skin (farmed, I was assured).

At dinnertime, still unable to get a reservation, I was in the lobby nursing a drink and my feelings when an apologetic hotel manager appeared and offered me dinner in a private room. That sounded dreary, but it certainly was a winning gesture. Eventually I was escorted to the lounge and, ordering from the restaurant menu, had a delicious rare rack of lamb and frisée/endive salad. The restaurant, which I saw the next day, was designed by L.A.'s Dodd Mitchell and is a sophisticated take on a steakhouse. The intimate 120-seat space features dark brown leather chairs and banquettes. Mains are \$23 to \$46.

Sè makes much ado about its spa, so I booked the Jade Facial (one hour, \$125 plus tip). On arrival, I was offered an "elixir of life," a pomegranate-based drink, with or without vodka. Janel, my facialist, took me to one of the nine treatment rooms, which are large with private steam showers. Four also have toilets. What a great idea -- your own treatment suite, no locker room hassle. I was pampered with fragrant masks and a facial massage with hand-held jade rollers (like those Chinese empresses used as wrinkle reducers).

Spa designer Sharilyn Olson Rigdon of designstudio ltd in Portland, Ore., calls the ambience "modern Moroccan," with handcrafted tiles, beautiful woods and burnt-orange accents. Spa treatments reflect Asian and Middle Eastern influences. There's an herbal steam room with mud cleansing rituals and stone massages. A couples suite has an infinity-edge soaking tub. Organic spa dining is available.

Rigdon also designed the Grand Penthouse, a tri-level, 5,000-square-foot aerie with roof terrace and forever views available at \$25,000 a night. Guests may also book two smaller penthouses or one of the 20 Euro-sleek one-bedroom condos.

The rooftop pool with underwater surround sound is to open March 27. This inviting area has eight curtained cabanas, lounge seating, a bar that will serve light food and a private event room. There will be live entertainment Thursdays through Saturdays -- top secret, but I did hear the words "geisha mermaids."

[travel@latimes.com](mailto:travel@latimes.com)">[travel@latimes.com](mailto:travel@latimes.com)