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In a valley setting, Ojai casts a spell

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GEORGE MEDOVOY, SPECIAL TO THE PRESS DISPATCH

OJAI • You'd never know it driving down the 101 along California's coastline, but about 90 minutes north of Los Angeles on the way to Santa Barbara, there's an exit leading to an enchanting Shangri-La.

It's the Ojai valley.

Merge onto Highway 33 and you're soon in the same breathtaking valley the director Frank Capra discovered for "Lost Horizon," his 1937 film starring Ronald Colman and Jane Wyatt.

Long before the movies, the first people to be touched by the valley's sublime beauty were perhaps the Chumash Indians.

And they must have been moved, as we are today, by the valley's "Pink Moment" at sunset, when the light kisses the Topa Topa mountain range, itself a strange quirk of nature because of its east-west orientation.

"If you're into all that," one Ojai native told me, "it's supposed to make it a sort of a spiritual vortex."

Over the years, the valley has attracted newcomers of every sort, searching for that special "something."

In the 19th century it was easterners drawn by Ojai's mineral-laden hot springs as a "miracle cure" for lung ailments, and in the 1920's, Indian philosopher Krishnamurti established a home in the valley's East End, now the Krishnamurti Library and Visitor Center.

Theosophists came, too, establishing a hilltop library with volumes of Eastern and Western thought known today as the Krotana Institute of Theosophy — Krotana Library.

At Meditation Mount, a 32-acre site overlooking the valley, locals hold monthly full-moon meditations, which executive director Roger Collis terms "spiritual activism," focusing on nondenominational prayer and contemplation "to build a more compassionate, just and peaceful world."

It's enough to transport you to spiritual realms, so when we checked into the Emerald Iguana, an adults-only boutique hotel of suites and cottages with whimsical touches reminiscent of the Catalan architect Antoni Gaudi, we found a "Garden of Eden" filled with orange Cana Lilies and Birds of Paradise that seemed ideally suited to the Ojai mystique.

Set in a quiet neighborhood dotted with 1920's-era cottages under giant oaks, the hotel seemed just what the doctor ordered to rejuvenate our souls — a fact that became clearer to me when I noticed a couple by the pool sharing a bubbly together.

The Emerald Iguana is the brainchild of Marc and Julia Whitman, an iconoclastic husband-and-wife team, who fit right into the scheme of things here.

Marc is an architect drawn to Gaudi's work, while Julia, who manages the hotel, is a self-taught interior designer and landscaper.



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ART: Marc Whitman's broken-tile iguana adorns the front of the Emerald Iguana boutique hotel in Ojai.

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Beyond iconic curved arches, the most pronounced Gaudi touch at the Emerald Iguana is Marc's playful water fountain, a broken-tile iguana, which transported me back to Gaudi's broken-tile salamander I first saw in Barcelona's Parc Guell.

For Marc, the important thing is to integrate buildings with nature, to make them "part of nature and not separated" — like arches designed to mimic the shapes of tree branches, and so on.

No two cottages at the hotel are alike: Julia has given each of them their own "personality," including playful names. Ours, a two-story suite named "Cricket," was a mix of homey and chic, with antiques and hardwood furniture Julia shipped home in three containers from Indonesia.

Before a patio dinner at the town's Osteria Monte Grappa, we walked to Bart's Books, the most unconventional used bookstore I've ever seen, where books are for sale on the street on the quiet corner of Matilija and Canada Streets.

Before Bart's, there was a 1940's one-bedroom honeymoon cottage on the site, but when Richard Bartinsdale — Bart — bought the place, his collection of books got so out of hand that he offered them for sale on street-side shelves.

Books are still sold on the street, with a can to put your money in after hours on the honor system.

There's also an inner courtyard divided into different subjects, including travel, where Charles Kuralt's "A Life on the Road" really dated me, as did the old-fashioned stick candy for sale at 10 cents a piece on the counter.

And what of the original honeymoon cottage? It's covered from floor to ceiling with books.

The next day, after a generous continental breakfast around the Emerald Iguana's intimate pool, we browsed through the boutique shops in the Arcade, Ojai's Mission Revival shopping area inspired by the Ohio glass magnate and philanthropist Edward Drummond Libbey, who fell in love with Ojai.

(Incidentally, you won't find any chain stores or fast-food companies within city limits).

At Kindred Spirit, we looked at jewelry items, and we found illustrated Moroccan cook books at KAVA.

Meanwhile, down the street at the Ojai Village Pharmacy, Fred T. Leivo told of plans to recast his store back to its 1891 look, sharing a photo of the original.

A special highlight was meeting David Mason, "Mr. Ojai," who has owned Village Florist for 46 years.

Mason waxed nostalgic about the movie stars he knew here, attested to by signed photographs on the walls of his shop.

One memorable photo depicts Mason at dinner onboard a ship headed for France with a number of celebrities, including June Allison and Maxine Andrews, one of the Andrews Sisters, whose work entertaining troops during World War II was being honored at a D-Day ceremony.

"When I was a kid," Mason said, "Anthony Quinn lived here, Loretta Young and that group. They were just people in town. We got excited to see them on the screen, (but) we didn't get excited to see them on the street."

Mason recalled first seeing Rita Hayworth at the Ojai Valley Inn and Spa, where he bellhopped on weekends as a teen-ager.

"She had on white shorts, a white shirt and no make-up," he said, "and her hair was just stuck to her face from sweat."

Mason was "just so disappointed" that it wasn't the same Rita Hayworth he knew from the movie "Cover Girl."

But a redeemable moment was at hand, when Hayworth, now wearing a long, white chiffon gown and a full-length mink coat, "her hair done up in big red curls," stood under a spotlight at the reservation desk, taking it all in "for all it was worth."

"Everybody couldn't take their eyes off her," Mason remembered, "she was just absolutely so magnificent."

From the Arcade we took a pleasant afternoon drive out of town past glorious orange groves for some olive oil tasting at Ojai Olive Oil, owned by Ron and Alice Asquith on property originally planted with olive trees in 1880.

Ron, who once worked for Occidental Petroleum, has a Ph.D. in psychology, "which," he joked, "you can see is directly related to the production of extra virgin olive oil."

The Asquith's produce a variety of extra virgin olive oils, including those flavored with lemon, mandarin, garlic and rosemary.

Back in town, the air was delightfully balmy — perfect for an evening stroll to Libbey Park to join folks stretched out on the grass or sitting in folding chairs, listening to music coming from the bandstand.

Soon parents and their children were marching to the sounds, holding colorful balloons in the air. It was a rare Norman Rockwell moment in a valley town so cut off from the rest of the world and its troubles.

Then, as if to mark the end of another perfect day in "Shangri-La," came the strains of "You're a Grand Old Flag," with the crowd singing "Ojai, oh, Ojai...we love you, Ojai, oh yes we do."

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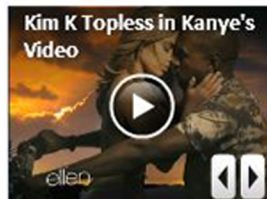
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