



## In a Valley Setting, The Town of Ojai, California Casts an Enchanting Spell

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**By George Medovoy, Editor**

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 place called the Ojai valley.

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





(Poolside at the Emerald Iguana boutique hotel in Ojai -- a taste of dreamy Ojai)

Over the years, man have been touched by the valley's sublime beauty. The first, perhaps, were the Chumash Indians.

In the 1920's, the Indian philosopher Krishnamurti established a home in the valley's East End, now the Krishnamurti Library & Visitor Center, attracting other thinkers like the British pacifist writer, Aldous Huxley, who spent World War II here, and painter Jackson Pollack.

The philosophers also kept coming, including Theosophists in 1926 who established a hilltop library with 10,000 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 from an eastern vista point, locals hold monthly full-moon meditations, which executive director Roger Collis terms "spiritual activism," focusing on non-denominational prayer and contemplation "to build a more compassionate, just and peaceful world."



(A cottage at the Emerald Iguana set in lush surroundings)



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 was 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!



(A patio under an umbrella of lush foliage at the Emerald Iguana)

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 in Ojai.

Marc is an architect drawn to Gaudi's work, while Julia, who manages the hotel, is a self-taught interior designer and landscaper, who doesn't seem to miss a beat.



According to Julia, the hotel's "hand-touched influence" incorporates California cottage style with a large dose of Gaudi, whose other-worldly style is synonymous with the Barcelona skyline.

(Marc Whitman's broken-tile iguana at Ojai's Emerald Iguana boutique hotel)

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.

What Marc and Julia started with here was old housing desperately in need of a complete overhaul.



(A quiet, lush spot on a terrace at the Emerald Iguana)

But the work was not without its unexpected moments, like discovering a 1920's-era newspaper article about Babe Ruth stuffed into an old wall.



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 an assortment of hardwood furniture Julia shipped home in three containers from Indonesia.

(The living room, looking down from the second floor)



Downstairs sat a heavily-embroidered blue-gray sofa with gold pillows, next to a full kitchen and a small dining area, which, in turn, led to a cozy patio under a canopy of trees.

The upstairs bedroom had terraces on either side, which made for places to sit and enjoy pleasant moments of reflection.

Before a patio dinner at the town's Osteria Monte Grappa, we took a leisurely walk 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.



(Books are for sale on the street at Bart's Books in Ojai)

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, so the story goes, got so out of hand that he offered them for sale on street-side shelves.

Thus, Bart's Books was born, and today, books are still sold on the street, with a can to put your money in after hours on the honor system.

Bart's courtyard is divided into different book 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.

In a room called "The Gallery," there were books on famous artists, including a really lovely retrospective on Gauguin.

The original honeymoon cottage is covered from floor to ceiling with books, including some wonderful cookbooks in a blue-and-white Dutch motif kitchen.

Bart's current owner, a twentyish guy who introduced himself simply as Matt, was talking to someone wearing a cowboy hat behind the counter.

I wondered to myself what the owner's last name was, but if Bart could be just Bart, then, I figured, "Matt" went with the territory.

The next day, after a generous continental breakfast around the Emerald Iguana's intimate pool, it was time to meet David Mason, the man known in town as "Mr. Ojai," who has owned the Village Florist for 46 years.



(The Ojai post office and its iconic clock tower)

Mason's shop is located in Ojai's Mission Revival-style shopping "Arcade," whose design was conceived by the Ohio glass magnate and philanthropist Edward Drummond Libbey.

Across the street is the post office building, with a bell tower that resembles the campanile in Havana -- and plays music at noon.



Mason was nostalgic about memories of movie stars he once knew here -- and whose signed photographs cover the walls around him, like one of "Battle Cry" signed by Tab Hunter and another by Anthony Hopkins, who "lived here for quite awhile."

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 in 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 bell-hopped on weekends as a teen-ager.



chairs, listening to music from the bandstand.

Soon parents and their children were marching to the sounds, holding colorful balloons in the air, a rare Norman Rockwell moment in this 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 town, 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."

## **WHEN YOU GO...**

Ojai is located on scenic Highway 33, about 20 minutes from Highway 101 in Ventura, about 85 miles from Los Angeles International Airport, and 40 minutes south of Santa Barbara.

For visitor information, contact the Ojai Visitors Bureau at (888) 652-4669, or visit [www.ojaivisitors.com](http://www.ojaivisitors.com).

For the Emerald Iguana, call (805) 646-5277 or visit [www.emeraldiguana.com](http://www.emeraldiguana.com). Rates start at \$169 midweek to \$379.

(The Whitman's own a second boutique hotel at the entrance to Ojai called the Blue Iguana Inn, which is dog-friendly upon approval and, besides the guest rooms, suites and bungalows, includes vacation houses on the property).

## **THINGS TO DO IN THE OJAI AREA**

Every October, local painters, sculptors, potters and other creative types open their studios to visitors during the Ojai Studio Artists Tour, October 9 and 10.



## ***Ojai for Biking Ethusiasts***

For biking enthusiasts, the Ojai Valley Trail was once a rail line used to transport Ojai oranges to the coast.

Lake Casitas was the site of the 1984 Olympics canoeing and rowing events and is about three miles from the town center.

## ***Popular Ojai Festivals***

Festivals include the Ojai Music Festival, the Ojai Wine Festival, the Lavender Festival, and the Ojai Playwrights Conference. Check with the Ojai Visitors Bureau for dates.

The Krotona Institute library is open Tuesday - Friday from 10 a.m. - 5 p.m. and 1 - 5 p.m. on weekends, with some 10,000 books on site. For information, call (805) 646-2653.

The Krishnamurti Library and Visitor Center is open to the public Thursday and Friday from 1 - 5 p.m. and Saturday and Sunday from 10 a.m. - 5 p.m. For information, call (805) 646-2390.