

## Flag of California



## Girlfriends Getaway to Unforgettable Ojai

©2011 by Barbara Singer

It's a fact that girlfriends really do need to get away from time to time, just to relax, renew and bond. Once a year my life long friend, Ellen, lures me to Ojai, California, for a welcome retreat. Ojai is the perfect place for a spiritual connection; the essence of discovery here excites my senses. Ojai is a place to visit for all seasons. I've grown to cherish our reunion getaways, while looking forward to Ojai and its festivals, food and fairs.

Ojai is a vibrant small town suspended in time that can be considered a temporary refuge from a busy daily city routine. Located about 75 miles north of Los Angeles, a quick drive to Ventura on the 101 Freeway with an easy right turn on the 33 Freeway leading into downtown Ojai. Its claim to fame, Frank Capra's 1937 film "The Lost Horizon" dubbed this hidden valley Shangri-La. Since then, all who come here, live here and experience Ojai have found their own unique paradise.

With a backdrop of natural beauty nestled in the valley of east-west mountain ranges, it's easy to unplug and explore the area by walking, hiking, biking and horseback riding. Nearby Lake Casitas awaits opportunities for boating, fishing and more. One way to meet the locals is to walk, jog or bicycle on the Ojai Valley Trail; it's just nine miles long.

More rare than gold are the sunsets at twilight on the Topa Topa Mountains; it's the Ojai's Pink Moment, the glow of the evening light shading the mountains. Yes, Ojai is a tranquil setting to retreat from stress and commitments with substitutes of scenic beauty and spa nourishments.

Early Ojai residents were Southern California Chumash Indians, who named Ojai with their word for moon. As one of the oldest and smallest towns of Ventura County, Ojai became a city in 1921, although it was settled in the 1800's. You know you are in Ojai when you see the historic Arcade in the downtown heart of the city. This multi-arched Spanish style arcade houses art galleries, boutiques, eateries and its casual inviting atmosphere continually draws visitors to its doors and windows. With the vision and financing of Edward D. Libbey, an early settler and rich glass manufacturer, the layout of the town was realized and created with architect Richard Requa. This includes the iconic post office tower, the former hotel that is now The Oaks Spa, restored by fitness guru Sheila Cluff, and the architectural pergola in front of Libbey Park facing the arcade.

This quaint Americana community is truly a mecca for the arts and artists. So many of the popular happenings are in downtown Libbey Park: art, music and theatre draws the crowds. On every block, around every corner and under the Arcade, you'll find art galleries featuring local artists others from near and far. We can tour Ojai Artists' Studios and see artists at work all about the town and even join in film festival fun taking place at The Ojai Center for the Arts.



## Emerald Iguana environs



On past girlfriends' visits to Ojai, we have stayed at top places like the elegantly casual Ojai Valley Inn & Spa and the feel great fitness destination of The Oaks at Ojai Health Spa. This time Ellen made the reservations and surprised me with a new place, a residential hilltop oasis called The Emerald Iguana. Relaxation and quiet high priority, just one glance at green surroundings in this woody area, I was ready to kick back and relax. Finally it's gal's time in a unique individual two story chalet-style cottage set among lush trees with a cozy living room with a fireplace and full kitchen. We settled in, took our meeting, greeting and chatting walk, while exploring the gardens and cottages around the lovely grounds of The Emerald Iguana.

## Dinner at Suzanne's Cuisine



One of the simple pleasures, a long awaited visit to Suzanne's Cuisine (805-640-1961), meant a creative gourmet meal with a European flavor. It's been said that the dining experience at Suzanne's begins the moment you walk through the door. As a first time visitor, it was first romance in this rustic setting. Then dining was truly love at first taste. The succulent Sautéed Jumbo Shrimp with Goat Cheese Stuffed Pasta Shells on a Bed of Marinara Sauce made me happy, and Ellen, a second time visitor, was pleased with her Rosemary Roasted Rack of lamb with a Mustard Herb Crust. We couldn't resist their dessert, especially the Crème Brule and Fresh Fruit Cheesecake.

Late night at the Emerald Iguana, we sipped fresh brewed hot tea by the fireplace and exchanged ideas regarding the next day's plans. Rising early, I wiggled into my hot new Italian Vitamina stretch jeans, finally my first pair of skinny jeans, which fit like a glove. As we met for a leisurely complimentary breakfast poolside, we agreed that we had little knowledge of the Ojai Valley and its environs. So we kicked back let the Ojai Trolley take us through the town and on to the suburbs of Meiners Oak, a colorful valley suburb. On board for was town historian Rose Boggs, sharing stories of growing up in the valley.

For lunch we joined friends at colorful Los Coporales, a downtown authentic Mexican restaurant, family run. Located adjacent to Libbey park, it serves traditional and grandma's recipes. Next on the agenda 'girls gone shopping'-we headed for The Arcade and ventured in and out and about the shops: Made In Ojai-jewelry, soaps, crafts, gifts of Ojai, Kingston's Candy Co.-all those old fashioned candies we remember - pez to pop, Kindred Spirit-seasonal clothing, gifts, jewelry and Human Arts gallery features furniture, ceramics, glass, textiles and more in a decorative setting.

Everyone ends up at Bart's Books sometime; it's open-air book haven with about 300,000 books, new, old and rare. Seating is everywhere a reader can find a niche. When they are closed, readers can chose any book on the exterior and pay by the honor system - by tossing the money over the door. Just across the street was my newest discovery, the wonderful RTK Studios of decorative glazed tiles. I love those amazing Catalina tiles and saw their images in this gallery bungalow; these beautiful tiles enhance so many Ojai spots. Before dinner we stopped by the Ojai Vineyard shop for a tasting treat from winemaker trendsetter Adam Tolmach, nice tastings for \$12.



We were ready to savor the best of Ojai, so we booked dinner at The Ranch House, (805-646-2360) known for a superbly prepared natural foods located in a woodland hideaway. We opted to dine in the garden; our gourmet choices were tasty, I decided on the special Irish Salmon and Ellen finally chose their Grilled Diver Scallops, we were both pleased. They have an endless award-winning wine list; we tried the Ojai Vineyard White wine. Before departing we toured the Herb Garden and the Bakery, I loved their Olive Bread and took a loaf with me. Back to our comfy room for cup of tea and chatting away.

#### **Ojai Hot Rock Massage at the Oaks**



There are no set rules that girlfriends on a getaway must spend every moment together. With that said, after two days, we pursued our own interests. You won't find us fishing, or golfing, a favorite past time at the Ojai Valley Inn & Spa and Soule Park. Ellen headed to The Oaks at Ojai, seeking fun fitness classes and aqua-tone pool workouts as well as their 1000-calorie per day spa food and cooking demonstrations. It's a low-key spot - no need to dress up here. Guests are welcomed solo at a bargain rate for one day or as many days as needed. We were close enough in town to meet here for massages in the afternoon. I relished the Ojai Hot River Massage; their signature treatment with those wonderful hot rocks that hit the spot and my girlfriend opted for the Ojai Olive Oil Body Soufflé. Later I went on to indulge my passions of shopping and films.

I made my way to the The Lavender Inn, a historic Bed & Breakfast, so close to everything: everything Ojai, dining and films. With colorful rooms here and delicious homemade breakfast, I enjoyed the fresh coffee, fruit and frittatas in the garden. A nice touch was snacking on local

wines and cheese in the late afternoon. I can't resist the Rainbow Bridge Natural Food Store across the street for lunch and munchies.

The shopping bug had bitten me, as I ventured to my favored shop the Treasures of Ojai, just steps away. Here I have found antiques and antique jewelry, vintage clothes and customized local jewelry. Now I keep a special drawer for my own Ojai treasures from this eclectic store: with compliments galore on my sliced turquoise necklace designed by local artist Maruschka.

During my stay in Ojai, I was drawn to banners for the Ojai Film Festival. I am and always will be a movie addict, which has lead me to film festivals all over the world; my favorite festivals are the Cannes International Film Festival, visiting twelve to date and the Santa Barbara International Film Festival, I have participated in five.

Just a short walk to the Ojai Art Center, everyone was gearing up for the 11<sup>th</sup> annual Ojai Film Festival ( 805-640-1947) for three days of screenings, seminars and gala awards presentations. While checking-in, I was introduced to Festival leaders, Artistic Director Steve Grumette and Executive Director Jamie Fleming, who have encouraged industry professionals, independent and regional filmmakers to fill the slate of 61 diversified films and participate in seminars and tributes, while exploring the human condition, thereby bringing peoples of the world closer together. The casual and approachable atmosphere of this film festival, plus the proximity of the screenings, an array of narrative features, documentaries, shorts and animation hailed this festival as a quality event. Lifetime Achievement awards went to Actor Craig T. Nelson and Cinematographer Michael Chapman; candid discussions at the their seminars were informative.

It was obvious the independent films screened were uniquely rare and interesting. I was attracted to the documentaries especially the thought provoking "American Faust: From Condi to Neo-Condi," better known as Condi Rice and Soenke Wortmann's award-winning Narrative Feature "Pope Joan," Best documentary Short: "Ingelore" from Frank Stiefel and the Festival Theme Award: John-Keith Wasson's "Surviving Hitler; A Love Story." These were a few of the enjoyable films I screened. The Ojai Film Festival is a perfect reason to visit Ojai.

#### **Steve Grumette (artistic director), Barbara Singer and James (executive director of the Ojai Film Festival**



Ojai remains in my mind long after my visit; it is unforgettable experience to be there, especially with a special friend. Here is a walkable town, where something is always happening. Take time to discover the magic of Ojai.

For everything you need to know about Ojai contact:

Ojai Visitors Bureau

[www.ojaivisitors.com](http://www.ojaivisitors.com) - 1-888-OJAI NOW

The Emerald Iguana

[www.iguanainnojai.com](http://www.iguanainnojai.com)

Ojai Valley Inn & Spa

[www.ojairesort.com](http://www.ojairesort.com)

The Oaks at Ojai

[www.oaksspa.com](http://www.oaksspa.com)

The Lavender Inn

[www.lavenderinn.com](http://www.lavenderinn.com)

[www.vijeans.com](http://www.vijeans.com)

Suzanne's cuisine

[www.suzannescuisine.com](http://www.suzannescuisine.com)

Los Caporales Restaurant

[www.loscaporalesrestaurant.com](http://www.loscaporalesrestaurant.com)

The Ranch House

[www.theranchhouse.com](http://www.theranchhouse.com)

Treasures of Ojai

[www.treasuresofojai.com](http://www.treasuresofojai.com)

Ojai Film Festival

[www.ojaifilmfestival.org](http://www.ojaifilmfestival.org)

Whether you wish to see Europe, Russia, Asia, or Egypt, the most relaxing way to travel is on Viking [River Cruises](#). You unpack once and then enjoy daily shore excursions to visit both modern and historic places. Viking River Cruises will give you the trip of your dreams with luxurious accommodations, delicious food, exciting entertainment, and fascinating scenery.