



Nestled near the Topa Topa Mountains, the Ojai Valley Inn and Spa features casual elegance with luxury accommodations, Spa Ojai, and a championship golf course.

Weekend in Ojai, California: A Creative, Spiritual Haven

BY BEVERLY MANN

Just 90 minutes north of Los Angeles and 30 miles east of Santa Barbara sits Ojai, a tiny town tucked into the hillside of the Topa Topa Mountains with fertile soil and postcard pink sunsets.

The Chumash Indians, the original inhabitants of this area, along with spiritual seekers revered Ojai as a place of healing, entitling it as “The Nest.”

Respite For Body and Spirit
Named after the Chumash Indian word for moon, Ojai is a place to nourish the body and the human spirit with a multitude of spas, yoga, and meditation offerings.



The 70-foot-long Herb Garden Pool is surrounded by 12 private cabanas and offers a hideaway from the Inn’s family and spa pools.

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It is also an artist enclave amass with colorful, creative personalities—from photographers, sculptors, and painters to writers, composers, and actors.

Settled in the 1800s and incorporated as a city in 1921, Ojai has also been blessed with an inviting Mediterranean climate for growing olives, grapes, and lavender.

Upon returning here for some rest and relaxation, I re-visited the 220-acre Ojai Inn & Spa. Glass mogul and philanthropist Edward Drummond Libby originally built this Spanish colonial-style resort in 1923 as a country club and golf course for residents and visitors. Today, the resort offers extensive spa, yoga, art, and meditation opportunities, as

well as top-quality cuisine.

I luxuriated in a 100-minute Shangri-La treatment: a sugar scrub infused with lavender, aloe, and jojoba, followed by a shea butter massage, mini-facial, and scalp treatment. Afterward, I relaxed further on the spa patio inhaling more of the lavender aromas while listening to soothing sounds of flowing fountains and gazing at the splendid mountainscape.

Satisfying the Palate
Dinner at the Maravilla Restaurant (with menu created by new Chef Chad Minton) was further indulgence. Dining out on the balcony under the star-studded sky, I enjoyed a tender filet and fresh garden vegetables straight

BEVERLY MANN

from the resort’s elaborate herb garden.

For a more intimate Ojai stay, I experienced an overnight stay at the Emerald Iguana. Its construction was influenced by Spain’s surrealist architect Gaudi, as seen by the broken tile mosaics and iguana fountain at the entrance.

The stone exterior was preserved from its original state, but owners Julia and Marc Whitman have added a contemporary, eclectic flair to both the exterior and interior. Carved wooden pieces from Bali and original artwork by local artists adorn the 13 cottage-style rooms. Julia calls the architecture “art nouveau craftsman” with lots of arches and curves.

I stayed in The Cricket, a two-level suite with a patio overlooking a tropical setting. An ample continental breakfast was served by the poolside.

Finding good restaurants for lunch and dinner in Ojai is not a problem, but choosing one was a real challenge. A favorite of mine, Azu Restaurant and Tapas Bar, was on Ojai Avenue, the main drag.

I filled up on a small dish of savory seafood paella, gambas (shrimp) sautéed with garlic and olive oil, a succulent Flat Iron steak, and a crunchy arugula and dried fig salad. Chef Laurel Moore, a photographer from L.A. with a love for Spain and cooking, has done an admirable job with the menu over the past 11 years.

Just a few blocks from the Ojai Valley Inn, and also on Ojai Avenue, is Suzanne’s Cuisine. As I entered the restaurant and stepped onto the covered patio,

I felt like I was part of an Impressionist painting amid a colorful, flower garden setting. French music was piped into the bathrooms for a further European feel. Their signature dessert, Café Liegeois de la Maison, was the piece de resistance to my filling meal of shrimp wonton soup and rack of lamb. The service was excellent.

Osteria Monte Grappa on Signal Street has the most amazing seafood salads and daily selections influenced by the finds at the local Farmer’s Market. Outdoor sitting was delightful for lunchtime.

Inspirational Artistry
Although I reveled in relaxation and quality cuisine, I was most enamored of the spiritual and



creative personalities living in Ojai.

One such individual was 83-year-old landscape artist Bert Collins who has enjoyed her 40-year career in the town. She has been an inspiration for aspiring artists around the world who come to her 2,500-square-foot home and studio to learn from the master painter—if they can get beyond her three-year waiting list.

PLEASE SEE OJAI ON B2

COURTESY OF OJAI VALLEY INN & SPA



Spa Ojai offers customers a unique experience of the spa signature mud treatment, Kuyam, or spa-goers can choose their own blend of essential oils for bath oils and lotions.

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The Emerald Iguana Inn boasts a large Gaudi-style mosaic iguana fountain at the front entrance.

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OJAI CONTINUED FROM B1

In 1997, Collins received the Lifetime Achievement Award from the City of Ojai. She is part of the Ojai Studio Artists, a guild of over 40 artists who organize an annual open studio tour every October to raise funds for scholarships to promote art education in the community.

How did she get started? Her first job out of high school was at a ceramics studio. Years later when her two children were grown, a neighbor said, "Let's go take an art class." Collins's first assignment was to paint a tree, hills, and a road, which actually was similar in style to what she paints today. Her student says Collins has a mimetic memory and that she knows if anything has been touched on, or not, in a painting, after seeing it just once.

Collins teaches three days a week with workshops on the first, second, and third Saturdays. It's obvious how much her students adore her, which I personally observed at her studio. According to Collins, "I love teaching even more than painting."

She used to paint still life in her younger years, similar to the 16th century Dutch masters, and then she went on to do landscapes using oils and acrylics. "Once I discovered pastels," she said, "I knew that was for me."

What she loves about using this medium is that what you see is what you get. Unlike oils and acrylics, pastel colors never change after they reach the canvas. Her popular pastel classes have turned into a club that holds two art shows a year exhibiting just pastels.

What is Collins's dream from here? She is quite content to teach and paint in this studio/home built by her deceased husband. "I have a perfect setup now. However, I still want to paint a masterpiece," she says. And, on another breath with a Cheshire cat grin, she notes, "Who can possibly have more fun than I am having now?"

Art and Aging

At the other end of town, up a curving hill, a perfect spot to eye



Local artist Alice Matzkin learned to appreciate and celebrate the aging process, which is reflected in her self-portrait.



The Embrace sculpture by artist Richard Matzkin pays tribute to his love for his wife as they grow old together.

the magnificent pink sunsets, lies the home and studio (called "The Nest") of artists Alice and Richard Matzkin, a husband and wife duo—she is a noted painter and he is a well-known sculptor. Married for 30 years, they have been an inspiration to one another's creativity, which has evolved into a thematic focus of the beauty and fears of aging.

Alice's painting of the famous potter Beatrice Wood at 100 years old sits in the National Portrait Gallery of the Smithsonian. With her own realization of the aging process, Alice painted and interviewed 21 women age 70 and older, from portraits to nudes, in a quest to answer her own questions about how women can live fulfilling lives and still be considered beautiful as they age.

Richard approached aging from a darker perspective. "I was looking at my own fears and began sculpting a series called 'Naked Old Men.'"

As an expression of the deep love between him and his wife

Alice, Richard's work has progressed into a series of bronze sculptures depicting older couples caught in an embrace.

The Matzkins have taken their art to yet another level with a published book, "The Art of Aging." A documentary based upon the book is soon to be released, and their "Naked Women" series appears on a 2012 calendar.

After reflecting on her art and interviews with the 21 mature women, Alice says, "I have come to a place of self-acceptance and self-love and realize that life is extremely precious. I savor every moment."

I thought of Alice's words as I left the picturesque town of Ojai on my way back to San Francisco. I tried to reflect on the aromas, scenic beauty, and tranquility of the sacred town's mountain greenery that surrounded me at every turn. I savored it all.

For more information contact Ojai Visitors Bureau: www.ojaivisitors.com or 1-888-OJAI NOW

Beverly Mann has been a feature, arts, and travel writer in the San Francisco Bay Area for the past 28 years. She has received numerous accolades in the fields of travel writing, education, and international public relations, including a Bay Area Travel Writers Award of Excellence in Newspaper Travel Writing. Contact Ms. Mann at: www.beverlymann.com

How Not to Plan Travel

BY TANYA HARRISON
EPOCH TIMES STAFF

No fair!

The ball dropped on schedule in Times Square in New York City, then the Chinese Lunar New (Year of the Dragon) leaped upon us on Jan. 23, and I ran out of time to do all the travel I'd planned in 2011. Beyond that, I've discovered (much to my dismay) that I travel far less as an editor than I did as a writer. Hmm, there's something not quite right about that!

Ah, but we had a great year vicariously traveling the world, exploring new cultures, and experiencing new cuisines, didn't we? So what do we plan for this year?

To Plan or Not to Plan

Every year there are so many lists for top places to travel. I fancied, once upon a time, meshing all of those lists together to see how many of them recommended the same places, and then building my own list of must-sees. Okay, not really. There are far too many of them out there, and often they represent a narrow view of what travel means.

Travel means standing on the lip of a volcanic crater and reveling in the sheer energy of the seemingly desolate expanse. It means wrestling with an ornery camel to cross a desert with little sights to see than other camel riders, but being off a beaten path exhilarates you. Travel is exploring a majestic culture in a faraway jungle and marveling at the sophistication of an ancient civilization.

Travel feeds the spirit when we leave our comfort zones by volunteering to care for other living beings on this planet that we share. It's being consciously careful about how we tread this world in our search for rest and relaxation. Travel means heading out for business and inadvertently finding that near-perfect place to throw off the suit and tie to truly unwind or maybe even relocate!

In my opinion, then, almost anywhere is the best place to go. What I learned in 2011 was that traveling to where your heart leads you was the most important. With that in mind, we start 2012 with homage to tranquility.



Relax, breathe deep, be where you are—and you will discover where you want to go!

Take a deep breath, relax, and don't think about where you want to go.

This isn't to say that once you are inspired you shouldn't plan how to get there. That would be irresponsible of me! Of course you want to research your destination, check the local situation and economy, find inexpensive transportation (yes, there's still a squeeze on the travel dollar), and look for deals on lodging. How you eventually get where you go can make or break the overall experience of your destination. Do keep that practical traveler tucked inside a compartment of your Zen-like travel reverie.

The Unexpected Traveler

I haven't decided where I want to travel this year, let alone come up with recommendations. I still want to take more leisurely, scenic train trips; I just haven't decided to where. I've yet to experience transportation as

relaxed and interactive as a train ride.

I still want to explore more of my New York backyard. It's touted as such a popular destination for tourists—certainly, it has as much to offer the "staycationer."

I will also check regularly for hospitality deals to visit Connecticut, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Maine, the last frontiers of my U.S. travel experience; however, I will not be attached to making it so. Sometimes, opportunities present themselves when we least expect them.

So, this year will be my Travel Year of the Unexpected. Yet, I expect to be delighted and enlightened with travel seen through others' eyes and my own. And each new experience will be savored and shared with you.

I wish you happy unexpected travel in 2012 and hope that you will be pleasantly surprised.

GEOGRAPHY GURU

Growing Your Geography Knowledge

Quiz 355

ZAMBEZI NATIONS:

The Zambezi River is the fourth-longest river in Africa, after the Nile, Congo, and Niger. Its length of approximately 1700 miles make it nearly as long as the Danube. Name the six nations in southern Africa that the Zambezi borders on or flows through. HINT: The capitals of the six nations are Gaborone, Harare, Luanda, Lusaka, Maputo, and Windhoek.

Answer for Quiz 354:

WEST OF SOUTH:

The westernmost point of land on the mainland of South America is in Peru, at Punta Pariñas. ORLANDO, at 81 degrees west, is closer to the same line of longitude as Punta Pariñas than are Boston, Dallas, Denver, or Los Angeles.

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