

COURTESY OF OJAI VALLEY INN & SPA



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.

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



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MANN ABOUT TOWN

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

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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.



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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