

THE OJAI VALLEY

CALIFORNIA'S SHANGRI-LA

By Mary Moore Mason

As we four London ladies sat around a table creating our own personal mandalas, I thought, my, what an unusual resort this is! Through the windows of the sunny Ojai Valley Inn & Spa's Artist Cottage we could see golf carts whizzing around the award-winning golf course and envision the activity at the nearby tennis courts and swimming pools.



The Spa's kuyam treatments include cleansing mud, dry heat, inhalation and meditation



Golfers enjoy Ojai's award-winning, 18-hole golf course



You can dine al fresco on the Oak Café Terrace

But rather than indulging in these more usual resort pursuits, we had chosen to depict our past lives and future aspirations in the artistic, circular designs known as mandalas (later interpreted by Renate Collins, our wise and visionary German-born tutor), create our own signature perfumes in the adjoining apothecary, picnic under a pergola overlooking a beautiful flower-and-herb garden, and luxuriate in such spa treatments as pixie tangerine body scrubs,

elderberry and ginger detox wraps and Native American kuyam treatments that combine cleansing mud, dry heat, inhalation and meditation.

But then, we were in laid-back, colourful unconventional Central Coastal California where part of the fun is experimenting with something completely new!

As the athletically-uncoordinated equivalent of former US president Gerald Ford – who Lyndon Johnson reputedly said “couldn't walk

and chew gum at the same time” – I was pleased to have the option of such artistic pursuits as silverpoint drawing, glass and silk painting and jewellery making, as well as such non-stressful exercises as t'ai chi and yoga.

However, we could – and did – enjoy more athletic pursuits during our four-day stay. Among the choices were horseback rides along the rugged Pacific coast; kayaking, surfing and deep-sea fishing from the nearby beach town of Ventura; biking into the charming, Spanish-



The resort is nestled in a mountain valley at the foot of the Topa Topa mountains and overlooking an award-winning golf course

INN & SPA

style village of Ojai just down the hill; and hiking or geo-caching for hidden treasures in the surrounding mountains.

INTO THE WOODS ON A TREASURE HUNT

The latter proved not only to be great fun but also one of the newest crazes in the US. Armed with hand-held GPS navigational devices, we followed our extremely fit 'Iron Lady' leader up a steep mountain path to discover 'treasures' hidden in the woods along the way. When my turn came, I discovered that the metal box tucked behind a tree stump contained everything from playing cards, a beautiful polished stone and a pocket-knife to a small, cuddly teddy bear. As instructed, I selected an object (the bear for a little granddaughter) and

★ **In laid-back, colourful, unconventional Central Coastal California part of the fun is experimenting with something completely new!**

left one behind along with my name, where I was from and the date I visited the site. Then the box was hidden again.

Where better to follow all these pursuits, we agreed, than in a beautiful mountain valley named Ojai ('nest') by the Chumash Indians. Settled in the 1700s by Spanish ranchers and still imbued with the ambience of 'Old California', it had been selected as the setting for magical Shangri-La – a land where people never aged – in Frank Capra's classic 1937 film *Lost Horizon*.

The 220-acre resort itself began life in 1923



The elegant Casa Elar is ideal for family, friend or corporate groups

as the private golf course and retreat of wealthy Ohio glass manufacturer Edward Drummond Libbey. After use as a World War II military training centre, several changes of ownership and a major renovation and expansion, it was reopened in 1986, adding a 31,000sq-ft luxury spa in 1997, plus additional amenities – a ballroom, conference centre and new restaurants – in 2005.

Now it is an AAA Five Diamond property boasting 308 spacious rooms and suites set around courtyards in charming clusters of white-painted Spanish American, hacienda-style buildings. Some are nestled in the valley, others on hillsides shaded by huge, 200-year old oaks and surrounded by an emerald-green golf course.

No wonder that over the years it has attracted such luminaries as presidents Teddy Roosevelt and Ronald Reagan, actors Fred MacMurray, Loretta Young, Jack Nicholson, Spencer Tracy and Katherine Hepburn, and the numerous top sportsmen who come to play on its 18-hole golf course and four tennis courts.

Lovers of fine food and wine – much of it produced in the region – are also well looked after by the Oak Café and Oak Grill and the more-casual Jimmy's and Café at the Spa. Our gourmet experience reached its zenith when we dined alfresco just at sunset on the tree-shaded terrace of the Oak Grill.

After savouring such treats as tortilla soup, fresh seafood, prime New York steak, and cheesecake enhanced by lavender grown in the resort garden, we raised our glasses to the magical nightly event know as 'the pink moment', when the sun sets over the surrounding Topa Topa Mountains. Then we added a toast to the resort, which, like the mythical Shangri-La, seemed – at least for a few days – to stop the passage of time.



A courtyard leads to the Spa with its numerous treatment rooms and pools



Renata Collins prepares for one of her perfume classes in the Apothecary

TRAVEL NOTES



GETTING THERE: The resort is 90 minutes (or about one hour-and-a-half's drive) north-west of Los Angeles, served by frequent, non-stop flights from the UK. We experienced good service on British Airways, www.ba.com, 0870 850 9850.



GETTING AROUND: The best way to reach the resort – and to tour the interesting surrounding region – is via a rental car through such companies as Hertz, www.hertz.co.uk, 08708 484 848. Once at the resort, you can reach your various destinations on foot, bike or staff-driven carts.



ACCOMMODATION: Room prices range from \$400 per night for a standard double room. If you'd like your own private villa for family or friends, ask about the luxurious Casa Elar, which encompasses four suites, a dining room seating 12, its own kitchen, an entertainment area with bar, an extensive patio, its own private pool and spa and parking for up to 12 cars.



SPA TREATMENTS AND PACKAGES: Treatment costs range from \$25-\$265 and entitle you to spend the whole day in the spa. Four- to five-hour packages, including several treatments (and perhaps an art class) plus lunch, range from \$415-\$830.



FURTHER INFORMATION: The Ojai Valley Inn & Spa, 905 Country Club Road, Ojai, California 93023, www.ojaisort.com, 001 (805) 646 1111.

