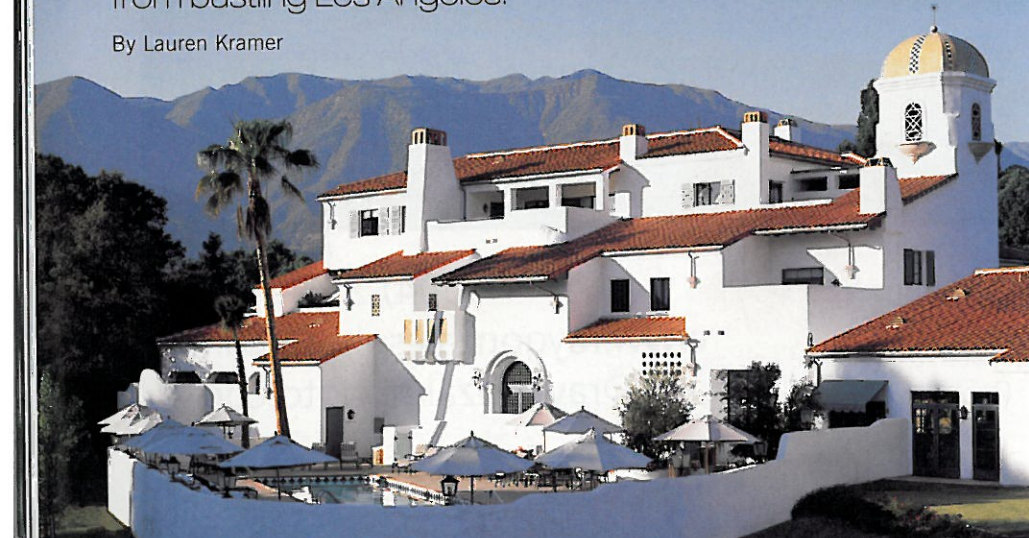


Pink Romance in the Ojai Valley

Calm, natural beauty just a short jaunt from bustling Los Angeles.

By Lauren Kramer



I'M POOLSIDE AT THE OJAI VALLEY INN & SPA IN CALIFORNIA, on a day when winter is rearing its damp, cold head in Vancouver. In this town of 8,000, however, just a hop, skip and a jump from Los Angeles, winter means 25 degree Celsius weather, a swimsuit and a few hours of decadent relaxation alongside a twinkling blue pool.

It's a relatively quick commute from Vancouver, but a journey to this small town, pronounced Oh-Hi, and located 75 miles from Los Angeles Airport places honeymooners in wonderfully different surroundings. For one thing, it's a joy to feel the warm sun on your skin this time of year, when summer is a distant memory in BC. For another, the very architecture, colour and tone of this town is deliciously different, speaking of Spanish colonial design with a splash of Mediterranean influence.

You couldn't find a more calming place than the Ojai Valley Inn from which to soak up this beauty. Spread over 220 acres of rolling greens dotted with eucalyptus and oak trees, the inn's villas overlook a magnificent golf course encircled by the Topa Topa Mountains. With its vast topography, the inn never feels crowded or cluttered, which is perhaps why this sanctuary is a favourite among Hollywood celebrities seeking some rest and relaxation. Brad Pitt brought Jen here in previous days, and Arnold Schwarzenegger and his wife Maria were also frequent visitors. They relished the vast space where they could remain, for the most part, gloriously anonymous.

There's no shortage of natural beauty out here. Deer prance gracefully across the manicured golf course in the early morning and vultures ride the thermals beneath a clear blue sky. Sunset every day brings with it a "pink moment" that's become a favourite time among residents, a magical glow around the mountains that can't help but bring out your romantic side.

Ojai is a place of deep spirituality, locals confide. At the Inn, that spirituality is reflected in a variety of ways. A Kuyum mud treatment at the spa honours the Chumash Indians who first lived here, hearkening back to their traditions. I peek into a room where mud-clad spa guests, their bodies sheathed in brown clay, are baking in sauna-like temperatures. The mud replenishes and revitalizes the skin, says Veronica Cole, public relations manager at the inn. That makes it a popular and

Left The architecture at the Ojai Valley Inn is inspired by the area's Spanish colonial heritage with a hint of the Mediterranean that fits perfectly in this warm, sunny nook of California.

Top Right At dusk a pink glow hovers over the Topa Topa Mountains in Ojai, bringing with it a view that cannot help but bring out your romantic side.

Middle Warm hues of red and brown decorate the stately lobby at the Ojai Valley Inn.

Bottom Renowned for its golf course, which attracts celebrities on a regular basis, the greens at the Ojai Valley Inn rise and dip with the spectacular topography of the land.

An air of sleepiness prevails, a relaxation to which visitors can't help but surrender.

unusual spa treatment, a far cry from the facials, manicures and massages going on upstairs.

The resort also offers honeymooners unique ways to express their individual creativity. In the Artist Cottage, in-residence artist Renate Collins gently encourages my husband and I during a mandala class. We're making a collage of four quadrants that represent the essence of our lives, and when we're done, Collins offers an insightful interpretation of the colours and designs we've created.

Later, in the apothecary, we are taught how to mix our own fragrances, scents based on the aromatic notes to which each of us is instinctively drawn. Mine has hues of lemon grass and patchouli, while his features amber and geranium. The end result is a product that's our unique, very own scent, one apothecary staff can turn into soap, lotion and other beauty items at our request.

There are three pools on this sprawling property, as well as tennis courts, four restaurants and bikes for a casual meander around town. We choose the latter, sauntering along a picturesque bike trail until we reach the Ojai Plaza. The quaint city centre is full of history, charm and character, devoid of chain stores and populated instead with an array of eclectic jewellery and clothing boutiques, galleries and gift stores that display the work of local artists.

It's an ordinary business day in Ojai, but an air of sleepiness prevails, a relaxation to which visitors can't help but surrender. Far from the maddening crowd of Los Angeles, Ojai is a place infused with a magical something, an inner beauty that whispers softly to all those who visit here, enchanting them with its pink moments and many shades of romance. rw

If You Go:

- Flights from Vancouver to Los Angeles are frequent, but once there it's advisable to rent a car for the 90-minute commute to Ojai.
- Rooms at the Ojai Valley Inn start at \$400 per night though seasonal specials are available.
Info: 800 422-6524 or visit www.ojairesort.com
- For general information on Ojai visit www.ojaichamber.org or call 805 646-8126.

