

enchancing

OJAI valley

by DON AND ANN JACKSON

OJAI VALLEY, TUCKED BEHIND MAJESTIC COASTAL MOUNTAINS just a few miles inland from Santa Barbara and Ventura, has been a popular getaway for the Los Angeles glitterati for many years. And why not? Just escaping the tensions and anxieties of the L.A. megalopolis was reason enough. But for us here in Central and Northern California, the Ojai area is one of those rather unknown destination secrets more than worth a visit.



OJAI VALLEY INN





THE SPA AT OJAI VALLEY INN



GOLF COURSE AT OJAI VALLEY INN



SUNRISE OVER OJAI

A LITTLE HISTORY: Back in the early 1900's, Edward Drummond Libbey, a millionaire glass manufacturer from Toledo, Ohio came to the Ojai Valley, fell in love with the natural beauty of the area, and had a vision that has endured and prospered. With Libbey's generous support, the town developed with a distinct Spanish architectural influence, and has steadfastly resisted major growth and over-commercialization.

Today's residents proudly guard their classic, small-town quaintness and heritage, as Ojai retains its reputation as an oasis of tranquility. Not too surprisingly, the town still has no chain or fast food outlets within city limits. When famous filmmaker Frank Capra began looking for a location to film his mythical paradise 'Shangri-La' for his movie masterpiece, *Lost Horizon*, he chose the Ojai Valley to evoke the image of a mystical utopia. We can only endorse his choice.

WHAT TO DO AND SEE: Relaxing by your resort or inn's pool might be at the top of your list when visualizing the serene setting of the valley, but if you want to be more active here are some ideas. A few miles from town center lies picturesque Lake Casitas, home to the 1984 Olympic rowing and canoeing events. Casitas offers some of the best trophy bass fishing in America. Local authority Marc Mitrany is the perfect pick to guide experienced fishermen to those special sure-thing casting spots, and he also loves to introduce beginners to the sport (www.ojaiangler.com). No swimming or water skiing is allowed in the lake, but kayaking, canoeing, and other type boat rentals are available. Appealing camp sites, disc golf, and a family-friendly, fun-filled water park are on the lakeside property (www.casitaswater.org).

On our recent trip, we challenged ourselves to ride the paved bicycle trail all the way from downtown Ojai to the Ventura beaches—30-plus miles round-trip. If you like paved paths, no car traffic, and mostly level biking, this scenic trip along the Ventura River bed is a must-do. For bike rentals or guided tours, visit www.project-ride.com. Long recognized as one of the country's top two most active tennis towns, the annual Ojai Tennis Tournament, now heading into its 111th year, is the oldest amateur tennis event of its kind in the U.S. Attending the tourney or just playing tennis on one of the area's many championship courts are both inviting options (www.ojaitourney.org). Can there be any U.S. small town that has more championship tennis courts per capita? We doubt it.

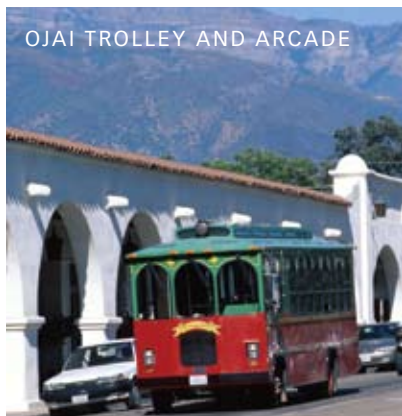
Strolling the downtown village with its famous arcade built in 1917, and browsing the many distinct boutiques, shops, and art galleries is another favorite pastime. Our favorite store, Made-in-Ojai, features a large variety of locally-crafted gift



KAYAKING AT LAKE CASITAS



OJAI BIKE TRAIL



OJAI TROLLEY AND ARCADE



DOWNTOWN OJAI

items, jewelry, and books written by local authors (www.madeinojai.com). Another local institution is the uniquely off-the-wall Bart's Books, touted as the world's greatest outdoor bookstore, where used book aficionados will find a mind boggling bibliophiles' haven (www.bartsbooksojai.com). The valley, also well known as an agriculture paradise, is famous for their delicious Ojai Pixie Tangerines, olives, and lavender. Visits to the local olive or lavender farms, where a variety of beautifully scented lavender products and famous mouth-watering olive oils are produced and shipped worldwide, is heartily recommended. For visit/tour scheduling, visit www.ojaioliveoil.com and www.newoakranch.com (home to lavender and the Pixie Tangerines). Surprisingly there are very limited vineyards in the immediate area, but Casa Barranca Winery's tasting room in the arcade offers the first certified organic wines from the Santa Barbara region (www.casabarranca.com).

WHERE TO STAY AND DINE:

The crème de la crème lodging option is the Ojai Valley Inn and Spa, one of the few five-diamond rated resorts in all of California (www.ojairesort.com). Originally built by Mr. Libbey and always a deluxe property, recent additions and remodeling have elevated this property to its most premier status ever. We are sure Mr. Libbey would be ecstatic at the resulting world-class accommodations and services. His original dreams for the property and town have long been exceeded. The resort's state-of-the-art Spa Ojai has been recognized as one of the country's best, and their championship golf course provides one of California's most dramatic cradled valley/mountain settings. Maravilla, their critically acclaimed signature restaurant is superb, and casual dining in both Jimmy's Pub and Café Verde at the Spa are also equally delightful. When we came to the end of our stay, we both unequivocally concluded that the inn ranks as one of our top five favorite resorts in all the U.S.

The Oaks at Ojai, founded and still operated by author and fitness expert Sheila Cluff and her family, is recognized as one of California's most popular spa retreats with a loyal following for over 30 years (www.oaksspa.com). Special theme weeks and packages are often sold out and their spa cuisine, accommodations, and exercise classes/hikes receive rave reviews. Another highly recommended spa experience is The Day Spa of Ojai; although sans lodging, their local reputation is exemplary and our personal massages were memorable (www.thedayspa.com).

The Emerald Iguana and Lavender Inn are two of the most highly regarded B&Bs in town and for valid reasons. The Emerald Iguana, a striking and stylish inn designed and built by local artists with a sense of joie d' vivre, has been wowing guests for the past few years. Their stunning accommodations and grounds brought us on-board the 'wowed list' for good (www.emeraldiguana.com).

MICHAEL MCFADDEN/OJAI VISITORS BUREAU (4)

The Lavender, an older historic residence located in the heart of town, features creative cooking classes and remarkable antique furnishings (www.lavenderinn.com). Su Nido Inn, a charming, newer lodging choice within walking distance of downtown is definitely worthy of serious consideration. Their enclosed courtyard design and room décor are very inviting (www.sunidoinn.com).

For hungry bellies, Ojai Valley has plenty of top-notch dining to consider: Suzanne's, often acclaimed as "the best restaurant in Ojai" (www.suzannescuisine.com); The Ranch House, a rustic indoor/outdoor award-winning restaurant, bakery, and herb garden has been the talk-of-the-town for over fifty years (www.theranchhouse.com); Azu, a very pleasurable Spanish-influenced tapas dining choice (www.azuojai.com); and Boccali's, a casual al fresco Italian dining spot for over twenty-five years that has become an Ojai residents fave (www.boccalis.com).

At Bodees, an incredible setting plus fabulous steaks and seafood warrant this few-mile drive up into the nearby mountains—side-by-side Harley-Davidsons and Ferraris are a testament to their diverse clientele (www.bodees.net). Feast Bistro is a newer restaurant in town, but their New American cuisine is already resonating at high levels with foodies (www.feastofjai.com); Ojai Café Emporium has the locals-boasted "best breakfasts in town" (www.ojaicafe.com); Knead Bakery is another newcomer to Ojai but this mother/daughter dessert, bread, and quiche artistry is building an ever-increasing following (www.kneadbakingcompany.com); and Ojai Ice Cream—on a hot day, this locally-made ice cream is a must indulgence.

Ojai is a getaway for stress reduction and anticipation of new discoveries. Consider this picturesque, one-of-a-kind place for a vacation destination, especially when seeking to be worlds away from everyday hassles. With enough lodging, dining, and activity choices to satisfy most wish lists and budgets, it just may become your personal "Shangri-La."

For all things Ojai, visit www.ojaivisitors.com.

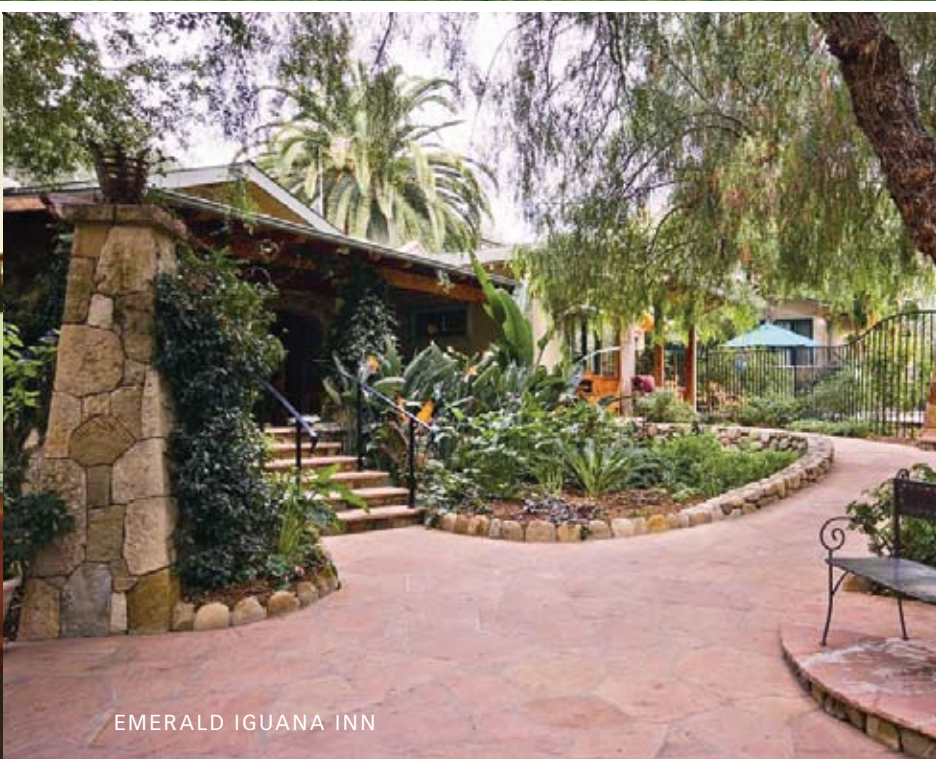
CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: OJAI VALLEY INN; THE OAKS AT OJAI; EMERALD IGUANA INN; THE OAKS AT OJAI



OJAI VALLEY INN AND SPA



THE OAKS AT OJAI



EMERALD IGUANA INN



CHILE PUMPKIN SOUP,
THE OAKS AT OJAI