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Friday, April 20, 2007

Not just for the girls

A top-notch golf course, spa, wine-tasting trips and deluxe accommodations make Ojai Valley Inn & Spa more than a girls' weekend destination

By Mickey Goodman, Special to the Daily Report

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(Courtesy Ojai Valley Inn & Spa)

The Ojai Valley Inn & Spa's setting takes advantage of the natural beauty of the countryside and offers guests many different ways to relax.

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IT WAS THE ULTIMATE BIRTHDAY celebration—a girlfriends getaway for 80 of the hostess' closest friends. We traveled to Ojai Valley Inn & Spa in Ojai, Calif., from Los Angeles and Chicago (where the hosts have homes), Oregon, Michigan, Florida, New York, Virginia and Georgia to toast Sue Neuman Hochberg's significant birthday.

The Chicago and Los Angeles friends from each city knew one another but the remainder (like me)—made 80 new best friends while we golfed, played tennis, feasted, shopped and luxuriated in the spa. We were all awed by the generosity of the hostess, who took care of every minute detail, down to scheduling, gift bags, meals, local transportation and even gratuities for the spa staff.

But the best part for me was re-connecting with a childhood friend. Her mother dated my dad before each married others and became lifelong friends. Our families were closely entwined. Sue's mom became my godmother, her hunky older brother John was my first crush and his pesky twin younger brothers were like my own siblings. During the years, we lost touch but never lost the family connection.

The road to paradise

Although the beautiful 70-mile drive from Los Angeles aboard a chartered bus took us through the rolling hills of the Los Padres National Forest, we weren't prepared for our

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first sighting of the inn, nestled in a valley, totally surrounded by the Topa Topa Mountains. Viewing the expanse of velvety grass blanketing the golf course, the lush plantings and natural beauty of the countryside, it's easy to understand why film director Frank Capra used the Ojai valley to depict Shangri-La in "Lost Horizon."

Named for the Chumash Indian word for "moon" or "nest" (depending on whom you ask), the Ojai Inn is an expanse of rounded Spanish architecture that draws its palette from the surroundings. With subtle shades of tan punctuated by the red tile roof and bright red and blue accents for "pop," the inn is warm and welcoming. In the evening, golden hues of the sunset seem to radiate from the interior. It's no wonder the post-World War II Ojai Valley Country Club became a favorite getaway for Hollywood golfers like Bing Crosby, Jack Benny and Bob Hope.

Ahh, spa

Give 80 women a selection of activities and it's a safe bet most will gravitate toward spa-ing. We certainly were not disappointed in the new \$70 million addition to an already picture-perfect retreat. Some of the girls were slathered in mud for a Kuyam treatment, a combination of wet and dry heat therapy that combines inhalation therapy and guided meditation for up to eight men or women (the first of its kind offered in the U.S.).

Others chose the delightful elderberry and ginger detoxification wrap, borrowing another Chumash tradition of using elderberries to hydrate the skin. Petals, another signature body treatment, uses rose petals to exfoliate and rose oil to nourish the skin, similar to the Chumash practice of smoothing the dried petals of wild roses on their babies.

I enjoyed a combination Pixie Tangerine scrub and massage, a delicious hour spent in another dimension. At the end of the hour, I found it difficult to re-enter the real world, but I was thankful that reality included a delicious dinner party in the very near future.

Fore!

Several of the women attending the getaway whiled away many happy hours on the challenging George Thomas-designed golf course. They reported it required using every club in their bags. The front and back nines from the original 1923 design were switched so that the first nine are easier than what awaits on the back nine. Guests named the 15th hole the most challenging but declared 16 and 17 the holes with the most spectacular views. The 18th hole, with its sharp angle, uphill green and bunkers, put even the most seasoned golfers to the ultimate challenge.

While others golfed, 16 couch potatoes (including me), chose a wine-tasting excursion in the north that went through the Santa Inez Mountains and the new San Marcos Pass—a journey that once took eight hours by stagecoach. Even without the imbibing, the ride itself would have been well worth a day's jaunt. We passed by the birthplace of Hidden Valley Ranch Dressing (a small ranch deep in a canyon) and the road to President Ronald Reagan's ranch, which will open to visitors this year.

The wine tour took us to Sunstone Vineyards & Winery and The Brander Vineyard, then to the charming town of Los Olivos, where the Oscar-winning movie "Sideways" was filmed.

At the end of each day, all 80 of us—getting better acquainted with each passing hour—gathered for marvelous dinners, each more delicious than the last and served piping hot.

But those who want to visit the Ojai Spa need not wait for an invitation by a generous hostess. It's the perfect spot for couples as well as for girlfriend getaways, "mancations," honeymooners and firm retreats. With a fairytale setting, top-notch chef, world-class spa and challenging golf links, Ojai is definitely on my radar for future visits. However, unlike Sue, I'm not sure I can even count 80 friends. We are indeed blessed to have been counted among her dearest friends.

Mickey Goodman is a freelance writer.

