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Ojai, Can You See?

There's lots to view in this popular California dream of a town

July 22, 2010 - Elyse Glickman, Jewish Exponent Feature

From the perspective of Los Angelinos and regular visitors, there was a time when Ojai existed in the shadows cast by its tony beachfront neighbors, Santa Barbara and Mendocino.

Thanks to its sunny location away from the beaches, nevertheless, Ojai developed a loyal following thanks to its quaint shops, spas, Aquarian-age establishments, horseback-riding, wineries and celebrity hideaways (Johnny Cash owned property in nearby Casitas Springs).



Happy trails to you ... It's saddle-up time at Western Trail Rides

With the presence of Camp Ramah (established in 1956), Ojai also became a summer rite-of-passage for thousands of Jewish kids in the L.A. area.

Upon the dawning of the 21st century, and a collective desire for destinations that embody life's simple pleasures, however, Ojai figured out what it wanted to be when it grew up -- itself, only better and more inviting.

K'hilat Ha'Aloneem, the Jewish Community of the Oaks, is in keeping with Ojai's long-standing artistic streak and independent spirit, as a nondenominational synagogue that sprang up from the grass-roots meetings of local Jews who initially met in each other's homes until funds were raised to open the temple.

The same kind of "positive energy" and its increasingly famous agricultural bounty are now on prominent display, thanks to a new generation of cafes, bars, boutiques, spas, inns and hotels.

Though many of these attractions have a little bit of uptown sophistication, there appears to be a shared understanding that progress should never be at the expense of local tradition or history.



Leapin' Lizards!



Stop at Casa Barranca Winery and some local food after a day on the dusty road

Southwestern and Eastern aesthetics without being over the top, keeping true to Ojai's "simpler is better" philosophy.

Both properties also have other wonderful home-y touches like continental breakfast treats and fluffy bagels.

Though the food scene in Ojai is sophisticated and on-trend, moderately priced cafes and fine-dining establishments manage to present their food in a very "homemade" context, and stringently keep the ingredients of their dishes locally sourced, simple and eco-friendly.

Casa Barranca Winery's craftsman-style tasting room makes wine-tasting more social and less touristy. What was once the town's former bookstore blends together a sweet wine bar and Casa Barranca wines with gallery space, comfy couches and a prime opportunity to witness locals congregating and appreciating what's in their backyard.

Feast Bistro

www.feastofjai.com and Vesta (www.vestaojai.com) offer well-priced, farm-fresh "New American" cuisine that showcases Ojai products and produce most creatively.

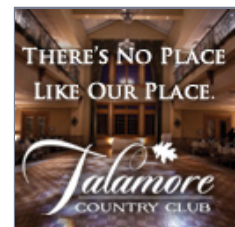
What makes the fine-dining spot Azu compelling is that the fare is pan-Mediterranean, with the strongest emphasis on Moroccan and Israel. Laurel Moore, the restaurant's executive chef and anchor, reveals that before launching her culinary career, she worked

This is one reason why lovingly handcrafted dwellings like the Blue Iguana Inn www.blueiguanainn.com and the Emerald Iguana Inn www.emeraldiguana.com should be lodgings of choice.

Though fancy resorts like the sprawling Ojai Valley Inn made locals and out-of-state visitors rethink their Santa Barbara side trips, the sister inn properties successfully balance comfort, amenities and Ojai's embrace of a simpler life.

The Blue Iguana, an easy 10-minute-drive from central Ojai, is suited either for couples or families with many of the rooms designed for extended stays. The décor is subtly Southwestern, with giant mosaic blue iguanas guarding the property and pool.

The Emerald Iguana, designed as a romantic, adults-only retreat, has an "enchanted forest" feel to it, albeit with a slightly tropical twist in its lush landscaping. Interior decor here blends



as a photographer in Israel for six months and was inspired by the foods she enjoyed there.

The menu is rich in texture, in flavor (her couscous with dried fruit is a meal in itself), and ripe with lots of local fruits and vegetables.

One superb place to do a morning ride, whether you're experienced or a newbie, is at Western Trail Rides WesternTrailRides.org. Using the adjoining protected nature preserves and panoramic vistas to her advantage, seasoned equestrian-riding teacher Melissa White provides a nice balance of riding technique coaching, local history and folklore, and another way to get a glimpse of local life, encountering residents riding, walking their dogs or working out on local trails during the course of her rides.

Off the trails, there's plenty more culture and history to be found, including Libbey Park (where you may catch a drum circle or a hula-hoop workout group); the Ojai Valley Museum; and Rains Department Store (at 96 years old, one of America's last surviving independents), loaded with its eclectic mix of house wares, clothing and bric-a-brac.

Though every other boutique on the block is impulse-shopping central, what distinguishes Kindred Spirit is its very nice collection of Judaica and mezuzot.

For more information and attractions in Ojai, log on to: www.ci.ojai.ca.us.

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