



The Oaks at Ojai photos

Yoga as well as Pilates, stretching and meditation, dance classes and more are offered at The Oaks at Ojai.

# Soothing but serious

# California health spa guides guests to lifestyle changes

Stories by **MARIA SMITH**  
Special Contributor

**O**JAI, Calif. — The spa was our special secret, a place with bargain prices, an enthusiastic staff, healthful but tasty food and an involved owner.

In an era when nearly every hotel chain has a spa, we continue to visit The Oaks at Ojai because of its low-key approach to lifestyle changes that visitors can use in the real world. And it's an amazing value. Rates start at \$175 per person per night. That's the price of a massage elsewhere, but here for that sum, guests get a comfortable room, all of their meals and access to every exercise class.

My husband and I visited to get our diets back in line. The Oaks' regimen of numerous small meals, no simple carbs (bye-bye to potatoes, bread, pastas, sugar and white rice) and reasonable portions really works. We took those lessons home with us and together have lost almost 25 pounds since summer. And we're having no trouble keeping it off.

The Oaks is a serious place for dieting and exercise. But it may be the friendliest and most supportive health spa anywhere. Classes are small, and instructors pay attention to each participant. It isn't unusual for the teacher to help one or two people after class. And like most spas, The Oaks offers personal training, too.

Guides, instructors and staff are out among the guests every day, inquiring about their visits and following up on concerns or problems to make sure everyone has a pleasant and successful visit. Owner Sheila Cluff is everywhere; she even teaches classes.

This destination spa is an attractive and understated facility that feels almost like home, but without mom's cooking. Ms. Cluff, the 70-year-old force of nature who founded the spa in 1977, has created a place that makes guests feel nurtured and valued. The goal is not simply immediate weight loss, it's making attainable adjustments in daily lives.

But the sacrifice isn't too great. For starters, the food is delicious. The total daily target is about 1,100 calories spread over three surprisingly generous meals and a number of well-timed snacks. Fresh



**Watsu, an aquatic massage therapy, is worth every cent of its \$90 cost.**



**Eating small portions frequently is one of the credos of the spa.**

fruit, coffee and iced tea are always available. Eating small portions frequently is one of the credos of the spa. Expect low-fat and salt- and sugar-free dishes crafted from fruit, vegetables, fish and poultry. We were never hungry, although we really looked forward to the midmorning, potassium-rich vegetable soup broth and the midafternoon veggie-and-dip

breaks. For growling stomachs after dinner, there is fruit and bags of flavorful air-popped popcorn.

We started every day with a hike into the foothills around Ojai. The first exercise option each day is a choice between a brisk three-mile walk and a more vigorous, and more uphill, hike, all before breakfast. The hikes, up to six miles long, are challenging and rewarding, with views from the tops of Ojai's hills. At least 18 classes are offered each day, covering every fitness level, all focused on increasing flexibility, burning fat, conditioning the heart and lungs, and toning the body. Expect lots of yoga, Pilates, stretching and meditation, dance classes (belly dance, funk and weighted body hoops) and a host of water classes in the Oaks' pool.

Instructors, for the most part, are older than 40. They demonstrate, encourage, adjust and challenge participants, all while keeping it light and fun. My husband and I attended classes for the challenge and to try new things such as tai chi, but also because they were enjoyable.

We happened to be at the spa during one of its seasonal "water weeks," with an extra assortment of pool classes each day. There was even one under the

stars for those who just couldn't get enough.

Unlike most destination spas, The Oaks is in town, fronting Ojai's main street. It embraces and is embraced by the community. (The only drawback: Out the front door are two ice cream stores.) The spa's 46 rooms are comfortably furnished and vary in size from private one-person rooms to elegant two-room suites with fireplaces and enclosed outdoor patios. We were able to pick figs from the tree at our cottage.

The Nest is The Oaks' small but nicely stocked boutique.

Our favorite spot was the pool. The beautiful California show pool was reminiscent of 1950s Hollywood. It was not too large and was surrounded by mature trees, a broad deck and plenty of lounge chairs. After hiking and a morning of exercise, we pulled a couple of chaise longues into the shade and spent relaxing afternoons reading and dozing — until that cherished afternoon snack.

Guests can choose from an array of spa treatments, including reasonably priced specialty facials (my alpha hydroxy acid facial was \$75), massages and health consultations.

A salon does hair and nail work. Watsu, a unique aquatic massage therapy held off premises, is worth every cent of its \$90 cost.

Guests chat during classes, by the pool and at the communal dining tables. We met individuals, couples, and mothers and daughters who come back year after year. Some come several times a year.

Others book extended stays, addressing significant weight and fitness challenges.

While the majority of guests are women, male guests were perfectly comfortable, and the restaurant offers slightly larger portions for bigger nutritional needs.

After dinner, guest lecturers provided additional, less physical activities to build on the lifestyle-changing themes. Topics range from handwriting analysis and art to stress and change management.

We love The Oaks. It's a relaxing break that allows us to decompress and adjust our diets. We haven't visited every year, but we may start.

*Ojai is about a 90-minute drive (with the usual heavy traffic) from Los Angeles and about 30 minutes from Santa Barbara. American Airlines flies nonstop to both cities. Special packages (mother-daughter, his and her, Labor Day weekend, etc.) are offered. Contact: [www.oaksspa.com](http://www.oaksspa.com).*