

Sunday Travel

The Californian oasis of Ojai offers uplifting activities amid natural beauty. Lisa Kjellsson rides into the mystic

Even residents of the City of Angels need a break, and just 90 minutes northwest of LA, in a valley below the Topatopa mountains, is California's answer to Shangri-La.

Ojai, a bijou town of fewer than 8,000 residents, is a boho community where stressed-out Angelenos swap highway jams and air pollution for yoga sessions, mud massages and healing hot springs. Here, among the sprawling lavender fields and orange groves, the zen grows on trees.

Ojai is home to the Chumash, a Native American people who have inhabited the California coast for millennia, and many still consider it sacred land. That inherent aura of serenity prompted its adoption by LA's hippie crowd and has helped make Ojai one of the US's top destinations for new-agers, from Indian philosopher Jiddu Krishnamurti, who lived in the Ojai Valley in the 1920s, to Byron Katie, the contemporary spiritual author and teacher.

Ojai is also an outdoor enthusiast's dream, with Los Padres National Forest to the north and Lake Casitas to the west. Keen to find my own zen, I decide to begin my visit by exploring this haven with hiking guide Maria Söderholm (mariasoderholm.com) whose passion for the California wilderness is infectious. As we make our way through the



Saddle up for a spiritual journey

valley, she points out native plants and flowers, such as the yellow bush poppy and bright orange California poppy.

The most uplifting sight of all, however, is the new vegetation sprouting through land still charred by December's Thomas fire, a wildfire that ravaged more than 280,000 acres in Ventura and Santa Barbara counties. It is hard to fathom that parts of this vibrant valley were so recently in flames. "It's humbling to see how nature

recovers from the most terrible ordeals," says Söderholm.

Just 8km east of downtown Ojai, Meditation Mount, a spiritual centre known for its full-moon group meditation sessions, was badly affected by the Thomas fire and remains closed for restoration. But meditation in motion is also powerful, and we explore the landscape both on foot and on horseback. I am a novice at the more relaxed, loose-reined Western style of riding, but soon get the hang of it with

guidance from Marie-Pierre Agostini, of the Ojai Valley Trail Riding Company (€65 for a one-hour ride; ojaivalleytrailridingcompany.com), who leads us through some of California's most beautiful horse country.

It's a scorcher of a day and I am grateful for the water bottle in my saddlebag. Next time I might opt for a cooler sunset ride, when there is the chance to experience the "pink moment" – a celestial phenomenon in which the surrounding Topatopa mountains turn a brilliant rose colour as the sun sets.

We are treated to a hint of that glorious pink in the distance from the patio of Noccicola, a fine-dining Italian restaurant (mains from €30; noccicolaojai.com). Ojai's culinary scene is excellent – another must-visit Italian is Osteria Monte Grappa, known for its artisanal pasta dishes (mains from €12; omgojai.com).

Eateries and shops are within easy walking distance of each other, and the weekly farmers' market, in the centre of Ojai, is considered one of the best in California. Stalls sell everything from olive oil to fruit, nuts, greens and all kinds of sweet treats, including all-American

“**Sunset is a chance to experience the 'pink moment', when the mountains turn brilliant rose**”

apple pie. A display of lavender soaps catches my eye – Ojai valley's lavender fields have sparked an annual festival as well as aromatherapy businesses – and the vendor, having inquired about my birthday, remarks that "Cancerians like patchouli".

Next door to the market is the Lavender Inn, a charming B&B that dates from 1874 and is full of period charm, with an eclectic mix of antiques and homely touches. There's also home-cooked breakfast, complimentary wine and tapas, and a lovely garden to relax in (doubles from €142; lavenderinn.com).

Bart's Books (bartsbooksojai.com) is the largest, and possibly quirkiest, independent open-air bookstore in America. This is the kind of place where you could peruse the shelves all

day – or all night: there's an "honesty box" for those browsing after hours. I leave with as many books as I can fit in my backpack.

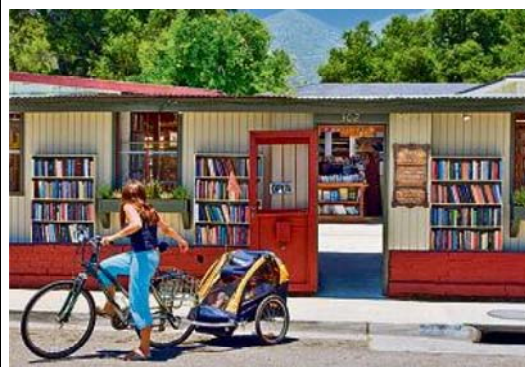
When in Ojai, you must do yoga. Yogis come here from all over the country to improve their practice. I attend the "Soulful Sunday" session at Ojai Yoga Shala in central Ojai and leave feeling energised and uplifted (ojaiyogashala.com).

My quest for wellbeing doesn't end there. I also visit the Day Spa of Ojai, reasoning that a bit of pampering will do me good after hours of hiking in the blazing sun. It does: the marine pumice body exfoliation removes dry skin and hydrates and mineralises it, while the stress-reduction back masque works its magic on my tired muscles (treatments from €22; thedayspa.com).

It's also soothing on a much deeper level, which I suspect is less to do with the mud in the masque and more to do with my therapist, Veronique, with whom I bond over esoteric matters of all kinds. I've come to the right place for all things mind-body-spirit and I can't help smiling. I found my zen.

THE LOWDOWN

- **Aer Lingus** operates daily flights from Dublin to Los Angeles (returns from €458, aerlingus.com)
- **Rentalcars.com** has car hire from Los Angeles LAX airport, from €30 per day.
- For more on Ojai and California, see visitcalifornia.ie



Ojai is an outdoor enthusiast's dream, offering opportunities to explore on foot or horseback, top; the less energetic can enjoy the town's markets and quirky stores, including the open-air Bart's Books, left