

Travel & Leisure



Post-Holiday Spas: Finding A Good Fit

It's January, and chances are you feel the need to visit a spa. What better way to recover from holiday indulgence and the stress of the season? Just be sure to take the time to find the right place. Spas are like shoes: no matter how beautiful they are, if they don't fit, you won't be comfortable. »

Canyon Ranch waiting room



« The Oaks At Ojai

Guest room at The Oaks

Located 35 miles southeast of Santa Barbara, this is the place for women who like to work out. (Men are welcome, too, but are very much in the minority.) The Oaks offers a daylong schedule of classes, which ranges from the 6:30am Advanced Mountain Hike to the mellow 4pm Relax, Stretch, & Yoga. In between, Water Works and Aqua Tone are taught in the pool, and a variety of strength, stretching, and cardio classes take place

Retail area at Hibiscus Spa, The Westin Casuarina



in a large room with a comfortable spongy floor, clouds painted on the ceiling, and a picture window overlooking the garden.

When my sister Patti joined me here last Labor Day weekend, neither of us expected a life-changing experience. In fact, I thought we'd focus on getting catch-up conversation and maybe have a spa treatment or two as time allowed. However, the classes were so good that we took them back-to-back and the low-calorie meals were so satisfying that we started keeping notes on easy eating changes we could make at home. To this day, I'm still benefiting from a mid-morning broth break, and Patti continues making 50-calorie fruit smoothies in the afternoon.

Fitness pioneer Sheila Cluff revolutionized the world of low-impact aerobics back in the 1950s. Today she owns The Oaks at Ojai and The Palms at Palm Springs, teaches at both places, leads Health Holiday cruises, and lectures extensively on nutrition and exercise. In spite of being chronologically advantaged (her term), her Ball Stretch class was the most challenging I took during our stay.

Over meals, Patti and I met guests who are regulars at The Oaks. Everyone commented that they liked the low-key atmosphere and the lack of pretension. "I've done Canyon Ranch," one woman told me, "but I prefer it here because I don't need trendy work-out clothes."

Another woman, a Hollywood agent, said she's been coming here for 20 years "because if I follow the plan, I lose five pounds in three days."

Comments on spa treatments were also very positive. A New Yorker said she's had facials "all over the world" and the one at The Oaks was "definitely the best." (Patti and I both loved our Extended Rock Massage and still joke about getting stoned together.)

Then there was the lawyer from DC who said she chose The Oaks over Rancho La Puerta because the latter doesn't have TVs and she's a news junkie.

My only caveat about The Oaks is that the rooms in the main building are too small to share. If you go with a friend, either get separate quarters or request a Mini Spa Suite or a Double Courtyard Suite. If you go alone, you'll enjoy the friendly atmosphere. (www.oaksspa.com)

Ojai Valley Inn & Spa

Unlike The Oaks, this isn't a residential spa, but if you're traveling with family, it's a good alternative. The Ojai Valley Inn is a large resort with an 18-hole golf course, riding stables, tennis courts, an activity program for children, swimming pools, and multiple dining options.

Their Spa Ojai offers a wide range of massages, wraps, facials, and body treatments, as well as a fitness center and weight room. Unlike most resort spas, they conduct a full schedule of mind/body classes – ranging from Pilates Matwork to Musical Sunset Stretch – throughout the day.

This isn't the place for a girls' getaway or a solo retreat, so if hubby and/or the



kids want to share your post-holiday spa experience, this spot should be able to keep all of you happy. (www.ojairesort.com)

The Westin Casuarina, Las Vegas

This is not a place to lose weight. Chef Jorge Lopez takes a healthful approach to food preparation, but it's not meant to be low-cal. On a recent visit I enjoyed his Chilean sea bass on a bed of Yukon Gold mashed potatoes. Unfortunately, I also enjoyed his warm chocolate cake with vanilla ice cream and fresh raspberries.

This is also not a good choice for those who must exercise. The fitness center is small and uninspiring, and Las Vegas just isn't the place to walk or jog.

Then why do I mention The Westin? Because this is a great spot for a self-indulgent spa experience. This is where to go when you want to spend your days in the spa or lounging in a poolside cabana, and your evenings taking in shows. This is the place when your only desired aerobic activity is shopping.

The Westin Casuarina, about a ten-minute walk from the strip, has neither dancing fountains nor tigers on display.

It is small by Vegas standards (850 rooms) and is unique because the staff is very personable and helpful — unlike the big hotel casinos where they often seem weary and disinterested.

This kindness is best experienced in The Westin's Hibiscus Spa. My first treatment, the Hibiscus Island Paradise, started in a wet room where I was applied with a papaya and pineapple scrub, which was then washed off with the multiple heads on the horizontal Vichy shower. Then I went into a dry room for a Swedish massage using coconut milk and kakui oil. This left me feeling smooth and relaxed, but the best was yet to come.

At this intimate spa, guests don't request a particular facial. Instead, estheticians analyze each face and tailor the treatment accordingly. The prescription for me included microdermabrasion with sea salt crystals and jojoba oil. I was also given a mask that went on as liquid and pulled off like a sheet of rubber. I almost never buy anything in the retail area of a spa, but after this experience my skin felt so soft that I couldn't resist picking up a jar of the crystals — Epicuren's Micro/Derm.

Impressed with the quality of these treatments, I opted to also try cranial sacral therapy. This healing-touch procedure involves no lotion or massage. Instead, hands were placed gently on strategic places on my body to open up the flow of energy to my brain. At the time, it didn't seem like anything was happening, but afterwards I noticed a positive shift in my mood. But then again, who wouldn't be in a good mood after a self-indulgent spa experience? (www.westin.com/lasvegas)

The Venetian, Las Vegas

If it's hubbub you must have, then you'll love the Canyon Ranch Spa at the 5,067-room Venetian. The staff here handle up to 1,000 clients a day, so you won't get the personal touch, but they do offer



some unique treatments. For instance, the Rasul Ceremony (a Middle Eastern cleansing ritual) takes place in a domed room with a heated floor and seats. Every surface is covered with ornate, handmade tiles, and fiber optics provide a starry sky.

Canyon Ranch also offers a daylong schedule of classes — including Salsa Dance, Funk Aerobics, and Venice Power Walk — and health lectures at noon daily. Guests can also use the indoor rock climbing wall, a fleet of stationary bikes, and a state-of-the-art fitness center.

In addition, spa cuisine is served in the Canyon Ranch Café. Here, calories, fat grams, and fiber grams are listed on a complete menu for breakfast and lunch.

Hmmm...lots of exercise and low-cal meals. Does this sound familiar? It should. Sheila Cluff of The Oaks inspired founder Mel Zuckerman to go into the spa/fitness business.

However, their spas are very different in style and size — like shoes. Choose carefully and enjoy. (www.canyonranch.com)

— Elizabeth Hansen, photography by Adams/Hansen Photography

The Venetian
Las Vegas
home of
Canyon Ranch



Reception area
and Climbing Wall,
Canyon Ranch