

The View from Paradise: picking the place for your retirement

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Ojai, California: The realm of the senses

By Daniel Akst

From time to time the continent shifts, and everything that isn't fastened down slides into Southern California.

Frank Lloyd Wright

In a bit of foreshadowing in 1937, Frank Capra cast the crescent-shaped settlement of Ojai, California, as Shangri-La in his film *Lost Horizon*. Today, Ojai has grown up to become what it symbolized for Capra: a mecca. Two distinct yet surprisingly compatible sets of people are drawn there--those seeking spiritual solace and those seeking a beautiful place to live. They share an abiding affection for this latter-day utopia and have helped preserve it from the mind-dulling suburban sprawl that blights much of Southern California.

Although less than 90 minutes north of Los Angeles, Ojai has always struck me as being worlds away. Its secluded, oak-lined streets are patrolled by sheriff's deputies on horseback. A used-book store, when closed, offers its wares on the honor system. When the local bank was held up recently, the tellers recognized the perpetrator, who was arrested later at his home.

The spiritual and material realms co-mingle peacefully; for every New Age guru I've met who has set up shop in Ojai, there's someone next door more interested in worshipping Mammon. The Krotona Institute of Theosophy and the Krishnamurti Foundation both occupy extensively landscaped campuses that blend seamlessly with the town's manicured estates. Movie types, who find the locals pleasantly indifferent to celebrity, dine regularly in the town's restaurants. A while back I treated myself to a massage at the well-known Wheeler Hot Springs. I was greeted by a woman named Harmony; someone else named Ocean plied me with expensive oils.

What does it cost to live in Shangri-La? \$300,000 gets you an "upscale" home of perhaps 2,000 square feet on a third to a half an acre, says local realtor Jerry Michaels of Coldwell Banker, but for fancier digs, plan to spend \$400,000 to \$700,000.

On the other hand, the place is a playground--in addition to ample tennis, golf, and horseback riding, the best of the California climate is at hand, gratis. Nearby Lake Casitas offers excellent fishing, and Ojai abuts the vast Los Padres National Forest, with its 1,540 miles of hiking trails.

Of Ojai's many charms, for Jeffrey Kerns, it is the lingering fragrance of orange blossoms from the town's vast orchards that made the place irresistible. I can't blame him--the heady scent hangs in the air, intoxicating. Kerns, 47, is creative director for BLT & Associates, which creates posters for such high-impact movies as *Independence Day* and *Mission: Impossible*. Ojai is the place Kerns goes on weekends to unwind, and Ojai will be where he settles when the time comes to retire.

Residents like Kerns can head 15 minutes south to the uncrowded beaches of Ventura and, offshore, the unspoiled Channel Islands. For cooks, there's a farmers' market stocked with fresh local produce every Sunday behind the arcade in town. For life's more serious needs--medical centers, airports, universities--Santa Barbara is only 45 minutes away.

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