

El Monte Sagrado open a whole new world of vacation ideas in Taos

TAOS — A luxurious eco-adventure might sound like a contradiction in terms, but a trip to El Monte Sagrado in Taos will open your mind to some new possibilities. And a lot more. Other than Disney World's Epcot Center World Showcase, it's hard to think of a spot on earth where you could enjoy more multicultural experiences in one place. Suites and casitas are decorated in themes that pay homage to sites and cultures around the globe, and offer several interesting takes on Southwestern style.

There's a lot to choose from. El Monte Sagrado has 84 guest rooms, including 48 "Taos Mountain" rooms, 18 Native American suites, and global suites and casitas inspired by cultures around the world.

My companion and I christened our room's style as haute Texas ranch yuppie chic. The armoires were upholstered with cowhide panels, our beds were draped in fringed suede covers and accented with fur throws and pillows embellished with real turquoise stones.

I asked for a tour of the suites and casitas and was particularly enthralled with the premiere suites inspired by Bali, Tibet and Egypt (complete with a King Tut-ish armoire, a fireplace etched with hieroglyphics and a pillared bath area that evoked images of a dip in the ancient Nile).

Other global suites pay homage to Argentina, China, Japan, Marrakech, Mexico, Morocco, Spain, Texas, and "a romantic Kama Sutra ambiance."

The Native American suites all have kiva-style fireplaces, original art and motifs that honor historical American Indian leaders.

The eclectic decor approach somehow manages to transcend kitsch in both lodgings and equally diverse common areas. The resort's adobe exterior architecture seems to find a happy blend between epic Aztec and Pueblo Revival.

Dining experiences are also imaginatively eclectic.

The Gardens offers lunch and breakfast in a tropical atrium orchard planted with kaffir lime, Ceylon cinnamon and white guava trees. Don't pass up the Blackened Bison Burgers with the quadruple-threat combo of green chile, fresh roasted jalapeños, chile mayo and pepper jack cheese.

The more formal De La Tierra restaurant is a floral-tinged hybrid of contemporary-adobe-Victorian-zen influences. We loved the soup sampler, a minimalist rectangular tray with small cups of savory soups: the warm miso was our favorite. The menu takes advantage

of fresh seasonal ingredients and pan-cultural inspirations. Imaginative selections included New Mexican Chile Chocolate Rubbed Muscovy Duck with lima bean and mango succotash, and bitter chocolate fig jus. A seared bass was plated with lobster ravioli, crushed English peas, wilted garlic spinach and fresh corn cream sauce. A nicely stocked wine cellar caters to aficionados.

If you came for a spa experience, you could easily maintain a healthy gourmet diet without leaving the premises and maybe even fit in a trio of homemade sorbets or a gluten-free flourless chocolate cake for dessert.

The Anaconda Bar dips far south of the border for a South American vibe, and is named for a giant faux anaconda that circles the room. Watch residents of a 1,000 gallon saltwater aquarium while you munch on tapas spiced with upscale Southwestern flare: calamari, nachos with chicken, steak or shrimp, tortilla soup or "Fearless Franks:" cheese and jalapeño stuffed hot dogs.

Surprisingly, for a resort so large in a relatively small town, the ambiance is both spacious and secluded. You feel like you're in a world of your own, when the Taos Plaza, with all its shops, museums, restaurants and artistic and historic Ledoux Street, is just a short walk away.

But it will probably take you at least a day or two to run out of things to do at the resort, including strolls through the grounds to enjoy mountain views, lush landscaping, statues, ponds, streams, artistic solar panels that double as sculptures, indoor and outdoor waterfalls, and all sorts of imaginative ways to recycle water and demonstrate xeriscaping and eco-friendly living principles.

After a dip in the saltwater pool in the rain forest ambiance of the domed Aqua Center (check out the nearby Biolarium filled with thriving herbs, produce and plants used at the resort), we had a choice of luxurious en suite ablutions in our whirlpool bath or a steam shower with multiple shower heads, confident, I suppose, that the water would be efficiently recycled in drought-ridden New Mexico.

There is also a nicely equipped fitness center and a full-service spa that offers everything from massage, facials and mani-pedis to esoteric Northern New Mexico specialties like "sacred time treatments to bring the physical body into balance and harmony" with herbs, warm stones, crystals or maybe a "detoxifying turquoise mud wrap."

Original art, much of it by world-renowned and New Mexico artists, is featured throughout the resort, where other surprises include a business center and meeting rooms with distracting and breathtaking vistas of mountains and grounds, and a well-stocked library with an English gentlemen's club ambiance and a pool table rumored to have been used by Minnesota Fats. Plush banquettes surround a grand piano ready for concerts in an intimate salon embellished with gold leaf by a local artisan.

There are elegant ballrooms large enough for major soirées. Reportedly actress Ashley Judd and her indie auto racer husband Dario Franchitti were recent guests with a destination wedding party.

Check out the Living Machine, billed as "a holistically designed eco-structure that incorporates recycled water, plants, and rock formations into a self-sustaining ecosystem." We even found a cluster of solar panels incorporated into an imaginative sculpture.

You'll be able to assuage any guilt pangs you might feel about your luxuriously decadent resort getaway when you go home with lots of new ideas about greening your own abode with artistic flare.