

APRIL 2008



## Sunset Boulevard

Take this spa trail across New Mexico in search of authentic indigenous rituals, holistic treatments, industry-leading eco-consciousness-and night skies as vivid as a Georgia O'Keeffe painting.

By Charlene Rooke

Driving west of Taos on the highway to **Ojo Caliente Mineral Spa and Resort** (ojo caliente means “hot eye” in Spanish), I’m puzzled by the cone-shaped formations scattered among the area’s mesas and cliffs: dormant volcanoes? The geography makes sense once I’m reclining in the waters, which emerge from underground aquifers through subterranean caves heated by volcanic rock and infused with minerals. This curative hot springs, a sacred gathering place to the tribes of New Mexico, is the only one in the world with four distinct types of mineral composition.

Leathery-skinned regulars recline in the hot pools rich in iron (said to be beneficial to the blood and immune system) and arsenic (believed to relieve everything from arthritis to stomach ulcers to skin conditions). Just a few floaters populate the enclosed soda pool (in which water full of natural sodium bicarbonate, said to help with digestive problems, steams away). The brave even drink from a tap rich in natural lithium, a longtime practice (thought to relieve depression and aid digestion) that is nonetheless not officially condoned. The modern aspect of these ancient healing waters is a high-tech wastewater treatment plant and geothermal heating and cooling systems that give it true eco-cred.

The feeling of the wild west is still here in the original 1916 hotel and 1868 bathhouse. In one of four new spa rooms, I get a facial with the ayurvedic-based Sundāri

line from Ryan, who has radical fishhook ear piercings. He uses the vata products for “hot” types with dry skin, which describes my condition in the thin, dry high-desert atmosphere. Another signature treatment here is a Milagro (miracle) wrap, a bargain at just \$10 to be swathed in layers of blankets post-soak, sweating out any remaining toxins. My cliffside suite, like many of the new buildings, is made of eco-friendly rastra (a recycled styrofoam and cement composite) and features recycled building products like weathered beams. There’s a private hot tub out back, so late that night I raise the lever on the industrial-looking hot-water pump and in a few quick minutes the large, shallow square tub is full enough to climb in. I recline on the steps and my mouth opens, and hangs open in this gaping position, for the duration of my 15-minute soak.

**Due to the spring’ secluded location and conscious “downlighting” to reduce light pollution, the sky is as thick with white stars as grains of sand on a beach, beating any Star Wars flick for entertainment value with its blinking, streaking and glowing attractions. The red rock cliffs loom beside me; white smoke drifts from my kiva fireplace across the indigo sky as I mentally compose my own painting of this stellar New Mexico moment.**