

12 stress-busting, joy-boosting surprises at Santa Fe's Sunrise Springs

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Photo: Robin Soslow / For The Express-News

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The sight and sound of water movement is good for health and spirit, and there are many places to experience that at Sunrise Springs Spa Resort near Santa Fe.

Could this be my soulmate? Or solemate?

When Woodstock licked my foot, he bestowed the magic needed to hold my Warrior III yoga pose on the lumpy lawn. He's a black lab and therapy dog who decided to offer a splash of extra service.

This was just one of the stress-busting surprises I found at Sunrise Springs, a spring-fed spa resort revamped and reopened in fall 2015. Twenty minutes west of downtown Santa Fe, cold natural springs made this a stop to replenish along El Camino Real de Tierra Adentro (The Royal Road of the Interior Land).

The spa expanded its roster of distinctive classes and activities and became the sister resort to New Mexico's famous Ojo Caliente Mineral Springs.

The 70-acre oasis lies in La Cienega Valley, surrounded by the Sangre de Cristo, Ortiz and Jemez Mountains. At nearly 6,000 feet are 20 spacious casitas with private courtyards, king beds, gas fireplaces and 32 garden-view guest rooms.

New Mexico desert sage lightly perfume the air. Great blue herons, meadowlarks, western mountain bluebirds, hummingbirds, ravens, ducks and other birds add song, chatter and color. Water is ever-present, with the expansive spring-fed pond, bubbling fountains and stone-studded manmade waterfalls. Willow leaves sway, rustle and glitter in the sun. At night, bullfrogs and crickets form a chorus. Even at full capacity, tranquility reigned.

The variety of fitness, spa and spiritual wellbeing activities made this high-desert hide-out seem ideal for a girlfriend getaway. We fretted over the "digital detox" aspect: the rooms lack TV, and guests are encouraged to leave cellphones far from fingers and beds. But the decision's up to the guest. Anyone craving TV can borrow an iPad at the front desk.

The resort's already earning repeat visitors with uncommon, inspired wellness offerings. Here are my favorites:

Yoga, sunlight and candlelight: We practiced outdoor yoga under the sun and candlelight yoga in the yoga studio, guided by Anjali. Her "feel free to explore" pose variations ranging from "relaxed" to "more active" to "you can even take a break to swim in the pool" had newbies and longtimers planning to attend her next class. As we worked to balance on the grassy lawn, she inspired us with a finding that uneven surfaces burn 8 percent more calories.

Bow wow wows: Assistance Dogs of the West trains and places service dogs with people from children to seniors to veterans. Part of the puppies' socialization is accomplished at Sunrise Springs. The first spa program of its kind, the Puppy Enrichment Center gives guests time to play with young labs. It's more than fun; interacting with animals has been proven to trigger the release of the "love" hormone oxytocin, lowers blood pressure and reduces levels of stress-induced cortisol.

Chicken littles: In an airy shelter, we sat with Silkie chickens. A child's sense of joy enveloped us as snow-white Princess and her gold and heather companions plucked feed from our hands and as we held these fluffy beings, feeling them purr.

Get soaked: Surrounded by trees, overlooking the pond, private "Ojitos" — open-air soaking pools and tubs — are filled with natural spring water set at 104 degrees. The magnesium-fused water helps calm nerves and boost the immune system. The spa's indoor treatments include massage and skin care using botanicals harvested locally.

More Information

If you go

For more info:
<http://sunrisesprings.com>

Digging dirt: Ways to channel energy and connect with nature include gardening classes. Guided by horticulturist Danielle Simmons, we pulled up ripe red and golden radishes bare-handed and planted seeds in their place. We also picked little Bumblebee and Indigo Rose tomatoes loaded with beneficial antioxidants — and flavor, we learned, when tasting our bounty.

Crushing it: I joined visitors from New Jersey to learn how to make herbal salves for healing cuts and scrapes. Our instructor Danielle explained the medicinal properties of herbs such as yarrow (anti-microbial) and myrrh (anti-inflammatory) as we crushed them with mortars and pestles. After combining them with olive oil and beeswax, we used a double-boiler to create the salve. We each left with two tiny silver tins and a sense of accomplishment, having practiced a bit of ancient wisdom.

Express yourself: Several art workshops help guests discover and express deep feelings.. In the "Body as Brush" class, my friends first connected to Earth through slow Qigong motions, then used fingers to paint what they felt. The designs were copied onto greeting cards.

Medicine Wheel: At a large central circle with landscaped quadrants oriented to the four directions, North, East, South and West, licensed counselor Michael Schroeder created a pleasant, safe and nonjudgmental outdoor space for discussing personal challenges and goals — mental, emotional, physical and spiritual. Delicate tufts shed by cottonwood trees floated by, adding a magical feel. "What happens in the Wheel stays in the Wheel," he said. What I can tell you is that he explained why the hottest fires open possibilities for the greatest growth — and that this no-extra-cost activity is a terrific value.

Healing ceremony: Concha Garcia Allen, a healing guide revered in the region, immersed us in rituals for gaining personal enlightenment that integrated prayers keyed to the four directions, wild penstemon flowers and readily accessible herbs, rattles and dances. She opened by blowing a conch shell and closed with blessings that offered gratitude. To help me see clear to coping with a personal loss, she showed me how to place a herb called rue — under my tongue. The practice felt more promising than wine therapy.

Hedonistic health food: It's a joy eating your colors here. Chef Rocky Durham, a Santa Fe native, and his team take locally sourced ingredients, largely from the resort's own garden, and use culinary tricks to coax maximize flavor out of them. The greens, radishes, heirloom tomatoes, peas, herbs and other produce are so fresh and robustly flavored that we ordered salads at every meal — for the taste, not out of self-discipline. Sauces (chokecherry) and dressings inspire plate-cleaning with housemade bread. The English pea hummus is addictive. The dishes are beautifully presented, and menus dominated by twists on Northern New Mexico dishes such as veggie tacos on made-daily blue corn tortillas, red chile tamales and a breakfast burrito that makes it easy to eat your colors. Drinks range from a whisper-light homemade hibiscus iced tea to handcrafted paraje hot tea to wine.

Sense of calm mixed with joy: Sandy paths crossing the grassy grounds lead in all directions to relaxing "just breath" places. Rocking chairs line patios and a dock. Footbridges invite contemplation. Colorful soft-fabric hammocks and tree swings etched with the word "Peace" draw out that inner child. An inner child free to take a spontaneous swim in the heated outdoor pool, play croquet or pet a puppy.

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