

Ojo (Ho Ho) Caliente

I don't have a lot of spa experience, so I was looking forward to the visit to Ojo Caliente, a well known and very old resort about 45 miles north of Santa Fe. We had planned the weekend in celebration of Terry's birthday, staying Friday night through Sunday afternoon.

The lodge at Ojo is a wonderful, funky old adobe style hotel which sits next to an even older, actually ancient, set of hot springs. The busy season ends October 31st. Naturally we were coming Oct 25th and missed out on the lower rates and the need to make reservations about 3 years, well, maybe three months, in advance. So we stayed at a lovely little bed and breakfast about a 10 minute walk down the road.

Now here's what you need to know about the hot springs at Ojo Caliente. First there are actually four springs, all with different types of mineral content. There's the Iron Springs, which are in an outdoor cement pool about 15 by 25 feet, and look like a swimming pool that has completely rusted out. There's the Soda Springs, which are housed indoors under a slanting plastic corrugated roof which steams up and makes the place feel a little like a steam room. There's the Lithium springs which actually is a pump in the middle of the bathing pool yard where you can fill glasses and drink the stuff. Since it's lithium it's supposed to make you feel better but it tastes like old bathtub water. And then there's the Arsenic Springs, which it seems don't kill you right away. We're not yet sure about the lingering death part.

These four springs are housed - and I use the word "housed" loosely - inside a compound of buildings, shacks and tents connected by concrete pathways. The buildings have rooms for massage, private hot tubs and places for bizarre and incomprehensible health spa activities like body polish, bio-wraps, aroma therapy croquet, and hot beeswax facials.

So we arrive Friday night after getting seriously lost by missing several key turns in Espanola. These roads couldn't have been more poorly marked if they had held a competition for confusing road signs. We drove about 20 miles out of the way to another lovely spot, Embudo Station, before turning around and finding the right road. We got to Ojo after dark. After checking in at the bed and breakfast, the first order of business was food. Being adventurous, we set out walking to the spa - in the pitch dark on a two lane country road without a flashlight. Several times we were almost killed by speeding cars, but we made it. The restaurant, which is also lovely, also requires reservations, and we didn't have any. But they seated us anyway. And we had a lovely meal and headed back along death highway to our room.

The next day I hiked up death highway in the daylight and purchased two day passes for the Mineral Pools. And Terry and I found our way there later after a spirited sleep-in, which is a lot like a laugh-in or love-in but without any sound or movement. I exchanged my car keys for a locker, changed and went into the Iron Springs pool. This was a truly wonderful moment. It felt great! The fact that the water was dark and I couldn't see my feet was OK. It was hard to

imagine anything dangerous alive in these waters. And I only bumped my shins on the underwater rocks a few times. The outdoor location for the Iron Springs pool also allowed me a clear view of Terry striding across the compound to fetch me because the desk attendant at the entrance didn't give a hoot about the plastic day pass badge I had obtained that morning and wanted to see the payment *receipt* for the day pass I had obtained that morning. I have years of management experience and I can honestly say that the in-and-out pass system at Ojo Caliente is one of the most confused and ineffective I have ever seen. Not only was it annoying but for all that annoyance actually didn't work. We later met a couple who never, once, over many years, paid for their day passes, but simply walked through in their bathrobes and were never challenged. Terry, on the other hand, was a paying customer and was only let in after I hauled my ass out of the Iron Springs pool and confronted the entranceway dictator.

So we were in! We did the Iron pool. We went on to the Soda Pool, where Terry expected a club and I was hoping for some scotch. (Get it? Club Soda. Scotch and Soda). Then past the Lithium pump to the Arsenic Pool. It is a strange thing that two New Mexico liberals adamantly opposed to Bush Administration water policy about arsenic in the water supply, would soak themselves in an arsenic hot tub. But we did. And we didn't die.

The night before, when we were waiting for our turn at the restaurant, we had made reservations for massages. The only one-hour massages they had left were at 8:30 PM on Saturday night. For an extra \$25 you could add on an Apricot Facial. This was to be the highlight of the trip. We signed right up and counted ourselves lucky that we had gotten the last time slots. So after reading, and napping back at the B&B we headed to the Hot Springs for our massages. Now here's the deal. It's 8:30 at night on October 26th. It's cold. It has been raining lightly off and on all afternoon. Now it begins to rain more steadily. We pass the entranceway guardhouse. I go to the building with the men's lockers. Terry goes to the building with the women's lockers, also the venue for the actual massages. It's about 30 yards between them, about 20 seconds at a good sprint, which is what I did in my bathing suit and bare feet. Here we are to relax and do something for our health and I'm running around in the cold rain in my bare feet. My mother would not be happy if she knew about this.

So with me shivering in my bathing suit, we are lead back to our respective massage therapist boudoirs. My therapist is a big woman, with strong looking arms and hands. And the first thing she does is ask me what *kind* of massage I want. Now this question really throws me. I know there are different kinds of massage: Swedish, Norwegian, Spartan, Presbyterian, but I actually don't know what any of these mean. So I tell her to do whatever kind of massage she thinks best. This was my first and last massage mistake. Next time I'm studying the books ahead of time. She leaves the room. I take off my bathing suit and lie face down on the table with a towel-like blanket over me. She knocks and comes in.

Now massage is supposed to be a relaxing experience. I had a massage once where I fell asleep and the therapist practically had to push me off the table so I would get up and leave. But this massage was different. This was like guerilla massage. She started working on my back and

shoulders and neck and it felt pretty good. But then all of a sudden she seized hold of this muscle in my neck and started to squeeze it, and it hurt like hell. This was a surprise. After a second or two of pain, I decided to assert myself: *AI*s this supposed to hurt?@I mumbled through the towel around my face. *A*Well, it=s the clavichord muscle and it=a place where a lot of tension gets stored.@She knew the names of all the muscles or she was good at making them up. I realized that I had given her permission to do the kind of massage that *she* wanted to do, the kind that was *A*good for me,@which meant periods of complete relaxation interspersed with searing pain. There was no turning back now. She found two other muscles that really hurt like hell. The stegosaurus muscle in the middle of my back and the Chinese Shakra medicine nerve center between my thumb and forefinger, where every nerve in the body supposedly has a lobbyist and legal representative. The great thing about these muscles-that-hurt-like-hell is that there are two of them, one on each side of the body. So we got to do all of this twice, which meant a lot of evil tension was forced out of my body at the expense of serious and not very relaxing pain. It turns out that tension is to massage therapists like weeds are to farmers. They will do anything to rid the body or field of these demons, and no amount of suffering is too much, certainly not if it=s someone else=s suffering. It was for my own good. I would surely feel better after this was all over. But there was no way I was going to fall asleep.

Now the other thing that kept me from falling asleep was the fact that I had no idea how much to tip this woman. I had five dollars stuffed in my bathing suit. But I was sure this was not enough. And I spent the entire time I was supposed to be relaxing between the episodes of pain, thinking about how mad and disappointed she would be at only five dollars and what could I do to give her more, given that my wallet was in my locker, a good 30 yard naked sprint in the rain away. Sure enough, when I was given my release, and she left the room so that I could put on my cold wet bathing suit, (Did I mention it was cold and wet?) I noticed that her tip basket had only twenties in it. If she had gotten other tips that day, she had taken them out and left only the twenties; or put her own twenties in. Pretty crafty, I thought. But after she came back in I said, *AI* left my wallet in the locker. I=ll be right back with your tip.@And I sprinted the 30 yards in the cold freezing rain in my bare feet and wet bathing suit, opened my locker, dug out a twenty dollar bill and sprinted 30 yards back in my bare feet and wet bathing suit, and put the twenty in her basket. Now, if you ever have the experience of a nice soothing massage, and feel some form of peace and serenity, some sense of warmth and well-being at the end of it, there is nothing so sure to destroy it as a 30 yard half naked bare-footed run in the cold rain. That was my massage.

The rest of the trip was much better. We hiked up to the top of the mesa and viewed the ruins of the Posi Pueblo, and the magnificent yellow cottonwoods lining the Chama river up and down the valley. We sat and read. We played with a wonderful little cat that made itself at home in our room. All very nice. But the hot springs experience itself was mostly disappointing. And I think I learned a few things from all of this. I will definitely be more careful in planning such a visit the next time around, providing the arsenic doesn't kill me first.