

Massage à Deux | Find the perfect formula for side-by-side treatments at The Spa at El Encanto. BY LISA MATTE



I've never been a fan of couple's massage. The side-by-side treatment often touted as a blissfully romantic spa escape always left me feeling a bit meh.

I trace my indifference to the first time my husband and I indulged in the spa equivalent of a table for two. We were staying at a lovely hotel on the west coast of Florida. The weather was beautiful as we strolled a bougainvillea-lined path to the spa.

We had great expectations but were quickly disappointed when we realized our individual therapists were synchronizing their movements. Rather than focusing on our unique stress points and tight muscles, the two moved in time to some silent rhythm only they could hear. Sweeping strokes and billowing sheets took precedence over therapeutic healing.

A couple's massage at The Spa at El Encanto changed my mind about massage à deux.

The difference between our experience at the sprawling resort in Santa Barbara, Calif., and previous ventures into the realm of treatments for two began the moment we entered the spa.

ENCHANTMENT: *El Encanto exterior*

PHOTO: © EL ENCANTO

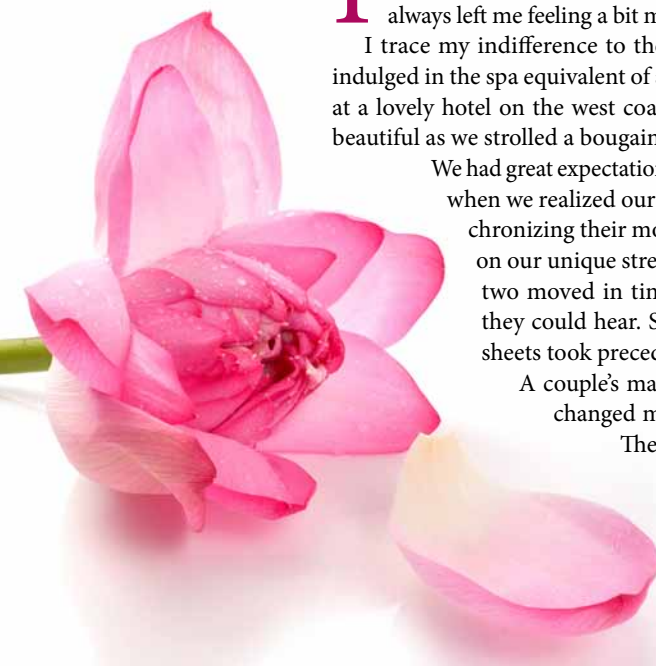
Attendants greeted us warmly and escorted us to the separate men's and women's locker rooms, where we changed from our street clothes into comfy robes and slippers before reconvening in the bright and airy lounge, done in soothing tones of light blue and cream. We were already feeling relaxed when our therapists, Yumi and Celeste, arrived to escort us to a treatment room set with side-by-side massage tables.

Yumi drew me to one side of the room while Celeste took Kevin aside to talk quietly in the opposite corner. Yumi explained that, in a departure from my experience with "signature" treatments at other spas, El Encanto's signature massage (and its couple's equivalent) employs a variety of techniques tailored to meet each individual's needs.

The "secret ingredient" is the incorporation of plant-based oils by Lotus Wei.

Founded in 2000 by Katie Hess, a self-described flower alchemist and spiritual seeker, Lotus Wei crafts and distributes an extensive line of plant-based potions.

According to Lotus Wei: Flower alchemy is based on the premise that our bodies operate like finely tuned instruments. Sometimes



our bodies vibrate at perfect pitch, but occasionally we need a bit of fine-tuning. Flower essences act as a natural tuning fork, easing our bodies into balance — and our bodies will intuitively direct us to the essence we need to find that balance.

Yumi showed me a chart of flowers and asked me to identify the one that appealed to me most in that moment. Most of the blossoms were beautiful and graceful. My brain wanted to choose a delicate iris, but I resolved to embrace the Lotus Wei philosophy as I pointed to a big, bright yellow, button-like flower — the image kept drawing my attention even though I didn't particularly like it.

"Joy," Yumi said. The flower I picked out of the line-up was an indication that I needed more joy in my life. Aha. I couldn't argue the point. I was in a gorgeous place, having a fabulous time, but I was also a bit on edge about upcoming business; that incipient stress was preventing me from embracing the moment.

As my husband and I reclined on the side-by-side massage tables, Yumi and Celeste blended the essence of the flowers we had each selected into the oil they would employ during our massages. We drifted slowly into relaxation during our separate-but-adjacent treatments and emerged an hour later feeling rested, relaxed ... and connected; the perfect state for being able to enjoy our beautiful surroundings.

El Encanto reopened in March 2013 following an extensive seven-year renovation. The property's infrastructure dates to 1913, when local landowner James Warren built a cottage community to house students attending Santa Barbara State College, the forebear to today's U.C. Santa Barbara. When Warren's rental cottage idea didn't take root, he shifted gears, adding a main building and reopening as a hotel.

The seven-acre property passed through several owners before Eric Friden, an accomplished businessman, purchased it in 1977. Friden died in a polo accident at the age of 61 in 2003. He and his wife, Kerin, had been planning an extensive renovation at the time of his death.

Orient-Express picked up the project in 2004, purchasing the idyllic property for \$26 million. The hotel closed in 2006 in

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anticipation of a major overhaul. Seven years and \$134 million later, El Encanto reopened to rave reviews.

Extreme measures were taken to ensure the iconic lily pond and expansive gardens remain a focal point. Contractors disassembled the brick columns supporting the trellis over the lily pond brick by brick, labeling and cataloging each so it could be rebuilt exactly over the pond. Mature trees and flowering shrubs were excavated and moved to greenhouses before being returned to the landscape. Guest bungalows were stripped and refurbished to maintain architectural integrity while offering all the 21st-century amenities associated with 5-star hotels. While initial plans called for renovating the main building, structural concerns made it necessary to raze the building. It was recreated on its original footprint.

El Encanto means "The Enchanted." Indeed it is.

FLOWER POWER:

Gardens at El Encanto

PHOTO: © EL ENCANTO

**THE SPA AT
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