

CEREAL

TRAVEL & STYLE

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O J A I

THE VILLAGE OF NORDHOFF

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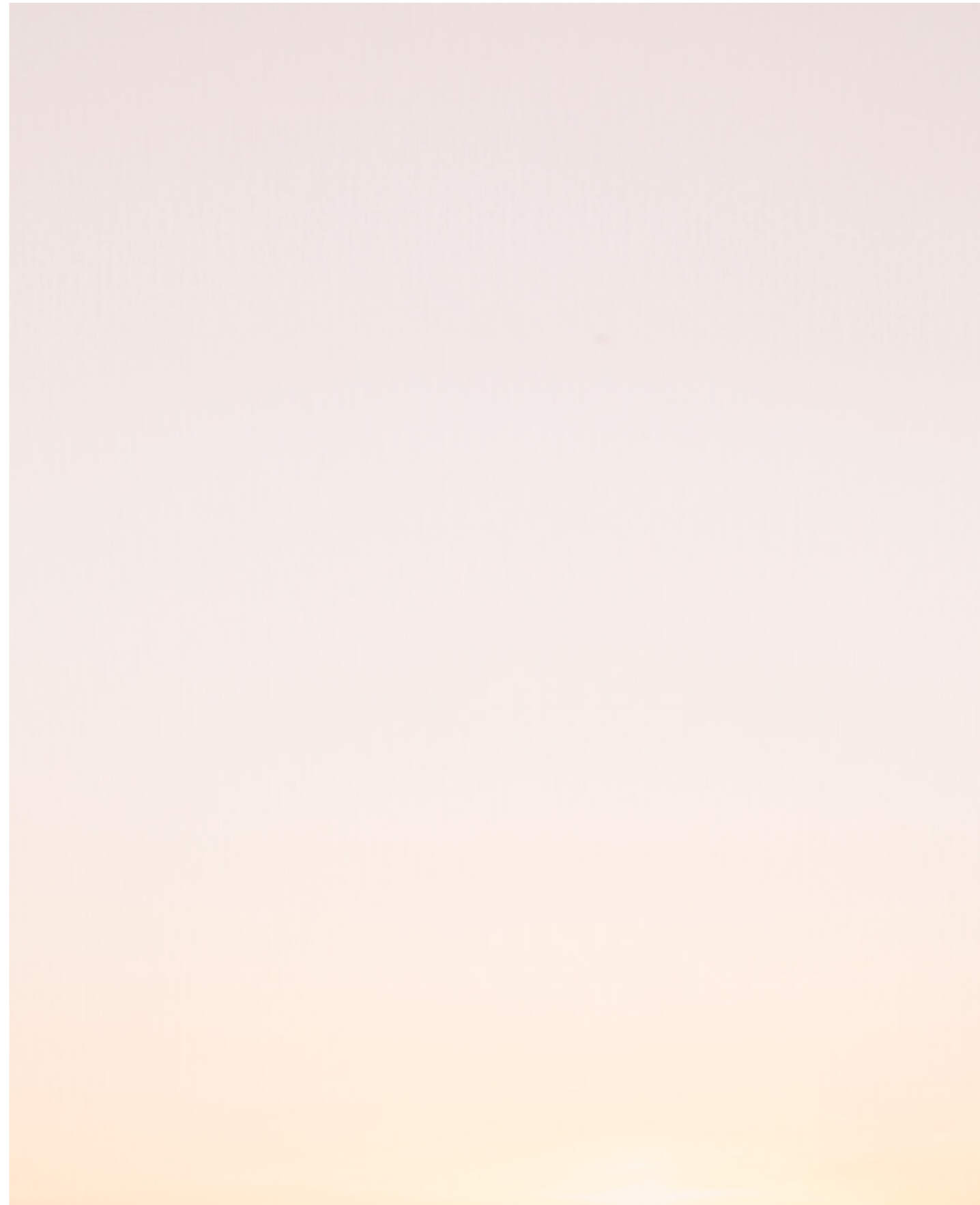
German born journalist Charles Nordhoff was responsible for creating the mythos of Ojai, California, without ever having been there. His book *California: For Health, Pleasure, and Residence* was published in 1873, and was soon distributed around the world to would be travellers. Nordhoff, who was living in New York City at the time, extols the Golden State's miraculous climate, though not Ojai's specifically, as the writer had yet to visit the valley. He goes on to claim that the air in Southern California has the ability to heal and rejuvenate; "I have known weakly women not accustomed to horseback exercise to ride, after a few weeks' practice, from five to 10 miles in a day, and feel no soreness of the limbs or other unpleasant consequences," he writes. A year after the book was published, a small town an hour and a half northeast of Los Angeles was officially named Nordhoff. The village was renamed Ojai in 1921, but by then, the sentiments expressed in *California: For Health, Pleasure, and Residence* had worked their way into the DNA of the town, as well as the perception of it, worldwide.

In the late 1960s, when California was in the throes of the New Age movement, the body politic of the valley changed. Ojai was suddenly awash with long hair, sundresses, beads, crystal stores, and meditation centres – many of which remain today. These new

residents had found in Ojai a refuge from their daily *ennui*. In 1971, the famed Meditation Mount was created. This gardened estate and beacon for the community's spiritual identity, sits atop a winding, mile long road that provides both stunning valley views and a venue for group meditation sessions.

When I left for the University of Southern California in 2004, I was chasing what fellow New Yorker Charles Nordhoff described as the 'pleasure and benefit' of the West Coast. My hair was long and I was listening to a lot of The Band. I thought I was perfectly outfitted to explore California's earthly adventures and hippie attitudes. Six months and 30 lb later, however, I had become something of an indoor cat, playing video games, frequenting the McDonalds Drive-Thru, and avoiding places like Ojai, which could expose my nature averse prejudices.

Today, nearly 150 years after the town was founded, people still regard Ojai as the feather in Southern California's cap – a place not to be missed for its splendour and healing properties. This past May, I finally put aside my preconceptions about the town and paid a visit. On the drive in we passed Nordhoff High School, home of the Rangers, and scuttled along the basin of the valley, cradled on all sides by the Topatopa Mountains. I was stunned by the town's





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erie, postcard ready Americana quaintness. I was determined to meet Ojai on its own terms, and beat back the artery clogging naivety of my college age mindset. Our plan was to check into the Ojai Valley Inn & Spa, head out for a hike, and then visit Meditation Mount, where we would watch and photograph the Pink Moment – when the sun ducks behind the mountains, and fills the valley with a beautiful rose coloured haze.

The concierge at our hotel suggested we try the Shelf Road Trail, and we obliged. She also told us that the best view of the Pink Moment would be from the hotel's front parking lot, a fact we ignored. The mile long trail zigzags the foothills to the north, providing unobstructed views of the town and its 7,500 residents below. Ojai is laid out in a grid, lined with single family homes, Spanish and Adobe style resorts, and orange groves with perfectly round, bright, delicious looking fruit. Many of these Valencia orange trees butt up against the trail, and hikers are able to grab the fruit and eat it along the way (evidenced by the many curls of orange peel lining the dirt path). From its perch a quarter of the way up the mountainside, the Shelf Road Trail gives visitors the impression of being inside a giant meteor crater, overlooking a town that could be from any 1950s American sitcom. The vegetation is mostly chaparral dotted with California sage, blue elderberry, and mugwort. There are avocado trees everywhere along the path, and we spent the first 30 minutes of our hike tossing a ripe Haas around like giddy schoolchildren. Sun soaked and drugged in our admiration for this picturesque hiking trail, we lost all track of time, and were forced to jog, sweating and panting, back to the car. We were going to be woefully late for the Pink Moment.

We arrived at Meditation Mount after speeding through the intersections of Downtown, accelerating around the serpentine switchbacks of the single lane road leading to the base of the site, all the while blasting the music of Kanye West from our rented SUV. This surely was not what Nordhoff had in mind. At the entrance, we were greeted by a couple throwing back white wine in the trunk of their hatchback Mercedes Benz. It was a Tuesday, and unfortunately for all of us, Meditation Mount was not open. We, the incredulous interlopers we were, invited the couple to follow us onward, past the sign suggesting *Closed*, and toward spiritual enlightenment (or at the very least a breathtaking sunset).

Within minutes of entering the grounds, a lithe, silver haired woman of the Free Love Generation wearing a flowing, tie dyed dress was upon us. She lived at the Mount, and having seen our group snapping pictures and making haste, she politely and repeatedly asked us to leave, but we would not. We preyed upon her goodwill and inability as a devotee to the universal spiritual principles to forcibly remove us. Together, the group wandered through the International Garden of Peace, which is beautifully maintained and peppered with blossoming flowers and rocks inscribed with messages of self empowerment and tenets for a holy life. Under the din of our persistently grousing hippie chaperone, we walked through a clearing to the lookout point. At this time, she asked the couple to please stop drinking wine in the sacred garden, to which they responded by chugging the rest of their bottle. Then, the last sliver of sun snuck behind the western peaks of the Topatopa Mountains, and the scene below became an iridescent pink. It was a serene and beautiful moment. The couple, now sated with an entire bottle of Chardonnay, were embracing behind us. Finally calm and restitute, our group began the walk back to the car. As we parted ways with our friend and mountaintop resident, she informed us that, pretty as it was, what we had just seen was called a sunset. The Pink Moment, she said, can only be seen from the other side of Meditation Mount, or, in our case, from the parking lot of the Ojai Valley Inn & Spa. ■

