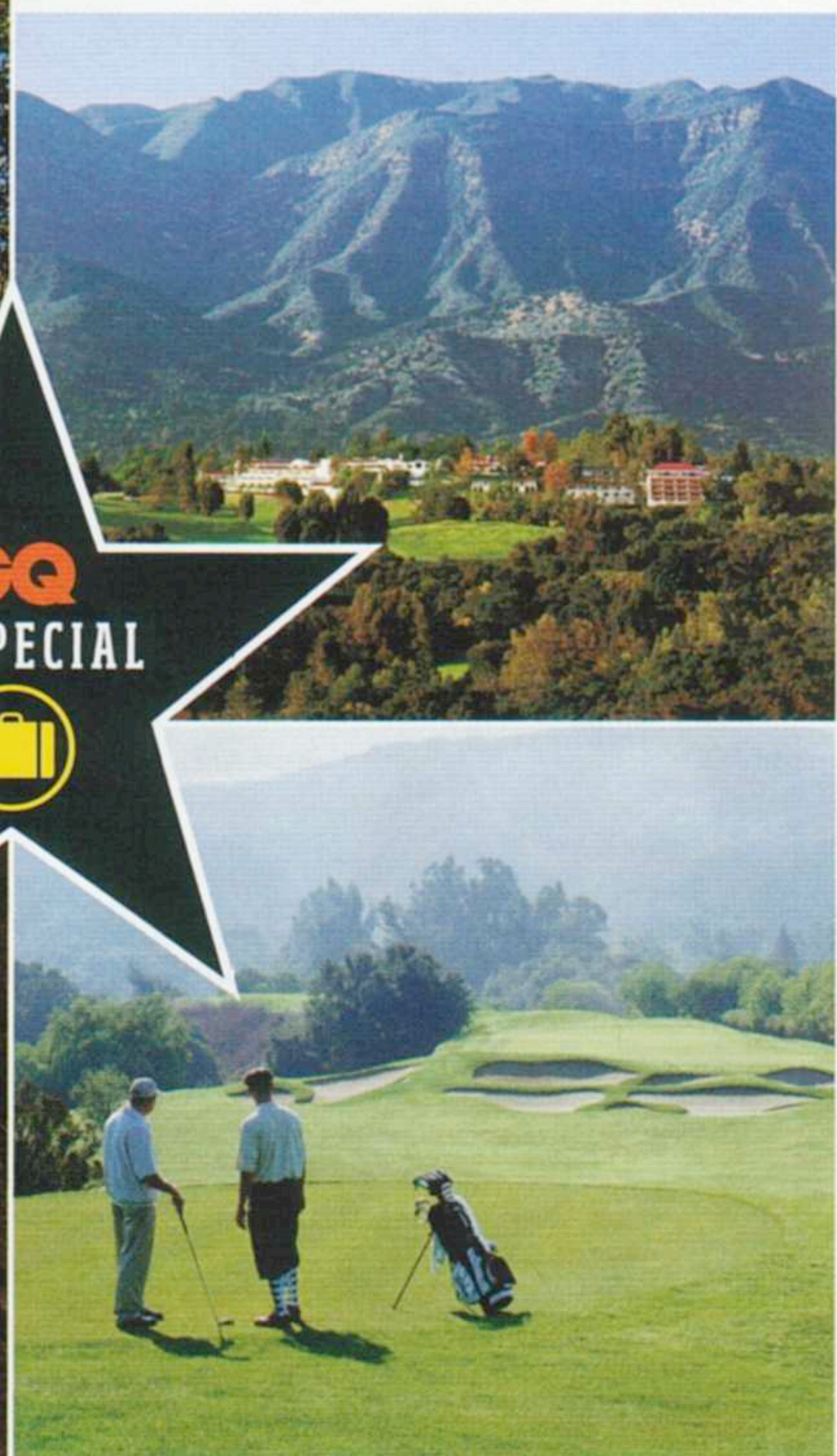




Spa attraction (clockwise from left): Clark Gable and Paul Newman were regulars at Ojai Valley Inn and Spa, lured by its grand location and golf course



Ojai Valley

GQ checks in at southern California's very own Shangri-la, set high in the Topa Topa mountains

The drive up the southern

California coastline from Los Angeles to the Ojai Valley is one of the most beautiful trips you can ever take, provided you go along State Highway No.1, better known as the Pacific Coast Highway (or PCH to Angelinos), rather than the more direct path along the 101 Ventura Freeway.

The Ojai Valley Inn and Spa, which we visited on a gloriously clear and sunny January day, is set in a gorgeous and remarkably unspoiled valley high up in the Topa Topa mountain range. So beautiful is the valley that it was featured as Shangri-la in Frank Capra's 1937 classic film, *Lost Horizon*. "Ojai" is a native American word meaning "the Nest", and it was a perfect nest for me and my family on a winter day trip.

The Inn was opened in 1923, and has just undergone a £55m renovation – without compromising the beautiful southern California ambience of its low-rise, white-washed Spanish

colonial buildings spread out along a ridge on a 220-acre campus. A first-class, challenging and justly famous 18-hole golf course meanders among the trees below the Inn. The course was designed by George C Thomas, who also designed several of the most famous courses in the LA area, among them the Bel Air, Riviera and the LA Country Club.

Before we played the back nine, we had a delightful lunch on the outdoor terrace of the Oak Café. Golf that day was our usual mixture of great and ghastly shots, but we loved the old-fashioned scenic course, with its huge vistas and wickedly small greens. Afterwards, we went to the large and elegant spa for massages, then had a superb

dinner at the Maravilla, the Inn's signature restaurant. It was unquestionably the best food we encountered in southern California during a month-long trip – locally grown organic fare cooked

The entire feeling is of a classic, early 20th-century private estate: informal and luxurious

OJAI RESORT

905 Country Club Road, Ojai, CA 93023.
001 805 646 1111,
ojairesort.com
Rooms start from £245 per night for a standard double

GETTING THERE

Virgin Atlantic flies from London Heathrow to Los Angeles twice daily. Fares start from £339 including taxes and can be booked online at virgin-atlantic.com or by calling 08705 747747. Ojai is approximately two hours' drive from Los Angeles

to perfection. The scallops with wild mushrooms and veal cheek ragout was outstanding, especially when washed down with excellent California vintages from an extensive wine list.

We did not stay overnight, but we looked at a couple of typical rooms for a future stay. Each had a high-beamed ceiling, four-poster bed and a fireplace; each was decorated with lovely Spanish tiles. The entire feeling, inside and out, is of a classic, early 20th-century California private estate: relaxed, elegant, informal and luxurious. In keeping with the casual feeling of the Inn, it was child – and pet – friendly.

We also managed to fit in a brief visit to the unique Artists' Cottage, where we painted in watercolours. Later, we created our own bespoke perfumes from the dozens of essential oils in the Apothecary, all under the expert guidance of Ojai's artist-in-residence, Renate Collins.

The time we spent at the Ojai Valley Inn was only from 1pm to 7pm, but it felt as if we'd been there for days (and wished we had!). After our wonderful day, we promised ourselves a return visit to Shangri-la. ED VICTOR

