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## Escapes

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Journeys

### At Eco-Spas, It's Nature *And* Nurture

By GRETCHEN REYNOLDS

**W**ATER is everywhere at El Monte Sagrado resort in Taos, N.M. It pours over small, rocky waterfalls on the leafy grounds. It trickles through a trough at the base of a curving wall in the resort's luxurious spa. It fills a rough-hewn artificial "swimming hole" outside, where back-to-nature bathers blithely commune with goldfish and trout, while children staying at the resort dip in borrowed fishing poles, and with a little barefoot perseverance, try to catch a trout for dinner. (Goldfish are strictly catch and release.) The constant gurgling is intoxicating in the high, dry desert of Taos. It whispers of life, growth and renewal.

It also would be massively wasteful if Thomas Worrell Jr., the owner of this self-proclaimed "living resort and rejuvenation center," hadn't invested roughly \$500,000 in a complex water recycling and purification system called a Living Machine. It sits in a glassed-in room (open to guests during tours) bursting with banana trees, lobster claws, guavas, kumquats, allspice and tamarinds — an aromatic, displaced slice of Tahiti.

Living Machines, a company owned by Mr. Worrell, designs and installs natural treatment systems that pump filtered wastewater through a pool rich with bacteria, fish, plant roots, snails and all manner of other swishing, swimming, respiring cleansers.

"Some people just can't wrap their minds around the idea of water treatment with snails," Mr. Worrell said. "They'll learn."

Eco-spa resorts — environmentally sensitive retreats where pampering comes with a clean conscience — are a hot category in the spa world. "They are perfect places for people who need stress relief and, at the same time, want an educational experience," said Lynne Walker McNeese, the executive director of the International Spa Association.

The \$50 million El Monte Sagrado, open only since last June, is already planning to expand. In Valle de Bravo, Mexico, the new El Santuario Spa (there is another



Rick Scibelli Jr. for The New York Times

**SAVE THE EARTH** But first, a massage. Ed Moffett tends to Beverly Hosokawa at El Monte Sagrado, a new eco-spa in Taos, N.M.

similarly named but unrelated eco-spa in Baja Sur, near Loreta) includes a 20,000-square-foot spa and a separate off-site facility built directly into the side of a mountain. There, guests can soak in a free-form therapy pool, near orchids and ferns, or wander into an "aromatherapy cave," freshened by a "cool mist bouquet ranging from tropical fruits to healing herbal essences," according to the resort's promotional materials.

Visiting these knockoff Edens is not cheap. Two-night packages at El Santuario, which include meals and an array of treatments (like a manicure, facial, body scrub and choice of an algae wrap; fango therapy, or mud-pack, treatment; or paraffin wrap), are \$835 (double occupancy). A night's stay at El Monte Sagrado starts at \$245 and rises to \$1,495 for a free-standing two-bedroom suite, exclusive of meals and spa services. "People will pay for things they believe in," said Susie Ellis, the president of Spa Finder, a specialized travel agency.

Many established resort spas, seeing an opportunity in environmentalism, are developing eco-oriented services and facilities of their own or bolstering those they

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***'It's nice that the resort recycles, but it's the massages that bring me back,' says a client.***

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have long had. At the venerable Rancho la Puerta resort and spa in Tecate, in Baja California, Mexico, which has been deluxe and organic for 64 years, the founder, Deborah Szekely, recently spent "a small fortune," she said, swapping all the resort's incandescent light bulbs for energy efficient fluorescents. "Those of us in the spa industry should be leaders in environmental awareness and action," she said. "Without a healthy world, there are no healthy people."

But it isn't easy for spas to be green. "A lot of people claim to be running eco-spas," the outspoken Mr. Worrell said during a tour earlier this month of El Monte Sagrado. "They think if they put in solar panels or build somewhere remote, they're living in harmony with the earth," he said. "But the earth knows better."

**A**MY McDONALD is a serene advertisement for rejuvenation and purification. Until recently she was the spa director at the exclusive Miraval resort in Tucson, but last month started work in the same position at El



Monte Sagrado. Slender, soft-voiced and efficient in a gentle, diaphanous way, she says her move was prompted by a desire to join "a living spa, where healing is an integration with nature, not a separation from it." This summer, at her instigation, the resort will move some of its massage tables outdoors and organize open-air yoga classes.

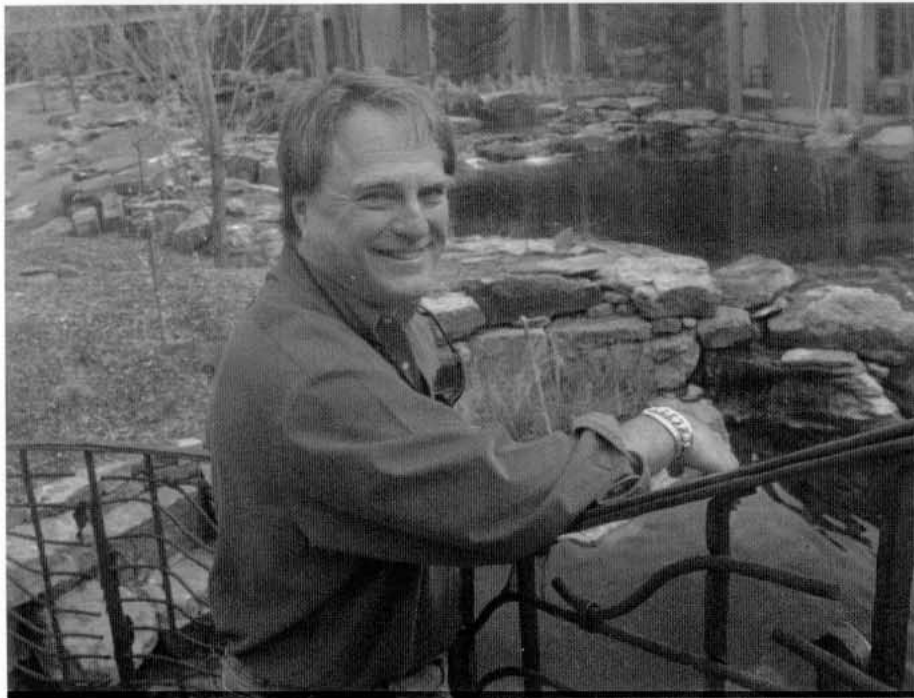
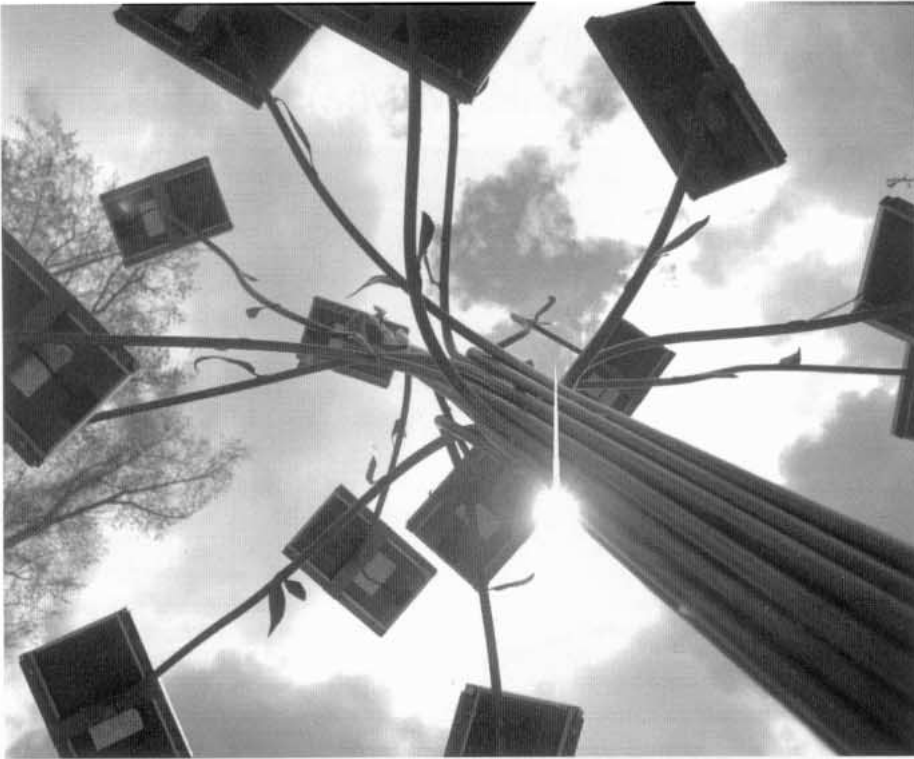
What makes an eco-spa an eco-spa? It depends on whom you ask.

According to Spa Finder, which recently codified its definition: "Eco-spas are set in natural or protected areas and incorporate organic gardening, water conservation and ecological building design. They encourage sensitivity to the natural environment and wildlife, and they may also promote the well-being of local people and culture by preserving indigenous healing traditions and ingredients."

The International Spa Association has no formal definition for an eco-spa or statistics on how many exist, although, Ms. McNees says, the number is growing. Any spa can declare itself to be an eco-oasis. No one polices environmental practices. Last year for the first time, the association convened a committee to discuss environmental guidelines for the spa industry. Meanwhile, in Australia, Costa Rica and coastal and central Mexico, where once there were only eco-lodges, now there are eco-spas.

Few resorts, however, domestically or abroad, are as evangelically green as El Monte Sagrado.

"We are absolutely committed to reusing everything and making as little impact on the environment as possible," said Mr. Worrell, who had the resort's original electrical heating system ripped out after construction and replaced with an ex-



Photographs by Rick Scibelli Jr. for The New York Times

**CHANNELING SERENITY** At El Monte Sagrado, opposite, recycled water is used in pools for fish and swimming after several treatments. Above, Thomas Worrell Jr., owner of El Monte Sagrado and of the company that makes its wastewater system, said he believes that his eco-spa will be off the grid within five years. Top, a solar "tree."

pensive geothermal and solar system. "We want to live symbiotically with the earth, instead of being at war with it."

Such sanctimony probably conjures visions of a grunge or hippie aesthetic, but there is no shabby chic at El Monte Sagrado — or at other eco-spas. Theirs is up-market environmentalism. The dining room at El Monte Sagrado serves organic yak steaks, and has a full-time sommeli-

er. Each room has been hand painted, the walls covered with elaborate stencils or faux finishes. In the breathtakingly well-appointed suites, each named for a different nation or region — Japan, Marrakesh, Bali or Texas (oddly, the most requested) — elaborate paint finishes and furnishings mimic that place. The Texas suite, for instance, smells strongly of leather. All have a fireplace and two full master

bedrooms. The Kama Sutra room even has helpful illustrations carved into its furniture. "It's the only honeymoon suite that comes with an instruction manual," Mr. Worrell said.

It is this mix of expensive coddling and environmental thoughtfulness that, ultimately, is at the heart of the eco-spa movement. "Sometimes, I just need to get away from materialism and celebrate the earth," said Beverly Hosokawa of Delray Beach, Fla. Ms. Hosokawa, who is 53, taut, convivial and married to a retired Internet company chief executive, has been to El Monte Sagrado four times in the last 10 months.

"Florida is all about who has the biggest house and the most expensive car," she said. "Here, it's all about serenity and the spirit." Her favorite activity, she said, is not the vitalizing formula facial (\$158 for 90 minutes) or the reflexology massage (\$105 for an hour), although such indulgences are wonderful. "I adore the sacred circle," she said, referring to a large, round and empty plot of grass at the center of the resort. "It's so nice that they didn't put a big swimming pool there. I can go out and practice yoga and reconnect with the spirit of the earth."

Eco-spas make easy targets for the cynical. They celebrate self-indulgence and expense where a more dogmatic environmentalism demands looking outward and thinking small, making do with less. But, Mr. Worrell pointed out: "Luxury accommodations bring in the kind of people who can make policy. Get them thinking about the earth and good things can happen."

Ms. Szekely of Rancho la Puerta agrees. "The other day, all of our guests were sitting around the table talking and arguing about George Bush and air pollution," she said. "Those are the kind of people who come to spas like ours, and when they leave, they take some of our consciousness with them."

Of course, in the end, an eco-spa lives or dies by its spa services. "I don't really get all that environmental, spiritual stuff," said Glenn Bracken Evans, 38, the scion of an oil-business family in Dallas. Mr. Evans has a second home in Taos, and a third, apparently, in the spa at El Monte Sagrado. "It's nice that the resort recycles," he said, "but it's the massages that bring me back. Even when your time is up, the therapists massage your scalp and use these great-smelling oils around your nose. I leave feeling all happy and loosened up. That's what's spiritual to me, that you're so relaxed."

My own tour of El Monte Sagrado ends with a 90-minute, demi-painful treatment from Ed Moffett, a tall, calm, deceptively powerful therapist (who also works part of the year at the Miraval resort). Mr. Moffett's deep-tissue, "bone-cleaning" massage promises to release energy and



## Feeling Good While (Maybe) Doing Good

**I**N the past year or so, eco-awareness definitely has become a part of our conversation in our industry," said Susie Ellis, the president of Spa Finder, a travel agency that books spa trips. "Clients are interested in the topic, and spa professionals are interested." In response, her company's Web site, ([www.spafinder.com](http://www.spafinder.com))

soon will include the term "eco-spa" among its searchable spa categories, alongside other terms like "weight loss," "romantic/honeymoon" and "mineral springs."

Right now, those seeking an indulgent but green getaway can choose from a number of resorts.

GRETCHEN REYNOLDS

**EL MONTE SAGRADO** 317 Kit Carson Road, Taos, N.M.; (800) 828-8267; [www.elmontesagrado.com](http://www.elmontesagrado.com).

Sumptuous and expensive, El Monte Sagrado is splurge environmentalism. Rooms range between \$245 and \$1,495 a night; longer bookings are at lower rates. Spa treatments include the standards—hot stone massage (\$150), body polish (\$115) and eight types of facials (\$115 to \$158)—as well as the Indian-inspired "raindrop" massage (\$115), in which warm oil is dripped along the spine.

**RANCHO LA PUERTA** Tecate, Baja California, Mexico; (800) 443-7565; [www.rancholapuerta.com](http://www.rancholapuerta.com).

One of the first spa resorts in the world, the 64-year-old Rancho la Puerta has long had organic gardens. It has recently begun an ambitious program of water and energy



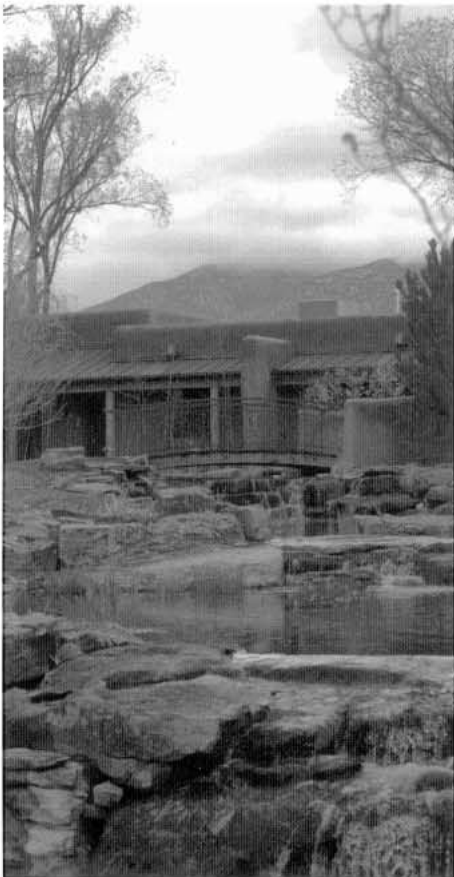
Rick Scibelli Jr. for The New York Times

**AH, NATURE** At El Monte Sagrado in Taos, N.M., one of the new breed of eco-spas.

conservation and now uses only biodegradable cleansers and detergents throughout the resort. "I think our guests want all of this," said Deborah Szekely, the owner. "And if they don't yet, they should." Rates range from \$1,970 to \$2,940 a person per week, double occupancy, and include all meals, classes and a variety of other services. All bookings are by the week.

**EL SANTUARIO SPA** Valle de bravo, Mexico; (866) 896-7727; [www.elsantuariospa.com](http://www.elsantuariospa.com)

Open only since December, El Santuario was built beside a lake in central Mexico and sits at the foot of an "energy conducting," or conducting, quartz mountain, according to the company's brochure. The resort has 64 suites, each with its own infinity-foot spa facility. A separate manmade cave system is being built into the quartz. Guests can be massaged on a boat that gently rides the lake waves for three hours, promoting — one assumes—serenity and not seasickness. Two-night packages are \$835 a person, double occupancy. Seven-night packages range from \$2,155 to \$2,645, double occupancy.



**WATER, WATER** The grounds of El Monte Sagrado flow with pools and waterfalls.

dissipate stress, and in fact, during my next morning's run, I feel fleeter and lighter than I have in years.

But as with so much that is good for you, the process involves sacrifice. As Mr. Mof-fett presses deeper, I wince. Finishing, he pats the sheet around me and says, sotto voce, "Get up when you're ready." I nod but don't move, my body now scoured and pure. I'm feeling benevolent toward all life, lying there, listening to the tumbrel of running water inside and outside the room, and the whoomp of my own pulse. Even if this isn't the music of the earth, it has a nice beat.