

Trailing Julia Roberts in Taos

Written by Story by Allison Young

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It's pretty easy to see why the Pretty Woman fell in love with this New Mexico mountain town.



LIVING LEGEND:

Eco-chic El Monte Sagrado provides a restful respite in the town Julia Roberts calls home.

OK, so Julia Roberts wasn't the main reason I was in Taos. I was there for an outdoorsy adventure you can only get in a mountain town like Taos with its multitude of off-the-beaten-path trails. Yes, there's skiing, but there's also snowshoeing, mountain biking and llama trekking (more on that later). But the celebrity-spotter in me craved a glimpse of the Pretty Woman—and with a population of only 5,000, there weren't too many degrees of separation.

As soon as I arrived, I could see why Mrs. Danny Moder bought a 40-acre ranch on the outskirts—and why she had her Independence Day wedding here. Cruising down the main drag, a charming collection of galleries and more galleries (there were a few knick-knack shops, boutiques and quaint restaurants interspersed), no one was madly texting or speeding through yellows. There's an anti-hustle and bustle about the place. Plus, it doesn't have the pomp and circumstance, or Mariah Carey sightings, of Aspen. I instantly felt calmer.

Something to Talk About

It seemed like everyone in town had a two degrees of Julia Roberts story. Unfortunately, most of the second-hand stories painted the Oscar winner as a diva: Don't look her in the eye... She never signs autographs... Don't dare acknowledge that she's famous. The first person I met with an actual Roberts story worked at the hotel I called home while in Taos, the rustically regal El Monte Sagrado Living Resort and Spa, a tucked-away sanctuary that's both upscale and down to earth, much like the actress herself.

"Oh Julia, she almost ran me off the road," he says. He explained how the actress came bounding around a mountain turn and nearly hit him—although she did give a friendly wave in apology. "She seemed nice," he says. I could sense I was getting closer.

El Monte Sagrado has something else in common with Roberts: It was green before it was cool to go green. Partly powered by solar panels, the 11-acre property, which is made largely from non-toxic and recycled materials, collects and reuses rainwater and has its own water purification and geothermal heating and cooling systems. And this eco-vibe goes property-wide: the pool and hot tub are chlorine-free; the award-winning spa features vegan pedicures and organic products; and the property's De La Tierra restaurant serves up locally grown and organic food. It even has a "Sacred Circle," blessed land that's hosted weddings and Deepak Chopra.

Eat Pray Love

After just one night at El Monte Sagrado, I felt a little more Roberts-esque myself. The perma-grin staff have a way of making you feel important and everything about the setting was luxurious, from my room's artistic accents (many of the paintings are by local artists) to the organic toiletries. I was well-rested and raring to go llama trekking.

Now, for those of you who've shunned the woolly beasts because of their penchant for spitting, rest assured. Our eco-geeky guide, Stuart Wilde, who listed llama facts and petroglyph stats with equal pizzazz, quickly cleared up that myth. Yes, llamas spit—at each other, not at humans. I got paired up with Zephyr, the teenage rebel of the bunch. Yes, he stole a chomp of grass every chance he got, but not once did he complain about hauling our gourmet lunch into the 800-foot-deep Rio Grande Gorge.

How do you follow up a day of llama trekking? At the spa, of course. Looking over the Living Spa's menu of tempting treatments can feel like grocery shopping on an empty stomach; everything sounded delectable. After much deliberation, I went with the Talistone, a combo hot stone massage/chakra balancer. I swear the therapist had magic hands as she worked the heated river rocks over my body, paying special attention to my tight hamstrings and shoulders. It was like hot yoga meets massage, and I loved every muscle-melting minute.

The next day was a bit of a blur. It started with a private yoga class led by the hypnotic Heidi Gates who managed to downward dog away any remaining tension and ended with elk tenderloin at De La Tierra. In between, I museum-hopped, soaked in my queen-size tub and curled up with a book in front of the fireplace. I was so busy doing nothing and everything that I almost forgot my mission. Almost.

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Closer

My final day in remote paradise, I awoke with purpose. A friend of a friend of a friend had told me that Roberts often dropped by the local yarn shop (she's a knitter, who knew?), so I layered up, laced up and headed out. She's also a runner, and I just knew our paths would cross.

I ran passed storefronts packed with Pueblo weavings, decorative dried chilies dangling in doorways and some amazing art, but nothing was going to sidetrack me. I trotted full-speed ahead to The Yarn Shop but was met with disappointment. The shop was closed.

I jogged back to the hotel, packed up my suitcase and bid farewell to El Monte Sagrado and Taos, a quaint and quirky town that left more than an impression. Not sure if it was the mountain air or the you-can't-help-but-slow-down pace, but I felt rejuvenated. And maybe my Roberts meeting wasn't meant to be this time, but you can bet her Oscar I'll be back.

TO LEARN MORE

El Monte Sagrado www.elmontesagrado.com.

Llama Adventures www.llamaadventures.com.