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Press Reset

Cal-a-Vie caters to an international crowd of wellness-seekers, but it's a transporting experience that may be best experienced by locals.

By Andrea Bennett

If you have never been to Cal-a-Vie, you might wonder upon your arrival whether you have found a utopian community or a 19th century luxury sanitarium, where people wander around taking in prescribed regimens of fresh air and sunlight as they convalesce from the consumptive effects of the Industrial Revolution. Add a century or so, and swap in ailments like digital dependence and stress, and you won't be far off the mark. But a visit here is also an annual gift its regulars give themselves. After all, real luxury is hanging out in your bathrobe, makeup- and judgement-free, among strangers and Louis XIV tapestries. No? Just me? But I think the hundreds of people who come here from all over the world each year would agree.

I hadn't been to Cal-a-Vie in a solid decade before my recent visit. Then, it was a world-class destination spa with a famous culinary program, 200 rolling acres for hiking and a stellar reputation for its spa services. But to call it a spa these days is to give short shrift to what has become a holistic center for resetting your entire well-being. The spa program (still wonderful—and growing) is an added benefit. My stay began with two consultations: one to assess my goals, record my preferred daily calorie count, and plan a customized exercise and spa schedule; and the other, a nutritional consultation by registered dietician nutritionist May Tom, who gave me a portfolio of customized recommendations to take home.

Our group began each morning with the choice of an ambitious pre-dawn hike or a fast-paced walk before a formal breakfast in the antiques-filled dining room and receipt of the day's personalized agenda. You have the option of launching right into back-to-back classes like TRX, interval weight training, cardio blast and more, or opting out to relax by the pool or in your beautifully appointed Provence-influenced room, or in one of the libraries or lounges. The pace slows after lunch, with classes like restorative yoga interspersed with facials, massages and wraps. One distinct benefit: The kitchen tracks your meals for you, so you can indulge in whatever incredible meal and dessert are set before you, because the worrying has already been done.

In recent years, Cal-a-Vie's owners, Terri and John Havens, have grown this remarkable retreat—shipping and reconstructing a 17th century French chapel and an 18th century limestone orangerie from the Convent of the Carmelites in Dijon, France—on a hillside among its now sprawling vineyards. Those have been joined by a picturesque windmill, Olympic-size pool and 3 miles of hiking trails. A historic French parish house is a current restoration project, and a perfectly situated observatory has just been completed. An antiques store lets you attempt to recreate this luxury at home and has become a secret (by-appointment) source for area decorators.

In my time there, I came to realize that, although most visitors pilgrimage to Cal-a-Vie from other states, it is arguably best experienced as a local. With its mountain landscape transformed into idyllic French wine country, you get the relaxing benefits of a faraway journey within a 30-minute drive. On my last evening, I did a guided private meditation session, which was even more therapeutic than I could have imagined. The next morning, I did restorative yoga in the 400-year-old chapel. I left this pleasant alternate universe completely relaxed, and without a flight or airport security line to jolt the Zen out of me. I'd venture to say that I got longer-lasting benefits from the experience. I imagine I'll have to return for the pleasure of greeting strangers in my bathrobe, but the longer-term change in mindset is a benefit that's completely transferrable. *From \$3,400 per person, 29402 Spa Havens Way, Vista, Calif., 888.373.8773, cal-a-vie.com*





Clockwise from left: Inside this windmill, there's a room for private gatherings. Couples who book Cal-a-Vie for their wedding often have their pictures taken here; the antiques-filled Great Room is anchored by a four elements-themed tapestry commissioned by Louis XIV; chef Curtis Cooke's cuisine emphasizes color, such as in this seared tuna nicotise.