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SOLAGE CALISTOGA

By **Mary Bemis**

This new conscious resort adds a bit of whimsy to a much-loved spa town steeped in tradition—and mud.

On any given day in the sleepy spa town of Calistoga, you're bound to find two or more Cruisers—the cool retro-style bicycles complete with fat knobby tires and Bullhorn handlebars—parked outside one of the local shops and galleries. The bike riders have originated from the same place—the recently opened Solage Calistoga, a mere 10-minute ride away.

The Cruisers were the brainstorm of general manager Richard Hill, a dapper former spa director with a penchant for Burberry. “Our concept is really all about being social and out in nature,” he says. “We envisioned that you’d hop on your bike and go to your spa treatment, or ride the bike around the property, or go into town. It’s an exhilarating bike ride into town.” Each of the property’s 89 guest studios is equipped with two Cruisers. It’s this social aspect of spa-ing that sets Solage apart from its competitors.

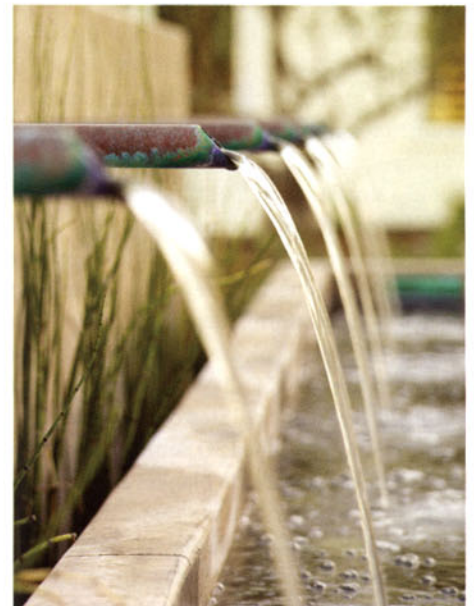
“Everything we’ve done is a modern take on an old spa tradition,” relates Tracy Lee, vice president of spa development for Auberge Resorts, the property’s parent company (Solage is actually a new brand that aims to offer accessible and contemporary, design-focused properties that prove that luxury and sustainability can go hand in hand, and Calistoga is its flagship property). “Spas are no longer just places for solitary retreats,” she says, “They’re destinations for girlfriends, couples, and people who want to relax together. We’ve created a social environment for people to mingle, relax, and have fun while partaking in an authentic mud and bath experience.”

HOT SPRINGS & HISTORY

Calistoga is home to more than a dozen spas and resorts and has long been revered as a healing place, thanks to its geothermal waters and mud. Although it incorporated as a town in 1885, Native Americans gathered here for eons for detoxification and purification purposes. They called Calistoga “Coolay-no-maock,” or the “oven place.” It took an enterprising man by the name of Samuel Brannan to put Calistoga on the spa map. Intrigued by its natural hot springs, Brannan bought 2,000 acres with the dream of creating a great spa destination. He opened his Hot Springs Resort in 1862; today it exists as Indian Springs Resort. (If you’d like to learn more about the town’s spas, log onto www.calistogaspas.com.)

Solage Calistoga is set on 25 acres that were once home to a horse pasture. Its welcoming, warmly designed spa was built around a majestic 200-year-old oak tree. “Our vision was to update the region’s longstanding tradition of mud baths and geothermal water therapies,” says Lee. What you’ll discover at Solage is a clever, fun twist on tradition. The standout signature here is called The Mudslide Experience, a three-part circuit consisting of “the mud,” “the waters,” and “the rest” that up to five people can experience at one time. This takes place in the spa’s unique Mud Lounge and Bathhouse. In addition

Top left: Each studio comes with two Cruisers. Opposite page, clockwise from top left: the couple’s suite in the Mud Lounge, the much-used cabanas; soaking tubs in the spa’s Bathhouse; a decorative outdoor water detail; the spa’s mineral pool is 90 percent geothermal; the movement studio; a treatment room at the spa, the main pool; and Solbar (center), the restaurant and lounge.



to these spaces, there are 14 treatment rooms and a huge state-of-the-art fitness center, as well as a large movement studio. SumBody, a local organic body-care line and Kate Somerville, a facial line created by a Los Angeles-based esthetician with a celebrity following, are the chosen product lines. "Like this place, my line is edgy and sexy, but healthy," states Somerville, who feels inspired by the property to create a new line. One-quarter Cheyenne—the image of her great-grandfather Roy Beaver graces the Wyoming license plate, she tells me—Somerville says, "There's something really peaceful and detoxifying about this property."

MUD BARS & BATHHOUSES

At the Mud Bar, you can indulge in a cocktail, such as the Mud Mojito or the Lavender Mudtini, or try the refreshing Hou Hou Shu, a local sparkling sake, or opt for one of four different mud mixtures for the body, each designed to achieve specific results. I'm not surprised to discover that the "Sam Brannan" is the most popular choice on the mud menu. Everything here is concocted by Juan, a pleasant young man with smiling eyes who has the distinction of being the property's first mudtender. Once Juan mixes the mud together with a variety of essential oils, he hands guests the final product in a small tin pail that they then transport to the Mud Lounge for a DIY treat. This is how The Mudslide Experience begins. The mud is applied in the stylishly simple Mud Lounge, where one bakes on a perfectly heated stone platform, then rinses off with a handheld shower before being led to the Bathhouse to relax in a soaking tub full of Calistoga's natural geothermal spring waters. The final step of the circuit is a rest in one of the NASA-researched SO Sound Chairs where you're cocooned in a cozy down blanket and given a choice of music to listen to that is supposed to be absorbed into the body, leading you to a state of ultra-relaxation. Unfortunately, this did the opposite for me. During my visit, the soundtracks were out of whack, and I heard two different (and too loud) ones at once. I'm told this has since been corrected.

SUSTAINABLE STRIDES

Designed by Howard Backen, a Napa Valley architect, and Dowling Kimm Studios, an interior design firm based in San Francisco, Solage's style has been described as "Napa barn meets San Francisco loft." The guest studios are open spaces with a warm color palette and contemporary furnishings. Backen took advantage of natural heating and cooling opportunities: solar panels and exaggerated eaves help moderate temperatures on warmer afternoons, while tall, shaded windows and doorways not only offer garden views, but fill spaces with filtered sunlight and keep interiors cool. Dowling Kimm Studios sourced contemporary furnishings made from natural, sustainably farmed and recycled materials. Hemp curtains, wool throws, stone countertops and pebbled showers are among other natural accents. Interiors were finished with non-toxic, low-VOC paints,

in-room amenities were locally sourced from the aforementioned SumBody company, and the housekeeping department uses only non-toxic and biodegradable cleaning products from Method. Chlorine use in the pools has been kept to a minimum, thanks to an ozone-based system that keeps the water clean. "People who are actively thinking about how to live more sustainably are drawn to Solage," says Lee.

The hot springs were put to excellent use as an alternative energy source and heat the treatment rooms and soaking pools at the spa. On warm days, the spa uses natural ventilation and an efficient "evaporative cooler" that cleverly uses water to soak up heat from the air and blow the cool air into the space. Room service is delivered on bicycles and Solbar, the property's hip (and delicious) restaurant and lounge features locally sourced and organic produce. Gardens of native, drought-resistant plants were planted throughout the property, which also uses reclaimed water for irrigation. "We're a more conscious resort model," says Lee. "We're making steps, we're making progress, and we're not doing it for the press. We just want to do the right thing."

COME ONE, COME ALL

"We envisioned that this would appeal most to the thirty- to fifty-year-old demographic, but all ages love it," relates Hill. "I've had guests in their sixties tell me this is the best place they've stayed in the Napa Valley, and I've had twenty-year-olds telling me they'll be back." Hill believes it appeals across the generations because people like the casual, social aspect, the clean, contemporary feel, and the fact that it's more accessible, dollar-wise. It's also kid- and pet-friendly (the pets make out pretty well here, as Solage offers custom-designed pet beds, Buddy Biscuit organic snacks, and an outdoor pet lawn).

"We really wanted this to be a social experience," says Hill. "This is not a romantic hideaway. This is where you can be sitting on your patio and engaging in conversation with the guest across from your courtyard and end up going to dinner or a bike ride together." ☑

www.solagecalistoga.com, 866-942-7442

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