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Getaway from reality – live the fantasy!

—*By Kenya McCullum*

Everyone loves to get away from the hustle and bustle of the city for a relaxing weekend out of town. However, some establishments — like the Fantasy Inn and the Madonna Inn — give you much more than just a room for the night. These locations give you an experience that makes the room a vacation destination in and of itself.

Madonna Inn: Paradise in pink

Driving along the 101 toward Los Angeles, you can't help but notice the eye-catching Madonna Inn (www.madonnainn.com) sign in all its pink glory as you drive through San Luis Obispo. As you travel up to the inn, you may feel as though you are entering a self-contained world of relaxation and coziness — and you wouldn't be wrong. The Madonna Inn was specifically made that way.

When the Madonna Inn was built by Alex and Phyllis Madonna in the late 1950s, they wanted to change the way people saw hotel rooms. At the time, Alex was working in the construction industry and traveled frequently, often spending nights in rooms that he found drab, boring, and generally uninviting.

When the couple built the Madonna Inn, they wanted an establishment with rooms that were the polar opposite of the cookie cutter ones you are likely to find in most hotels. They wanted color, they wanted character, and they wanted charm. They also wanted rooms that each had their own personality because the one-size-fits-all approach to designing rooms would not appeal to all guests.

“Mr. Madonna said that he wanted to make the rooms cozy and a little bit more special than your average hotel, and so he and Mrs. Madonna worked to create the theme rooms because they said that you can't do one style and please everyone,” says Susie Kelley, the Madonna Inn's Operations Manager.

And when you look at the Madonna Inn's selection of 109 rooms, it's clear that the couple succeeded in their mission. Some are bright and engulfed in colors, such as American Beauty, Canary Cottage, and Crystal Room. Others pay homage to a specific geographic location — like Holland Dutch, Mount Vernon, Portugal, and San Francisco — by taking on the characteristics of their namesakes.

Some of the inn's most popular rooms are the rock rooms, such as Lucky Rock, Rock Bottom, and Yosemite Rock. These rooms evoke the moodiness and beauty of being inside a cave or along a mountainside — with walls that are made from real rock that was collected from the Madonna's properties — so much so that any rock climber would feel tempted to find some gear and scale them.

The ambience of the theme is even extended into the bathrooms, with their rock showers and waterfalls

that make you feel like you are bathing out in the wild.

The inn itself is an independent world that you really don't have to leave if you don't want to. You can eat flavorful meals with large portions at the Copper Café and the award-winning Gold Rush Steak House — where people congregate each night for an evening of dinner, live music, and dancing. If you have a sweet tooth, the bakery has a variety of cakes and pies available, and for more gourmet fare and wine, you can walk up the hill to the Madonna Inn's Classic Gourmet and Wine Shop where you can taste the inn's signature wines.

If you're not up to shopping or dancing and you would just like some rest and relaxation, the Madonna Inn has a fitness center with jetted spas, an exercise room, and a European-style pool — all surrounded by a 45-foot waterfall. Soon guests will also be able to get a little extra pampering, as the establishment will be opening a spa this spring that, in the usual unique Madonna fashion, will feature different treatments for different tastes — namely ones that mirror the flavors of their bakery's cakes.

Fantasy Inn: Making desires come true

As you maneuver your way along the twists and turns of Highway 50 toward South Lake Tahoe, romance already begins to creep up your nostrils. Driving along the mountainous road — a skier's dream covered in a blanket of white during the winter — is reminiscent of a Norman Rockwell scene frozen in time.

Nestled in this scene is the charming Fantasy Inn (www.fantasyinn.com), sitting on the California-Nevada border, which offers its patrons rooms that are equally picturesque and experiences as beautiful as the fine art and photography that adorn its hallway walls.

To call the rooms here a “fantasy” is not just a clever way of getting you to spend the night here. The theme rooms — which make up 15 of the establishment's 52 rooms — are designed in such great detail that you can actually feel the ambience they are meant to evoke the minute you open the door. For instance, the rustic feeling of the Tahoe Room is expressed from its furniture — including wooden rocking chairs — all the way down to the tree-trunk shaped lamps, the bedding covered with a forest scene, and the carved wooden bear and fish centerpiece.

For the last 30 years, the Fantasy Inn has been bringing whimsical themes to life in elaborately decorated rooms that can make guests lose themselves for a night in their unique expressive statements. Rooms such as Romeo & Juliet, Anthony & Cleopatra, Queen's Quarters, Arabian Nights, Caesar's Indulgence, and Graceland are decorated with such specificity that you start to feel like you are in another time and place.

And to further help guests forget the outside world, each room has a whirlpool spa — some are even heart shaped to add to the romance — that owners Jim and Connie Foff say guests take full advantage of by lounging in the bubbles and heat, sometimes three times daily during their stay.

Also included in the rooms are king-sized beds surrounded by mirrors and European showers with his and hers showerheads. And as if all that weren't cozy enough, some rooms at the Fantasy Inn even have fireplaces.

After spending a night in such romantic luxury, some couples get so caught up in the moment that they decide to tie the knot at the inn's wedding chapel during their stay. But it's not just for quickie marriages: The Fantasy Inn has about 500 weddings per year in the chapel that holds 30 guests on the inside and has a courtyard on the outside, decorated with flowered arches, that accommodates an additional 100 wedding guests.

Fantasy Inn guests that are lucky in love may feel especially confident during their stay and want to find out if that luck will continue to be a lady at the nearby casinos, which are literally a five minute drive away. But if you'd rather not try your hand at gambling, or if the one-armed bandit has left you feeling a little robbed, the area also offers skiing, golf, ice skating, and snowmobiling to get your heart racing.

Although the rooms of the Fantasy Inn may look like they came from the hands of an interior decorator they don't. The owners design them by reading design magazines and attending hotel and furniture shows for new ideas. This fall, the Inn plans to redo many of the rooms to popular movies themes that represent romance, such as classics like "South Pacific," "Gone With the Wind," and "Casablanca," as well as contemporary films like "Memoirs of a Geisha" and "Pirates of the Caribbean."

When Kenya McCullum is not sleeping in theme rooms around California, she is a freelance writer whose work can be found at www.km-com.com and www.uselesonline.com.