

The Crossings

Zoning out, tuning in at Tex-Zen spa

By Anne Valdespino Special to the Register

The Orange County Register
Sunday, September 12, 2004

Some vacationers like to stand at the edge of the Grand Canyon. Some like to shoot through raging waters in a kayak. Some like to scuba dive in deep, dark water, knowing they could be joined by sharks at any minute.

But there are others who seek a different vacation experience: something spiritual, intellectual, restorative, mind- and body-cleansing. And where is the Disneyland for those of us who want to mediate, purge and tap our powers of creativity while being really good to our bodies at the same time?

No, not Northern California, or Taos or Zion, but Austin, Texas. The newest oasis for the enlightenment crowd is tucked away in the Texas hill country west of town. It's called The Crossings, and it was dreamed up by former Dell computer executive Ken Beck and his wife, Joyce, as a way of giving something back to the world.

"Ken was blessed beyond his wildest imagination," said Crossings spokeswoman Dina Rose. "When he retired he was only in his early 50s, and he asked his friends, 'What should I do next?' His decision was to combine his passions with his wife's." (Joyce Beck is a therapist). "They decided to create a place where new

learning experiences could happen in a totally relaxing atmosphere.”

The setting is serene. High above beautiful Lake Travis, Beck spent more than \$20 million to construct a mini-university for the soul, acquiring much more acreage than he needed for the project. The campus’ 34 developable acres are part of a 210-acre tract filled with Texas oak, cedar and brilliantly colored seasonal wildflowers, all made accessible by five miles of hiking trails. When he bought the parcel, Beck agreed to let the majority of the land remain untouched – it’s part of the Balcones Canyonlands Preserve, habitat of the endangered golden-cheeked warbler. The Crossings’ architecture is coolly contemporary (the staff has dubbed the style “Tex-Zen”) but uses old-fashioned indigenous materials, including roughhewn limestone and exposed oak beams. Wander the campus and you’ll find a meditation sanctuary, a theater, a movement room with floating bamboo floor specially designed for yoga and tai chi, a gift shop and book store, an espresso-wine bar, meeting rooms and salons.

The heart of the place is a plaza overlooking the lake. Close by are an infinity pool with adjoining kids’ pool, a hot tub, a cold-dip tank, an 11-room wellness spa (some have private patios) offering every imaginable kind of massage, and a Watsu pool – a round tub containing body-temperature water where a floating massage technique is administered to tired bodies.

There’s also a cafeteria, the Cypress Creek Dining Hall, whose menu features only chicken, fish and vegetarian items. You can choose to sit inside or on the patio, which boasts the campus’s best view of the lake. The young pastry chef is a wizard who makes heavenly vegan chocolate ganache cake and lavender shortbread cookies.

Want to visit without enrolling in any of the classes? A nominal \$20 per day is charged for those who simply want to use the sumptuous facilities (spa treatments, of course, are extra).

But for the full mind-body-soul experience, take a class or a workshop provided by The Crossings through a partnership with the well-respected Omega Institute. Have you always wanted to pursue “The Artists Way”? Julia Cameron herself teaches the class. The stellar faculty also includes big names in the spirituality and self-help fields. Ram Dass and Raymond A. Moody, Jr. come here to conduct classes and seminars. For creative types, there are a wealth of workshops: Indian percussion with Zakir Hussein, acting with Alan Arkin.

My workshop, “A Whole Brain Approach to Spanish,” offered a way to tap into language skills through my creative side. We sang songs, wrote poetry, performed skits in Spanish and every night unwound by watching films in Spanish, from “Frida” to “Like Water for Chocolate.” We were also offered free sampler workshops to get a taste of future classes we might want to take.

Best of all, because The Crossings is a combination of university and hotel, you can tap into your selfish, irresponsible student side again. Remember the kid who got up early for a hike before class? Or slept late and rolled up just in time for breakfast? It’s all there for you, and if you’re like me – a perpetual student pushing 50 who really puts the “continuing” into “continuing education,” – the experience can take years off your age.

In the evenings, The Crossings often hosts entertainers of various kinds. Local singer-songwriters and poets are featured. Tuesday nights are frequently set aside for free concerts.

“Part of the vision for The Crossings is to become a vital part of the community,” said event services director Saxz Stevens. “That’s why so much of what we offer here is free.”

Stevens acknowledges that his unique facility, which opened in September 2003, is a work in progress. “We’re still developing our image. We want to be eclectic – to integrate philosophy, culture and health. We don’t want to grow too much; we want to stay intimate and accessible.” The Crossings can accommodate 168 overnight guests.

And it’s a great place to stay. You can choose the Lodge, which features private rooms with bathrooms (\$225 per night for a single with meals) or the Bunkhouse, which is a dormitory with shared bath facilities (\$110 per night with meals). Banish those unpleasant memories of undergrad living – these are guaranteed to be the most beautiful dorms you’ve ever stayed in. Each monk-like retreat has a twin bed with Ralph Lauren sheets, clock radio, coffee mug, plush terry-cloth robe, shower shoes, desk and phone. There’s a communal bathroom with blow dryers, tissues, shampoo and shower gel. The courtyards and grounds are perfect for simply hanging out. But Texas can be hot, so I would recommend spring or fall for catching the best weather. May proved idyllic, with bluebonnets and lavender blooming all around. During my spring sojourn, evenings and mornings were cool and afternoons warm and sunny. I brought my violin and had a great time practicing in the courtyard, which took me back to halcyon days of student music camp in Vermont.

And I wasn’t the only musician there. A mother and daughter had come to The Crossings for a retreat: the 12-year-old was preparing for a piano recital while Mom took advantage of the spa and yoga classes.

One warning to the media-addicted. There's only one small television on the entire Crossings campus. And though bustling Austin is only 20 minutes away, you'd never know it – there's absolutely no road noise at the isolated site, and cars are parked at the edge of campus. They're serious about making sure you get away from it all.

Whatever you decide to do, The Crossings can help you take it down a notch physically while revving you up mentally and spiritually. Time seems to stand still in this very special retreat. Emerging refreshed and energized without huge credit card bills or the lumps and bruises of a go-for-the-burn adventure – that's what a vacation should be all about.

“This is my home away from home,” said Jackie Anderson of Alabama, who has visited The Crossings four times since it opened. “It's a place to replenish yourself. To be above town, above your problems. To do some clear thinking and just relax.”