

## Cuddling chickens and other alternative therapies at Sunrise Springs

By Teresa Bergen



PHOTO BY TERESA BERGEN

Rocking chairs at the pond provide a place to relax and reflect.

**W**hen I first heard that a resort in New Mexico featured therapy chickens, I immediately wanted to visit. My trip to Sunrise Springs didn't disappoint. While the chickens were slightly more reluctant therapists than I'd hoped, the overall grounds and casitas were beautiful. And I experienced one of my favourite things about travel – doing things I probably wouldn't do at home.

### A NEW START

Located 20 minutes outside Santa Fe, the 70-acre resort has been around for decades. But last summer it reopened under new ownership, rebranded as an integrative wellness resort in a semi-luxury setting. Its philosophy centres on the Native American medicine wheel, which is smack dab in the middle of the property. The wheel's four quadrants correlate to different phases of life and their corresponding challenges. On-site counsellors and guides instruct guests on how this concept can improve their overall health.

During my two-day stay in April, things were just getting underway. The spacious, comfortable casitas were accepting 20–30 guests at a time, while the lodge rooms were opening soon. The guests were an interesting mix, including two psychiatrists checking out the integrative medical model, a pair of sisters from Atlanta who'd recently lost their father after a long illness, a lawyer mother from New York and her college-age daughter, and a retired couple who read about the resort in the *Washington Post*.

### ACTIVITIES

While it's possible to sleep at the resort and spend the days sightseeing, staff encourages guests to stay on-site and participate. Some of the activities are Native American-based, such as sweat lodge ceremonies and medicine wheel studies. Many involve nature. I harvested plants from the resort's greenhouse and grounds to make smudge sticks and pressed flower bookmarks. These crafts

reminded me of being a kid at camp, but were surprisingly satisfying as an adult. They also provided a good way to meet other guests. In one class, Body as Brush, we did quick, expressive ink drawings of different emotions. This class especially brought up deep feelings and promoted connectedness between participants. As a person there alone, the activities were my entrée into being invited to sit with others at meals. Yoga, juicing, cooking and fitness classes are also on the schedule.

For those who want a more typical spa experience, Sunrise Springs offers massage and other body treatments that emphasize wellness over beauty. My massage was so relaxing I fell asleep.

### ANIMAL INTERACTIONS

The Springs' 21 silkie chickens, with their poofy heads and feathery flanks, are ridiculously cute. But as far as therapy, don't expect them to help blind people cross the street. Their usefulness is more subtle. According to art therapist and Springs instructor Sue McDonald, chickens help people slow down and relax, which drops their cortisol levels. "Chickens pick up on your energy," she said. "It's very grounding to be able to hold an animal so that they feel safe."

Sunrise Springs also partners with Assistance Dogs of the West to train therapy dogs. Upon graduation from a two-year program, dogs will know approximately 90 verbal commands and be able to assist a person with diabetes, PTSD, seizures, or other medical conditions. Guests can help train the on-site puppies. I spent a couple of evenings hanging out with trainer extraordinaire Barbara Klein. So far, she's delivered two litters of puppies at Sunrise Springs. "We start training them from the minute they're born," she said. I enjoyed watching Barbara interact with Marley, Jude, Honey Pie and Sage. But when I told her how naughty my dog is, she sadly told me there are no bad dogs, just bad dog owners. Ouch.

### AFTER EFFECTS

The staff wants Sunrise Springs to have a lasting, positive effect on the health of visitors. Those who sign up for the intensive two-week program leave with a transition plan and can continue the relationship via Skype.

I pondered how much a visit to Sunrise Springs can change a guest. Personally, I found myself surprisingly touched by the care shown to the resort's plants in the greenhouse and on the grounds. While there, I vowed to improve my relationship with the plants in my own neglected yard. A month later, my yard remains an overgrown jungle. But I'm still hopeful that the Springs planted a seed, and I will soon be out there communing with backyard nature.

### IF YOU GO

You can fly into Albuquerque or the smaller Santa Fe airport. Ask Sunrise Springs for information on shuttle service to the resort. [www.sunrisesprings.com](http://www.sunrisesprings.com)

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