

May 3, 1998-----

Interior decorating.

Now that's a way to test any romance. But Alex and Phyllis Madonna have fixed up 110 different hotel rooms at their Madonna Inn in San Luis Obispo, Calif. And they've been happily married for 48 years.

The one-of-a-kind hotel is just off Highway 1, halfway between Los Angeles and San Francisco. The Madonna Inn has no religious significance, and the singer of the same name never has stayed there. But Barbra Streisand is a regular customer. As is Dom DeLuise. President Reagan slept here once.

The Madonna Inn is my favorite romantic getaway.

Let me count the ways: "The Caveman Room," the hotel's most requested room, features solid rock floors, walls and ceilings, as well as a rock shower and sinks that are recast as waterfalls. A small couch is finished in leopard-pattern upholstery. And a custom handcrafted stained-glass window welcomes natural light into "The Caveman Room."

Me Tarzan, you Jane.

Of course, the Madonnas have decorated a small room called "Romance," a split-level semi-suite painted in baby blues and an opal-glittered ceiling. "Romance" is accented with hand-carved beams and furnished with a king-sized bed.

Each room is as different as the Hatfields and McCoys.

"We've never had a disagreement," Phyllis says, with Alex listening on a phone extension. "Alex gets the ideas and I follow through." Alex adds, "Most of our rooms run in sequence, four or five in a group. Like the 'Swiss Room' is followed by the 'Edelweiss,' 'Matterhorn,' 'Carin' (cah-reen, the Swiss term for endearment) and 'Swiss Belle.' With each room being different, you can't make the same mistake twice."

Phyllis says, "You make more people happy by having a bigger variety. We always discuss back and forth how we wanted to do this. We love everything we see. So we decided to do everything. Fortunately, we enjoy the same things. I've heard so many people say they have problems if they redo one room. We've worked closely together all our lives."

The Madonna Inn's 110 rooms are in three separate buildings that rest on 2,200 acres

at the base of Mount Serro San Luis on the California Central Coast.

You don't even have to get a room to enjoy the Madonna Inn.

Tourists just passing by can relax in one of the pink leather heart-shaped booths in the outrageous Gold Rush Dining Room or have a drink in the "Let's Eat and Forever Be Happy" bar, peppered with copperwork, German wood carvings, and red leather stools and booths.

Then there's the wine cellar men's room. The Madonna Inn postcards (all photographs by Phyllis Madonna) call it "the most talked about men's room in the world."

And where else can you buy a postcard of a men's room?

The urinal is a rock waterfall accented by huge clamshell sinks.

As you step up to the urinal, an electric eye is triggered. Water cascades down the rocks, which creates a waterfall flush. Every time I've been to the Madonna Inn, I've seen women sneaking in the men's room for a peek at the bathroom, which looks like something out of a Flintstonian Sybaris.

"He was trying to outdo me, if you want to know the truth," Phyllis says. Alex says, "That's true. She did a heck of a job on the ladies' room." That room has gold tassles dangling from an overhead canopy. "The doors going into the ladies' stalls are handcrafted in red leather and velvet. The floor and walls are made out of pink marble," Alex says. Even the registration desk is done in pink marble with pink carpets on the office floor.

Alex, 78, is a native of San Luis Obispo. A contractor by trade, he built and paved 148 miles of Highway 1 between San Luis Obispo and Monterey.

He planned and built the Madonna Inn himself. "I went to several architects and didn't get anywhere." So he built it the way he saw it.

The first 12 rooms were completed by Christmas Eve, 1958.

Through the heat of passion, a bunch of lovebirds inadvertently helped burn down the original rooms in 1960.

"We had baseboard heat," Alex says. "Not knowing enough about the business, we didn't do some things right. That was one of them. We had seven honeymooners that night. One of

them threw the blankets down against the heater, and when it caught fire the whole thing went up in no time."

The Madonnas live in a house on the north side of San Luis Obispo. They have four children between the ages of 29 and 44.

Alex met Phyllis when he returned to California from a stint in the Air Corps Engineers. He was working on a highway in Orchid, about 40 miles south of San Luis Obispo. He took a break at a diner called Elmer's.

"I went there for lunch, and she was giving a birthday cake to a friend of hers working in Union Oil's main office," Alex recalls. "I saw her a couple times later. We just clicked."

Phyllis says, "It only took one date. And I was hooked. We've always had a lot in common."

Alex says, "She says 'Frog,' and I jump."

Phyllis says, "You know what he's saying? I'm the one that jumps. But I love him, you know. And then you do."

POSTSCRIPT:

Alex Madonna suffered a fatal heart attack in his San Luis Obispo home on April 22, 2004. He was 85.

I have visited the Madonna Inn four times and it is a difficult destination if you live in Chicago. But the four-hour drive south out of San Francisco (or the one time I drove four hours north from Los Angeles) was always worth the effort.

I last saw Mr. Madonna in the fall of 2002.

We had lunch in the inn's Gold Rush Dining Room. Mr. Madonna sat in his favorite pink leather heart-shaped booth, flanked by cherubs and pink roses. Every time I saw Mr. Madonna he was smiling. How could you not smile in a fantasy landscape like this?

On a clear day you can see Morro Rock towering above the hotel's nearby entrance to Morro Bay and up to 25 miles of the lush California coast. Mr. Madonna was enamored with that old mountain. "We have Easter sunrise services up there," he told me in 2002.

"Between 2,000 and 3,000 people will start out at 4, 4:30 in the morning with candles and

walk up the road. It's really quite nice. There's something magical about that mountain."

There was something magical about Mr. Madonna.

I included the Madonna Inn in my 2000 'Ticket To Everywhere' compilation of travel columns. When I do readings, the unbending love that Mr. Madonna shared with his wife, Phyllis, always resonates with the audience.

The most popular suites such as "The Caveman Room" require reservations a year in advance. The last time I stayed at the hotel was with a friend who was into Feng shui. She freaked out in "The Caveman Room." Despite all that, the hotel is in perfect harmony. The Madonnas were married 54 years.

[Previous](#) [Next](#) [Return to Hitlist](#) [Return to Search Screen](#) [Change Document](#) [Display](#)