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Travel

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BEYOND THE GREEN



COACHELLA VALLEY BY MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN

Flying into Palm Springs, I'm always reminded of a color-by-number painting — one short on both colors and numbers. Peering out of the small aircraft window, I see a palette of just green, for the exquisitely manicured golf courses, and brown, for the giant mounds of cocoa powder that turn out, unfortunately, to be mountains.

Two hours east of Los Angeles at the northern end of the Colorado Desert, the Coachella Valley in California is composed of a handful of cities, the most established of which is Palm Springs. Nearly surrounded by mountains, the valley is protected from all but the sunniest, warmest days.

In Palm Springs, ditch your golf cart: The desert is Coachella Valley's true oasis

BY MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN
Special to The Washington Post

Once known as a winter escape for Hollywood's Rat Pack and other entertainers, Palm Springs and its neighbors are now famous for their 110 golf courses, 24-hour casinos, mid-century modern architecture and rehab facilities, such as the Betty Ford Center. In recent years, the area has also become a popular LGBT destination and home to one of the country's largest music festivals, Coachella.

So at first blush, it's understandable that you might gravitate toward the sparkly, colorful side of the desert. After all, those of us from the East tend to associate green with life. Brown is easy to dismiss.

But you'd be forgiven.

Not long ago, I, too, was in the green camp. My grandparents

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Grit over glam: This desert doesn't mess around

PALM SPRINGS FROM F1

moved to the Coachella Valley in 1986, after my grandfather retired from a career at Hughes Aircraft. Ever since, I've been visiting.

In the early days, the airport — which was originally a World War II military airfield — was little more than a landing strip. My grandfather always wore a hat, and I remember walking off the plane and seeing him waiting on the side of the tarmac, standing several heads taller than everyone else.

My grandparents, like many other retirees there, lived in a gated golf community. Outside the gates was a world that seemed remote and exotic, all sand dunes and desert brush. Back then, few streetlights spoiled the night sky, and I remember riding home from dinner under a sheet of stars, on a dark, two-lane road that seemed to slice right through emptiness.

Inside the gates, my sister and I found a surreal world in which people zipped around in golf carts and gardeners picked up palm fronds the moment they hit the ground. We joined my grandparents for lunch at the clubhouse, swam in pristine pools, watched my grandmother on the putting green and once courted trouble with the older boy next door during a late-night golf cart excursion.

The Little San Bernardino, Santa Rosa and San Jacinto mountains around us provided a stark contrast, like giant hands cupping our playground. They changed colors as the sun moved across the sky. On occasion, I wondered about the source of the water that kept the golf greens green. But we rarely interacted with the natural world. My grandmother's idea of an outdoor activity was serving malted milkshakes on the patio.

In 2008, I drove cross-country and helped my grandmother — by then widowed — move into an assisted-living facility in Palm Desert. It was a nice two-bedroom with a balcony we knew she'd never use. By that point, Coachella Valley was built up beyond recognition. Her new home was a few blocks from El Paseo, known as the Rodeo Drive of the desert. I drove back East with my grandfather's record collection, heavy with Frank Sinatra and Benny Goodman. During my subsequent visits, I vowed, I'd escape the green.

Seeking nature, finding plenty

Visits to my grandmother are endlessly comforting, largely because I know what to expect: baking, shopping, coupon-organizing and Rolodex card-rewriting. Between these activities, I began planning outings to the brown areas of the desert. One year, grieving and seeking solitude, I ventured out to Joshua Tree National Park, where the Mohave and Colorado deserts converge. I climbed boulders and hiked under the hot desert sun with gritty sand crunching under my feet. Another year I learned about date farms and took the Palm Springs Aerial Tramway 2½ miles up the cliffs of Chino Canyon to Mount San Jacinto State Park. At the top, 8,500 feet, I found snow-covered hiking trails and a breathtaking panorama of the windmill farms and valley below.

One day at the end of last year, I landed in Palm Springs just before dusk. I called my grandmother, now 95, and she said she'd saved me half a cheese sandwich. But after a day of travel, I was determined to find more gratifying food. "Okay," she said flatly. "I'm just waiting for you." Racked with guilt but deferring to my stomach, I drove a few minutes from the airport into downtown Palm Springs. After parking, I stretched my legs for a couple of blocks, admiring the twinkly lights coiling up palm tree trunks and eyeing a bright orange rotary phone in the window display of a design store.

I went into Workshop Kitchen + Bar, an austere-looking restaurant with concrete tables. The special was a whole head of cauliflower with truffles for \$39, intended, I assumed, to be shared. Instead, I filled up on a delicious shaved Brussels sprouts salad and bread with carrot butter. At my grandmother's, the first thing I did immediately after we embraced was open her freezer to look for Toll House cookies.

My first getaway that week was an early hike with my Uncle Mike at Thousand Palms Oasis, a preserve with a historic palm log cabin that serves as the visitors center. Mike, who was a pioneer when he moved to the desert as a young lawyer in 1972, grabbed a walking stick. We joined a small group on a two-mile guided walk along the San Andreas fault line. Our guide, Harlan, first walked us through an oasis of California fan palm trees. Plopped into the desert, this small, lush grove of trees looked junglelike and out of place, with a boardwalk over water and palm fronds splayed out from trunks like long hula skirts. Harlan explained that springs arise along the fault line, creating oases and a setting for different types of vegetation.

As we exited the oasis, Harlan pointed out various plants, such as the stinky creosote bush; the golden cholla, with fierce-looking spines; and the leafless smoketree, for which photosynthesis occurs through branches.

"It's not about looking good," Harlan told us about desert ecology. "It's about staying alive." We stopped at a dyeweed shrub, and he picked off a dead-looking flower. He smashed it in his fingers. I followed his lead. A surprising citrus fragrance exploded out of this dry crumble, and orange dye stained my hand. Nearby, a lone desert sunflower bloomed bright yellow. All that looked barren from overhead had now come to life.



In Palm Springs, a horseback ride, above, from Smoke Tree Stables goes along canyon trails to an Indian reservation. The estate Sunnylands, below, hosts free yoga on the Great Lawn set to a backdrop of the San Jacinto Mountains.



We stepped into a quiet palm grove Harlan called the cathedral, and after he told us about the scarce great horned owl and the fringe-toed lizard, we all spent a few silent moments looking for animals. Then we hiked up to Vista Point, which rewarded us with views all the way out to the Salton Sea. Mike said he used to water-ski there decades ago, but the water is evaporating and its level has dropped dramatically. It's now saltier than the ocean — unfit for humans or fish. But it remains an important migratory bird stop along the Pacific Flyway.

Toward the end of the hike, a man who had extensively studied survival skills identified bobcat tracks. We got to talking, and he mentioned a free outdoor yoga class the following day.

On the drive back to my grandmother's, I stopped to buy her new Rolodex cards and found that the office supply store had stopped carrying them.

Horses and a downward dog

Over time, I've pieced together a new picture of the Coachella Valley. I always found it hard to take seriously a place with streets named after Bob Hope and Dinah Shore, that produced Sonny Bono as mayor and hosts an annual golf cart parade. But the more intimate I've become with the land, the more I understand that it's a spectacular place for outdoor adventure — and the more I have come to respect it. While we humans bask in our conveniences, plants and animals survive here in harsh conditions. A short hike without proper hydration could be deadly; the desert doesn't mess around.

At the assisted-living facility, my grandmother and I dined downstairs with her friends John and Larry at 4:30. I fell asleep

before she did and blamed it on the time change. We sat at the kitchen table and made chocolate and caramel candies, and I tied a pink ribbon to her walker as a reminder to stand up straight. Then we improvised with the Rolodex, writing new numbers on the back of old cards. I bought her a magnifying glass with a light that quickly became her favorite gadget.

One morning, I hiked with my aunt on a popular trail known as Bump-n-Grind, which heads straight into the mountains and offers a bird's-eye view of billionaire Larry Ellison's private golf course, Porcupine Ridge. Another time, I drove into the mountains to the Santa Rosa and San Jacinto Mountains National Monument Visitors Center, where I found a sign above the toilet that read "Dehydration Urine Color Chart," with colors assigned to various levels of hydration.

Toward the end of my visit, I drove to Smoke Tree Stables, a family-run operation that offers Western-style horseback tours. I was the only one who showed up for the 8 a.m. ride. My guide, Leanne, introduced me to my horse, Mouse, and we took off along a dried river bed and into the foothills of the San Jacinto Mountains. Leanne talked a bit about Native American history — these lands are the ancestral home of the Agua Caliente band of Cahuilla Indians. But for most of two hours, the only sounds were our horses' hooves on the rocky ground as we headed up along the Andreas Canyon Trail and through an oasis of California fan palms. We passed rushing water, which I could hear well after we'd left the oasis.

As I slipped my legs off the horse, I could already tell I'd be sore later. Yoga seemed appealing. So I headed to Sunnylands, the former Annenberg estate, often

called the Camp David of the West. The gorgeous new visitors center hosts weekly yoga classes on its Great Lawn. I met the survivalist for drinks on the patio. His coffee arrived in its own French press, with an orange sand timer housed in a sleek stainless steel frame, so he'd know when to pour.

Yogis in fluorescent apparel dotted the lawn, which was mowed in perfect stripes. I grabbed a mat and claimed a spot. In the distance, I could see snow-capped mountain peaks. The grass felt like a shag carpet, and I left footprints wherever I stepped. The sun warmed my shoulders.

Nearly 100 students formed a ring around our instructor. She addressed people as "baby" and playfully admonished us to pull in our holiday stomachs, which were hanging over our pants. "This is the California part," she said into her microphone, "where you have to touch someone you don't know." She talked us through resting a hand on our neighbor's shoulder and executing several balance positions.

At the end of class, it was time for our relaxation pose: on our backs, arms out in a "T" and heels sinking into the soft grass. Even with my eyes closed, I still squinted away the fierce sun overhead. So I pulled off my ball cap and placed it over my face, relaxing my eyes. The instructor spoke soothingly, asking us to think of ourselves as a clear and open channel between heaven and earth. I took a deep breath and exhaled. Then I cracked open one eye and found a tiny air hole at the top of my hat. I peered through it like a pinhole camera and saw a bright blue sky.

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If you go

WHERE TO STAY

Triada

640 N. Indian Canyon Dr.
760-844-7000

www.triadapalmsprings.com

A Spanish hacienda built in the 1920s that opened in November as part of Marriott's Autograph Collection. Sunrise yoga and hikes start in the spring. Downtown, 56 rooms, single king/queen from \$169.

Del Marcos Hotel

225 West Baristo Rd.
800-676-1214

www.delmarcoshotel.com

The hotel has 17 rooms with whimsical names (e.g., the Shag Room, the Errol Flynn Suite), with retro touches such as a yellow mid-century dinette. Heated saltwater pool, complimentary bikes. Rooms from \$149, including breakfast.

WHERE TO EAT

Cheeky's

622 N. Palm Canyon
760-327-7595

www.cheekysps.com

Breakfast is served from 8 a.m. to 2 p.m. with fresh-squeezed juices, organic eggs and coffee, house-made pastries and sausages, and locally sourced veggies. Goat cheese hash browns \$5; roasted yam sandwich with feta \$9; blood-orange mimosa \$9.

Las Casuelas Terraza

222 S. Palm Canyon Dr.
760-325-2794

www.lascasuelas.com

Family-owned, with authentic Mexican fare. Outdoor patios with live music, 75 varieties of tequila and Mexican hot chocolate. Pollo en mole (half chicken with mole poblano) \$16.95; jicama salad \$10.95; margaritas from \$5.75.

Workshop Kitchen + Bar

800 N. Palm Canyon Dr.
760-459-3451

www.workshoppalmsprings.com

An industrial spot with 27-foot cathedral ceilings and a menu built around seasonal produce. Shaved Brussels sprout salad with persimmon and pomegranate \$15; mesquite-grilled pork chop with gorgonzola-stuffed roasted Bartlett pear \$32.

WHAT TO DO

Palm Springs Aerial Tramway

1 Tram Way
760-325-1391

www.pstramway.com

A large rotating tram car takes visitors up 2.5 miles in 10 minutes, to 8,500 feet in the San Jacinto Mountains. At the top: spectacular views and 54 miles of hiking trails. Cars depart at least every half hour, daily. Adults \$23.95, ages 3-12 \$16.95.

Smoke Tree Stables

2500 Toledo Ave.
760-327-1372

www.smoketreestables.com

Third-generation family-owned stable with family-friendly guided Western rides along canyon trails. One-hour ride along the base of the Santa Rosa Mountains, \$50; two-hour ride into the Agua Caliente Indian Reservation, \$100.

Hikes

The Coachella Valley offers countless opportunities to hike, including Joshua Tree National Park (www.nps.gov/jotr), the 800,000-acre climbing mecca where the Mohave and California deserts meet; Thousand Palms Oasis Preserve (www.coachellavalleypreserve.org), with free guided hikes several days a week; Tahquitz Canyon (www.tahquitzcanyon.com) and Indian Canyons (www.indian-canyons.com), both part of the Agua Caliente reservation; Whitewater Preserve (www.wildlandsconservancy.org), which features a swimming hole and a year-round flowing river; and Santa Rosa and San Jacinto Mountains National Monument Visitors Center (www.palm SpringsLife.com/santarosa), which is central to several trails, including access to the Pacific Crest Trail.

INFORMATION

www.visitgreaterpalmsprings.com
www.visitpalmsprings.com

—M.K.