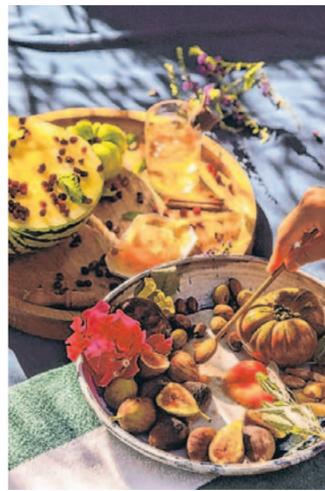


ADVENTURE & TRAVEL



HEATLAND Clockwise from far left: One of the numerous mineral pools at the Two Bunch Palms, an adults-only wellness resort in Desert Hot Spring; Capone Master Suite at Two Bunch Palms; the resort's restaurant leans vegetarian.

Over the years, many of these original resorts fell into disrepair and eventually closed. To be sure, Desert Hot Springs has little in common with its more manicured neighbor to the south, Palm Springs, or the golf-happy Palm Desert. You don't go there for fancy restaurants or nightlife. Rather, it's the "rebel cousin," as one denizen put it, of the swankier burghs nearby. Many Desert Hot Springs spas (like those elsewhere) suffered during the pandemic; hot tubs and high-touch services like massages were a hard sell at a time of lockdowns and social distancing. But resorts began fully reopening in the middle of last year, prompting our impromptu getaway.

As soon as we arrived at Two Bunch Palms, extensively renovated in 2018, we noticed guests clad in terry cloth robes wandering around the resort; a few were even dining in the elegant restaurant. It didn't take us long to adjust: Not having to fret about what to wear is another freeing aspect of the spa lifestyle. One repeat guest told me it reminded her of the ryokans she'd stayed at in Japan. It was so quiet we whispered even when we didn't have to. Like most of the boutique hotels and resorts here, Two Bunch Palms is adults-only.

Along sandy paths marked with "roadrunner crossing" warnings, we drifted over to the spaceship-style yoga dome to take a class. After massages in the spa treatment rooms, we ordered glasses of natu-

ral wine on the restaurant patio. Once we'd shed that nagging feeling we ought to keep busy, we got on the program. Simply put: Soak, rinse and repeat. (Access to the resort's pools and most classes are included in the room rate, which starts at about \$400, but meals and spa treatments are priced separately.)

"It's all about the waters," said one longtime resident of Desert Hot Springs. And the precious liquid was everywhere. Our suite had its own hot tub in a patio outside the bedroom, but it seemed almost redundant given the sheer number of possibilities for solitary soaking. Pools of all different sizes are scattered around the grounds.

I found an unoccupied medium-size pool in a shaded corner off the main path, and was just settling in with a book when an attendant came by to ask if the temperature was satisfactory, mentioning that most tubs are heated to 102 to 104. But other than the warmth, what really sets this apart from just sitting in a bubble bath at home?

A scientific analysis of the water wasn't performed until 1937, when, as per local history, "its therapeutic value was affirmed." In layman's terms, that means it contains a mashup of minerals—lithium, silica, magnesium, calcium, among others—that its boosters in the wellness sector claim reduce pain and improve mobility, increase blood circulation and cell oxygenation.

I'm not sure which minerals were at work, but after 48 hours, much of it spent floating in this soothing soup, the persistent soreness in my neck and shoulder had all but vanished. My daughter found that for pure relaxation, nothing topped a midnight soak under a starry desert sky. Perhaps it's not a "cure" per se, and to be fair, most of the spas here in Desert Hot Springs aren't claiming to deliver more than a restful escape. As Two Bunch Palms puts it in its literature, "wellness is whatever you make of it."



The 10-room Hope Springs Resort, an updated midcentury modern motel, has three pools, fed by the springs, and a range of spa treatments

Soak It All In

At Desert Hot Springs, a glitz-free getaway spot for Angelenos, the agenda is simple: Sink into a mineral pool, rinse, repeat

By BARBARA PETERSON

IN ROBERT ALTMAN'S devastating Hollywood satire, "The Player," Tim Robbins plays an amoral studio executive pursued by police who suspect him of murder. As cops close in on him at the airport, he hits on an escape plan: "I know this great hideaway in Desert Hot Springs," he says to his female companion. "It's a two-hour drive." When we next see them, they're pulling up in a Range Rover to a gated oasis in the desert, dotted with towering palms and stone cottages surrounding a grotto filled with gurgling waters. "It comes right out of the ground," the Robbins character explains as guests frolic nearby in steaming mineral pools. (Spoiler alert: This romantic idyll is soon interrupted by a phone call from his lawyer.)

Last October, seeking an escape of another sort, I set out on the same auto route, with my grown daughter at the wheel, and headed for Two Bunch Palms, the sprawling



spa resort that Altman had chosen for this location shoot. Aside from its brief cameo in the 1992 film, the property has long had a reputation as a refuge, for celebrities seeking privacy and even some real-life crooks: Al Capone is rumored to have holed up at the oasis of Two Bunch Palms during the 1920s.

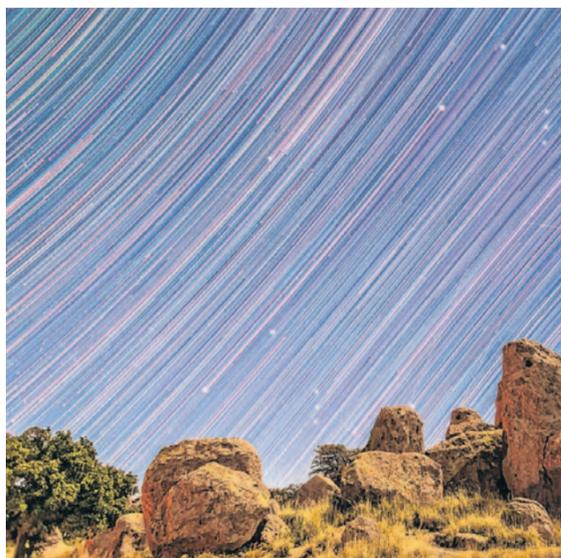
Desert Hot Springs, which sits on a swath of arid land in the Coachella Valley, styles itself as "spa city" after its most unusual feature: It sits atop two aquifers, one hot and one cold, that supply the mineral waters that flow into the spa resorts and their ubiquitous mineral baths and pools. Those waters are the main

draw, whether you're staying in a posh spa hotel like Two Bunch Palms, the smaller Hope Springs or even a motel.

While the existence of these warm springs was known to the indigenous Cahuilla tribe for hundreds of years, they weren't widely reported until the early 20th century. Around 1914, a homesteader named Cabot Yerxa, while trying to locate water on his land with his pick and shovel, stumbled on both springs near where Two Bunch stands today. Yerxa named the spot "Miracle Hill." Soon after, real-estate developers began building a spa center to rival other mineral spring "cure towns" in the U.S. and abroad.

By the 1940s Desert Hot Springs lured not just Hollywood types but ordinary folks seeking a miracle cure for all manner of ills, from arthritis to polio. Soon there were more than 200 "spa-tels" and bathhouses advertising the therapeutic benefits of their mineral pools. Another selling point: Unlike the sulfuric waters of warm springs in other places, these desert springs had no rotten egg odor.

TUMBLEWEED CONNECTION / NOT ALL DESERTSCAPES ARE THE SAME. FOR A MILDER CLIMATE AND VARIED OUTDOOR DIVERSIONS, HIT THESE HIGH-DESERT TOWNS.



STAR STRUCK City of Rocks State Park in the Chihuahuan desert region of southwestern New Mexico.

Parks and Recreation St. George, Utah

As the gateway to five national parks (Arches, Bryce, Canyonlands, Capitol Reef and Zion), St. George sits at the northernmost tip of the Mojave Desert. "It serves as a sweet hopping off spot to those natural wonders," said Tracey Welsh, general manager of Red Mountain Resort, 7 miles outside of town. Hikers, bikers and kayakers can explore the area's spectacular terrain while museums and galleries abound downtown. Among the new arrivals to downtown St. George are the Advenire, an Autograph Collection hotel, and Wood.Ash.Rye, a venue known for its biscuits and burgers. Still, the biggest draw remains the otherworldly red rock landscape—a back-



drop for ATV/UTV escapades, concerts at Tuacahn Amphitheatre and athletic competitions, including the Huntsman World Senior Games and Ironman and Ironman 70.3 triathlons (pictured above).

Art, Caves and Stars Silver City, N.M.

For an old mining town tucked into the mountains of southwestern New Mexico, Silver City has an unexpectedly energetic downtown district. It's lined with galleries and hosts

art festivals throughout the year. The Trail of the Mountain Spirits, a scenic byway, starts in town and runs north to the Gila Cliff Dwellings National Monument, where the Mogollon people lived in the 1200s. About 30 miles southeast of Silver City, hikers can scale monoliths rising from the desert floor in City of Rocks State Park. Those seeking a peek at the Milky Way and distant galaxies find the heart of darkness at Cosmic Campground, a designated Dark Sky Sanctuary on Gila National Forest land.

Rockin' the Rivers Grand Junction, Colo.

Two large rivers—the Colorado and the Gunnison—meet at Grand Junction, a high-desert town in western Colorado,

where hiking, mountain biking and stand-up paddleboarding are free-time favorites, along with rafting and canoeing. The nearby red rock spires of the Colorado National Monument and Grand Mesa, one of the world's largest flat-top mountains, are both primed for nimble rock climbers and canyoneering enthusiasts. Check into Hotel Maverick on the Colorado Mesa University campus and borrow a bike to size up the town, then stop at Moody's Lounge, a new speak-easy on Main Street. For outdoor pursuits, you can fish for catfish, trout or largemouth bass in Highline Lake State Park or sample the wines at vineyards in nearby Palisade. Book a table at Colterris at the Overlook for views of the Colorado River. —Donna Bulseco