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Hot Tubs Among The Blooms

By HATSY SHIELDS

WITH a vision of magenta and golden desert flowers in full bloom, I picked up the phone in frozen mid-February to make late March reservations for a family romp in the warm, dry air of Anza-Borrego Desert State Park. Encompassing diverse desert landscapes, with almost two-thirds of it wilderness, the park stretches south from Riverside County for more than 60 miles to just short of the Mexican border. In the northern half of the park, a two-and-a-half-hour drive northeast of San Diego, where we plucked our son Ben from his drafting table, the unprepossessing town of Borrego Springs offers the only amenities in the area. None of the recommended inns I called could accommodate five of us for a week -- they were already almost solidly booked -- so we split our time among three. And for different reasons, we would happily revisit each.

The Palms at Indian Head, ideally situated on the edge of town just down the road from Anza-Borrego's handsome underground visitor center (where you can spend hours studying displays of desert geology, flora and fauna), is on the site of a lodge that burned in 1958 and that was a playground for Hollywood celebrities in the 50's. Its replacement, a two-story white wood-frame and masonry building, is more reminiscent of military housing than a getaway for the stars, but is softened by a curtain of brilliant raspberry-colored bougainvillea at the entrance. L-shaped, the inn's glass-fronted living room and dining room open onto the original pool -- sparkling, unheated and too cold for me in mid-March. Small tables dot a patio that gives way to steps down to the pool area bordered by low walls draped in rosemary and purple verbena. I can picture martinis being poured poolside -- with Marilyn, Bing and Marlon, whose photographs adorn the reception area, on the lounge chairs holding up a glass.

Postwar Borrego Springs nurtured high hopes -- it wanted to be the next Palm Springs. The town was laid out ambitiously, a grid of flat, straight roads that feel wide today for the sparse commercial activity. The boom never happened. Conservationists blocked plans for a highway from Los Angeles. A few golfers trickled in on weekends. A few farmers tapped the valley's deep aquifer and planted grapefruit groves. But the park and its informal campsites became a draw for avid hikers.

Though it was late afternoon when we arrived, we were itching to get into the cactus-strewn landscape. A convenient path from The Palms hooks into a three-mile self-guided nature trail into Borrego Palm Canyon, the park's most visited canyon. The path climbs gently beside a lively little stream and presents small surprises along the way, like clusters of unusual and lovely deep blue desert Canterbury bells. While my husband fingered the plant's notched leaves, I came to the last line of its identification in our wildflower guide explaining that this species causes "a skin rash similar to poison oak." (We learned not to touch unfamiliar beauties.) The canyon had been home to various native tribes, and we discovered morteros, grain-grinding holes, in a number of boulders. At dusk we came upon an oasis of 70-foot fan palms, an imposing assemblage of skirted giants with their feet in the water.

Looming above us on our hike back, the 3,960-foot Indian Head Mountain cast long shadows as we gingerly negotiated among spiny teddy bear chollas and sweet-smelling desert lavender. When we returned to the inn, my husband and the three 20-somethings sank into a steaming amoeba-shaped hot tub. The jagged profile of the mountain peak began to melt into the darkening desert sky. A pinyon wood fire crackled and blazed in a chiminea next to the pool, and clinking china and chatter from dinner guests at the inn's popular Crazy Coyote restaurant drifted into the night. Leila, our son Nick's fiancée, declared this to be the most romantic hot tub setting she could possibly imagine.

Back upstairs in our corner room, a missing blade in the ceiling fan caused a wheezing lurch with every rotation. We shut off the fan but then couldn't open the windows. All 10 bedrooms are on the second floor. All except ours (No. 9 has a small suite) open directly onto an outdoor corridor with a staircase at each end. These rooms are airy and light, with enormous front-facing windows, sturdy bleached lodgepole-pine furniture and inviting arrangements of comfortable overstuffed chairs -- each equipped with a small refrigerator, microwave, coffee maker and fan. In Nick's room, New Age paintings of

clouds floated above the king-sized bed, and a basket of paperbacks -- from philosophy texts to Rosamunde Pilcher -- sat by the bed. "Mellow vibes here," approved the graduate student on break.

Privacy, however, was something of an issue even for the laid-back among us. "What is the etiquette here?" asked Ben. He was referring to the open-curtain policy along the corridor. Does one ignore the on-view bedroom scenarios -- couples napping, hanging up laundry, dining on takeout food. They were unremarkable but more than we New England passers-by felt entitled to behold. We might have acclimated to fishbowl life had we stayed longer (certainly a friendly atmosphere prevails, with such touches as chocolate-chip cookies and cold milk delivered at bedtime), but we were soon off to our next inn, with its own brand of laissez faire hospitality.

Sitting on 10 flat acres of desert on Palm Canyon Drive, the main road through town, the three-year-old adobe-style Borrego Valley Inn feels like a modern-day pueblo village, low-slung and blending nicely into the gritty beige landscape. Tastefully designed to honor its desert setting, the inn's 14 bedrooms and reception area create a U-shaped courtyard framing spectacular views of the pristine ridges in the distance, the parched folds that change color, mauve to olive green to navy blue, with the slant of the sun.

"Borrego Springs is for people who love solitude and are looking for a wilderness experience," said Mary Robidoux, who built the inn with her husband, Don. The couple have since sold it to Allison and Grant Rogers, formerly an investment banker and a television director respectively, who moved west from New York in mid-September. At that moment Mary and I were crossing a bit of tamed wilderness in the sandy courtyard landscaped with desert natives, yellow-flowering creosote bushes, spindly red-tipped ocotillos and needle-pointed agaves, to an adobe wall covered in apricot-colored bougainvillea. An insistent visitor, a baby roadrunner, was calling for its morning snack of raw hamburger.

The wide courtyard with its scattered benches, blue and yellow Adirondack chairs and aviary aflutter with tiny chirping white finches, separates two rows of seven tile-roofed single-story bedrooms. Each Santa Fe-style room with Mexican-tile floors and handsome rustic furniture has its own porch in front (where guests read the paper in the morning and where we five gathered for a glass of wine before dinner) and an enclosed private patio in back. From an attractive, well-equipped kitchenette in Room 7, sliding glass doors led to our patio. A pipe organ cactus made a handy rack for drying socks, and a glossy-leafed lemon tree shaded a small table and chairs.

We padded to the heated swimming pool or round hot tub to soak tired legs in the evening, never overlapping with other guests in the pool area. I wondered if anyone accepted the inn's invitation to swim au naturel, on the room information cards.

The Borrego Valley Inn serves a sumptuous breakfast but no dinner. We went down the street to Carlee's for a hamburger and beer on a rollicking karaoke night at which certain of our family members displayed musical talent hitherto unsuspected. The breakfast buffet consisted of fresh breads, coffeecakes, cheeses, boiled eggs, fruit and yogurt, and guests settled themselves in the living room or on the veranda.

We would pore over our desert field guides. Was the tree with tiny leaves catclaw or mesquite, the yellow daisy brittlebush or snakeweed, and how toxic is the sting of the five-and-a-half-inch-long mustard-yellow giant desert hairy scorpion that disrupted our picnic? Painful but not deadly, we learned. We studied maps of the park to plan the day's excursions. Should we hike at sea level for a viewing of the rare elephant trees or shift into four-wheel drive to climb 5,000 feet on rutted roads for panoramic views of the Borrego Valley? We were all beginning to understand the lure of the unspoiled low desert, a fragile and fast-disappearing habitat.

In fact, our last stop, La Casa del Zorro, five miles south of town on Yaqui Pass Road, is a verdant 42-acre kingdom that defies the elements and all but ignores the desert. Casa del Zorro is a resort, and it is about comfort, fitness and entertainment. There are five swimming pools, four Jacuzzi baths, a therapy whirlpool, a massage room, an aerobics room and a fitness center. The six tennis courts are lighted for night play, and the nine-hole putting green wraps around a pond with a splashing fountain and darting hummingbirds. When you are finished with bocce, shuffleboard and croquet, you can try a game of outdoor chess with knights and rooks the size of 5-year-olds.

The key to this manicured playground peppered with palms and landscaped with banks of oleander and meadows of orange poppies and daisies is a huge irrigation system. Sprinklers come on regularly to water emerald lawns so lush my feet disappeared in the thick, even grass. An ever-busy maintenance crew in golf carts buzzed around on paths that wind among the 19 California-style casitas -- little houses, some white stucco, some brick, with one to four bedrooms each -- and outbuildings of executive suites (two with baby grand pianos, some with fireplaces) and deluxe rooms. Our executive suite

was one of six in a single-story bungalow. The décor was generic upscale hotel, nice enough and spanking clean with a newly upholstered couch, two queen-sized beds and padded hangers in the closet, but we could have been in Milwaukee.

After washing off desert dust our first evening, we decided to eat at the informal Fox Den, a dining room in the main building. The tables were full, and attentive guests seemed to be enjoying the unremitting entertainment.

"A little in our face, isn't he?" Nick muttered of the crooning piano player. Maybe we'd spent too much time in the sun.

In the next few days, our children succumbed to the appeal of ever-present games and activities. None of us, it turned out, was immune to the cushy resort life.

We had our pick of well-kept tennis courts on a late 75-degree afternoon for a marathon doubles round robin. We were still battling when the sun began to sink behind Pinyon Ridge, but then, suddenly, the evening sky claimed our full attention.

Days earlier someone had explained that the occasional blindingly colorful sunset -- should we be lucky enough to see one -- was the result of the slanted light reflecting off particles of sand in the atmosphere. And here it was, banners of deep pink, purple and orange chiffon floating across the sky, an astonishing display. Even with our feet grounded on green, hard-surface courts, a desert phenomenon could steal the show.

3 cool oases: pools, patios and palms

The Palms at Indian Head, 2220 Hoberg Road, Post Office Box 525, Borrego Springs, Calif. 92004; (800) 519-2624, fax (760) 767-9717; www.thepalmsatindianhead.com. This International Modern-style inn has 10 rooms decorated with lodgepole pine furniture, minirefrigerators, microwaves and coffee makers; with air-conditioning. Rooms are \$75 to \$159, without breakfast. Lunch is available Wednesday to Saturday; dinner, Wednesday to Sunday; a brunch buffet is offered Sunday.

Borrego Valley Inn, 405 Palm Canyon Drive, Post Office Box 2038, Borrego Springs, Calif. 92004; (800) 333-5810, fax (760) 767-0900; www.borregovalleyinn.com. All 14 rooms, with air-conditioning, are decorated in a Southwestern style and have a private patio; all but two have kitchenettes; some have fireplaces. Rooms cost \$135 to \$185, with breakfast (no other meals available).

La Casa del Zorro, 3845 Yaqui Pass Road, Borrego Springs, Calif. 92004; (760) 767-5323, (800) 824-1884, fax (760) 767-5963; www.lacasadelzorro.com. The resort has 77 rooms and casitas (one to four bedrooms, most with private pool or whirlpool), all with air-conditioning: from \$175 to \$1,250, without breakfast. The resort has two restaurants: one serving breakfast, lunch and dinner; the other, lunch and dinner.

Photos: A room at The Palms at Indian Head, on the edge of Borrego Springs. (pg. 12); Borrego Valley Inn, where yellow-flowered creosote and agaves grow. Breakfast at the inn is set outdoors. The Palms at Indian Head. At La Casa del Zorro, a bedroom and one of the resort's five pools. (Photographs by Robert Burroughs for The New York Times)(pg. 10) Map of California shows the location of Anza-Borrego Desert State Park. (pg. 10)