

The Springs in Palm Springs

Rod and I enjoyed spending time, with friends of five decades Diana and Harold and Chip and Terry, in the California desert this winter, in the Coachella Valley around Palm Springs.

My grandmother first traveled to the desert more than a century ago, from her home in Los Angeles. Back then, the desert towns were small health resorts, where tuberculosis survivors, like my grandma Tennys, went for dry air, winter warmth and the healing, naturally hot mineral waters.

My parents continued her tradition of desert sojourns, and we visited frequently during the 1950s, 1960s and early 1970s. At first, our destination was Desert Hot Springs, a rustic outpost where multiple mineral hot springs flow from the aptly named Miracle Hill. We stayed at modest motels or in our camper, roamed around the desert looking at horned toads and cacti, and soaked at the Miracle Pool, a giant indoor hot pool. I was intrigued by the chair on an electrically powered boom that lowered and raised people paralyzed by polio, or unable to walk for other reasons, in and out of the mineral pool.

Following our developing interest in playing tennis, we moved on to Palm Springs, where there were abundant tennis courts, but where a half-century ago life still revolved around the hot springs. Long days of competitive tennis on the public courts at Ruth Hardy Park were followed by soaking in the hot pools at the Palm Springs Spa, on Palm Canyon Drive in the middle of town. We still stayed in our camper, or later, motor home.

Visits to Palm Springs back then were all about health. Tennis, hot springs, hiking up the rugged canyon to Tahquitz Falls, swimming under the falls. Eating raw foods, snacking on dates. We purchased our almonds and dates, and Dr. Bronner's soap and other supplies, at the Desert House of Health, an early health food emporium that was a precursor of giants like Whole Foods. Its owner, Art Hendershot, was a guru of healthy living and eating, who hosted wellness lectures at his store.

He was also one of the organizers of a six-week trip to Jamaica, in 1965, when I was 12 years old, together with former Broadway director, then Hollywood bodybuilder, trainer and health promoter Howard Inches. They were recruiting investors for papaya plantations in Florida and Jamaica. The papaya would be turned into nutritional supplements, sold through the Desert House of Health and other outlets. Our family flew, with Hendershot, the Inches and other prospective investors, to

Montego Bay in a chartered DC-3, via Texas and Florida. It was quite an adventure, but that's another story.

In the 1960s, my grandmother and my mom purchased a small apartment building and a few rental cottages, with a tiny one-room casita for our own use, near the classic El Mirador Hotel on the north side of Palm Springs. Two decades later, when the El Mirador had become the campus of the Desert Regional Medical Center and Palm Springs proposed to take the properties from us through eminent domain to build a parking lot, I spoke at a Palm Springs City Council meeting, asking the city to instead consider partnering with our family to develop a senior facility. I will never forget appearing before Mayor Sonny Bono. He and his fellow council members turned down our plea for cooperation, so our time of business ownership in Palm Springs ended.

Art Hendershot and his wife Alice eventually closed the Desert House of Health, leaving Palm Springs for Shasta County, where they purchased the undeveloped Big Bend Hot Springs on the Pit River, hoping to create a close-to-nature Essene community there. In the 1980s, my mom led us up to see them and to soak in the hot springs.

Gone also, for the most part today, is the emphasis on health, wellness and soaking in the hot mineral springs, in the California desert. The Miracle Pool is no more. The Palm Springs Spa is a casino. We looked for hot springs during our recent visit, without much success.

The Coachella Valley is home to more than 120 golf courses. Ruth Hardy Park still has public tennis courts, but Indian Wells has its Tennis Garden, owned by Oracle Executive Chairman Larry Ellison, with a 16,000-seat stadium and 29 tennis courts. La Quinta, Palm Desert, Rancho Mirage and other outlying resorts have become planned communities with lavish homes and golf courses. The Coachella Valley has a population of 463,000 permanent residents, and growing. There are fabulous restaurants and art galleries, which we enjoyed.

Tahquitz Canyon, along with several other canyons, is owned and maintained by the local Native American tribes, who have built trails and bridges, and keep the canyons clean and maintained, a very welcome development.

But we still found ourselves asking, "where are the springs in Palm Springs?"



Photo by James Meinert