

Borrego Springs Eternal



Wide-open spaces, dramatic badlands, welcoming retro inns, endless starlit nights... and not a big-box store in sight. The Desert of yesteryear beckons.

By Jan Silver Maguire

My grandfather, an accomplished artist and spirited storyteller, used to tell me the moon was made of Swiss cheese. And so it seemed to my naïve five-year-old mind as I peered out the window of our motel at the brilliant orb hanging low in the dark, vast Desert sky.

Fast-forward 45 years. Those colorful tall tales spun during family escapes to Southern California from frigid Chicago winters remain some of my favorite memories. Although I am, in many ways, grateful for the Coachella Valley's recent transformation into a thriving resortopolis, I miss the soulful experience of contemplating the preternatural richness of a Desert night undiluted by city lights. Thus began a quest to reconnect with my youth by visiting the pristine Borrego Valley, about 90 minutes south of Palm Springs.



On a clear day the drive down I-10 not only will reacquaint you with the valley's agricultural legacy, but afford awesome views of the Salton Sea. Turning south on State Highway 86 at Indio, and then west on two-lane S22, a primordial vista begins to unfold—miles of deep, creviced canyons slicing through a starkly beautiful landscape of sand-hued mesas. Here you are likely to see all-terrain vehicles, and an occasional camper, traversing the steep ravines.

Farther along, the ATVs and RVs disappear, heralding the start of **Anza-Borrego Desert State Park** (www.anzaborrego.statepark.org). If you have a four-wheel drive, take a detour onto the four-mile sand road that leads to Font's Point to view the rippled chasms of the Borrego Badlands. Back on S22 and about 20 minutes later, the village of **Borrego Springs** (www.borregospringschamber.com)—located on the northeastern fringe of San Diego County—welcomes visitors to the Desert's colorful, carefully preserved past.

TIME STANDING STILL

The Borrego Valley is steeped in history. Kumeyaay Indians left their mark throughout the region's mountains and canyons, and as early as 1772, Spanish and Mexican explorers led expeditions through the area. A hundred years later, intrepid cattlemen and pioneers began to homestead in what was then called "Borego." Residential and agricultural growth continued, and in 1946, developers began promoting Borrego Springs as a recreational resort community designed to "preserve the natural beauty and serenity of the Desert setting."



Anza-Borrego Desert State Park is world-renowned for its vivid display of springtime wildflowers and provides a nighttime celestial experience beyond compare.

Today, Borrego Springs remains a close-knit outpost, boasting a year-round population of about 3,000 that swells to roughly 10,000 in winter. Surrounded and protected by the state park, the village promotes an outdoor lifestyle abetted by acres of open space. And, given its laidback environment and eclectic blend of architectural styles that include Mid-Century, Southwestern and Mediterranean, it's not uncommon to hear it likened to the Palm Springs of 50 years ago. (In fact, the main drags of both towns share the name Palm Canyon Drive.) Just beyond Christmas Circle, a shaded, grassy roundabout that serves as the village's gateway, you'll discover art galleries, restaurants, funky boutiques and family-owned shops serving basic retail needs. What you won't find are traffic lights, urban sprawl, fast-food joints or Starbucks outlets.

Borrego Springs offers a variety of accommodations—from rustic campsites to intimate inns and upscale vacation rentals. To immerse in a classic California Modern



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experience reminiscent of the 1950s, book a room at **The Palms at Indianhead** (www.thepalmsatindianhead.com), a 20-acre resort nestled within one of the area's most beautiful mountain coves. Originally built in 1947 as Hoberg's Desert Resort, the inn was a favorite getaway for stars like Marilyn Monroe, Clark Gable, Bing Crosby and Montgomery Clift. Rebuilt after a 1958 fire, the resort was used in various capacities until present owners Cindy Wood and Dave Leibert purchased it in 1993. Since then, Wood and Leibert, along with Los Angeles designer Timothy Elliot, gradually have been restoring the 12-room inn to its original grandeur.

Unique amenities at The Palms include a sparkling Olympic-length pool and, beneath it, a original subterranean grotto bar (now undergoing renovation). Two poolside casitas offer private entrances, wet bars and stone fireplaces. Drink and dine in style just steps away in the resort's **Krazy Coyote Saloon and Grille** (760.767.7788; closed during summer). An artsy cocktail lounge, white linen tablecloths and subtle background strains of Sinatra set the stage for this popular restaurant featuring continental entrees like chicken cordon bleu, beef Wellington and Australian lobster tail.

The 15-room **Borrego Valley Inn** (www.borregovalleyinn.com) also is a visitor favorite. (*Fodor's* has awarded this Southwestern-style lodge a 5.0 rating.) Cheerful guest rooms feature Mexican décor, Saltillo tile floors, luxury linens and private "sun and star" patios. Accommodations include a hearty continental breakfast, plus the use of two pool and spa areas—one of them secluded for clothing-optional sunbathing. If a full-service resort is more

your style, try **La Casa del Zorro** (www.lacasadelzorro.com), a four-diamond, 42-acre property. Options range from deluxe poolside rooms to four-bedroom detached homes. Five pools, a scenic jogging track, a fitness center, tennis, bocce ball, golf at nearby championship courses and fine dining in the Butterfield Room are among the resort's many delights.

With its relaxed pace and inspirational setting, Borrego Springs is home to a thriving arts community—with galleries and cultural organizations offering events year-round. In addition to exhibits and workshops, the **Borrego Art Institute** (www.borregoartinstitute.com) sponsors the annual Plein Air Festival (March 16-22, 2008). Celebrating the 150th anniversary of the Butterfield Overland Stage, the **Anza-Borrego Desert Natural History Association** (www.abdnha.org) recently mounted an exhibition featuring the work of famous painter Marjorie Reed, who immortalized the stagecoach mail route on canvas. The active calendar for the **Borrego Springs Performing Arts Center** (www.bspac.net) features an array of theater, music and dance, including performances by the San Diego City Ballet.



The Red Ocotillo



Marjorie Reed's stagecoach mail route paintings (top) immortalize old "Borego," while The Palms at Indianhead preserves its Mid-Century roots as Hoberg's Desert Resort.

GREAT EXPLORATIONS

A stay in Borrego Springs provides the perfect central base from which to explore Anza-Borrego Desert State Park. But before you head out for your expedition, stop by **The Red Ocotillo** (760.767.7400) to enjoy a light or hearty breakfast. Set in a unique red-and-black Quonset hut on the way into town, the eatery offers generous portions, great homemade soups and sandwiches, free Wi-Fi and even a pet-friendly dining patio. For great homemade salsa and hefty "make-your-own" burritos, stop by **Carmelita's Mexican Grill**

and Cantina (760.767.5666) in The Mall. Narciso Dorado, the former head chef of Las Casuelas in Palm Springs, opened this family-owned diner last March.

Now celebrating its 75th anniversary, Anza-Borrego Desert State Park is California's largest. Encompassing 600,000 acres of some of the most diverse landscape in the world, this vast preserve shelters an astonishing array plant and animal life—including the endangered Peninsular Bighorn Sheep, coyotes,



The Palms at IndianHead



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mountain lions and the Black-tailed Jackrabbit. With 12 wilderness areas and 110 miles of hiking and biking trails, Anza-Borrego offers abundant opportunities to commune with nature. One of the more popular hikes is the three-mile-round-trip Borrego Palm Canyon Nature Trail, which leads to a tranquil

oasis with California fan palms and a waterfall. Many of Anza-Borrego's wonders are revealed on this scenic hike, where it's not unusual to have a close encounter with the native fauna.

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Borrego Valley Inn

Off-road vehicle enthusiasts typically flock to the **Ocotillo Wells State Vehicular Recreation Area** (www.parks.ca.gov) on the eastern side of the park, off State Highway 78, just west of 86. Here you'll find Blow Sand Hill, which actors Emile Hirsch and Hal Holbrook scaled to survey their rugged surroundings in last year's acclaimed film version of Jon Krakauer's nonfiction book about self-discovery, *Into the Wild*.

The nonprofit **Anza-Borrego Foundation and Institute** (www.theabf.org), established in 1967, helps protect the park and promote conservation through active land acquisition, educational programs, interpretation and scientific studies. The Foundation also sponsors a prestigious photo contest. Moreover, Anza-Borrego—a treasure trove for amateur and expert archeologists—is world-renowned for its vivid display of springtime wildflowers and provides a nighttime celestial experience beyond compare.

Be sure to stop at the park's contemporary visitors' center, where you'll find maps and brochures, a gift and book store, and informative exhibits. And don't miss the award-winning 15-minute film, *Ghost Mountain: An Experiment in Primitive Living* (www.ghostmountainmovie.com), detailing the captivating story of unconventional poet/writers Marshal and Tanya South, who raised three children for 17 years on a remote mountaintop in the Anza-Borrego Desert during the early half of the 20th Century.

Who knows? Perhaps they, too, saw a moon made of Swiss cheese. ◀

Thanks to this winter's rains, Anza-Borrego Desert State Park may enjoy a banner spring wildflower display. Call 760.767.4684 for information.