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Southern California Close-Ups: Joshua Tree National Park and Desert Hot Springs

Joshua Tree and environs offer camping, hiking, unusual sites (the famed Integratron), hotels, restaurants, watering holes and spas, where you can take a well-deserved soak.

March 25, 2012 | By Christopher Reynolds, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer

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There's a growing art scene here, and not just within the walls of the Red Arrow Gallery and Joshua Tree Art Gallery on the main drag. Check out the artists of High Desert Test Sites (6470 Veterans Way, Joshua Tree), who make outdoor works that the desert will transform and reclaim. Like the galleries, the headquarters opens on weekends (Saturdays and Sundays, 11 a.m.- 3 p.m.) and one work is always accessible. It's along Twentynine Palms Highway 1 mile east of Park Drive, on the boulder-strewn slopes at the end of meandering, unpaved Neptune Road. Up close, you may see that "untitled" by Sarah Vanderlip is made of welded aluminum, but from a distance, it gleams like a silvery egg, possibly dropped by a titanium dinosaur.

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Planning your trip to Joshua Tree and environs

GRAPHIC: Joshua Tree and Desert Hot Springs, Calif.

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Pioneertown (Christopher Reynolds / Los Angeles Times)

4. Pappy & Harriet's

Pioneertown, up on a plateau about five miles north of Yucca Valley, was built in the 1940s as a TV and movie set. Some decades later, along came Pappy and Harriet's Pioneer Town Palace (53688 Pioneertown Road, Pioneertown, a roadhouse with live music that has become a desert institution. Somehow, Pappy's gently blends desert-rat locals with escaped city slickers and lures performers you'd never expect in the middle of nowhere. The Pioneertown Motel is right next door. Or, if you're okay for the drive back to Joshua tree, there's the 10-room Joshua Tree Inn (61259 Twentynine Palms Highway, Joshua Tree), where you can have room 8 (the Gram Parsons death room) for \$109. It's got a pool and a shrine to Parsons.



The Integratron (Christopher Reynolds / Los Angeles Times)

5. The Integratron

You're either up for The Integratron (2477 Belfield, Blvd., Landers) or you're not. It stands about 20 minutes' drive north of Joshua Tree, a white wooden dome, 38 feet high and 55 feet in diameter, built in the 1950s, '60s and '70s by renegade aeronautical engineer George Van Tassel (who died in 1978). Van Tassel wanted to contact other worlds. In his absence, a trio of sisters has taken ownership and the building has a new life as a place for meditating, or playing music or just climbing the ladder to the upper chamber, curling up on a blanket and listening for half an hour to hear somebody coaxing eerie, powerfully resonant sounds from a series of quartz bowls. "I call it kindergarden nap time of the third kind," says co-owner Joanne Karl. But the sign outside says "sound bath." To bathe alone is \$80, by reservation. But two weekends per month, you can join a public sound bath at noon for \$15. The sound, bouncing off the rounded walls and trembling through the Douglas fir floorboards, is mesmerizing. Karl estimates that a third of her customers are musicians.



Twentynine Palms (Christopher Reynolds / Los Angeles Times)

6. The 29 Palms Inn and the town's murals

The city of 29 Palms stands at the northern entrance to the national park, its population of 30,000 dominated by the Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center, which readies marines for service overseas. Since the early 1990s, town boosters have bankrolled the painting of about two-dozen historic murals, so as you roll past all the barbershops in town (marine cuts a specialty), you'll notice a lot of history in living color. For another sort of color, the 29 Palms Inn (73950 Inn Ave., 29 Palms) is a prime haven. The family-run inn, whose rooms, bungalows and cabins are scattered over 70 acres near the park entrance, goes back to the 1920s. If you can swing it, rent Irene's Historic Adobe, which went up in the '30s and has a master bedroom, a bunkroom, kitchen, living room with fireplace and a big private courtyard.

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Roughley Manor (Christopher Reynolds / Los

Angeles Times)

7. Stony haven

In a territory dominated by stray boulders, why is it so surprising to find a house with stone walls? Maybe it's because Roughley Manor (74744 Joe Davis Dr., 29 Palms), which goes back to 1928, is three stories high and surrounded by equally tall trees. This is a good spot for families, its 25 acres set apart from the rest of town, the grounds including a pool, grassy areas, two suites in the main house and five cottages. While the J-tree hoteliers court the young and trendy, Roughley Manor's resident owners cater to scrapbooking groups. When your book's done, it's a short drive to Smith's Ranch Drive-In Movie Theatre (4584 Adobe Road, 29 Palms), which still screens movies on Thursday through Sunday nights. J



Big

Morongo Canyon Preserve (Wally Skalij / Los Angeles Times)

8. Damp and shady at last

After you've zoomed down the hill from Joshua Tree but before you reach the windmill forest at the entrance to the Coachella Valley, you reach Big Morongo Canyon Preserve (11055 East Drive., Morongo Valley), where boardwalk trails trace paths past riparian brush and desert willows. More than 250 bird species have been recorded in the area. When you're done, hop across the highway for grub at Willie Boy's Saloon & Dance Hall (50048 29 Palms Highway, Morongo Valley).

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Spin and Margies Desert Hideaway at 6:56 PM March 31, 2012

Thank you to Chris Reynolds for covering our eclectic community so extensively.

The town of Joshua Tree and Joshua Tree National Park play host to 1.5 million visitors a year. It is 3 hours from Los Angeles, and a wonderful place to visit. The residents of Joshua Tree are dedicated to preserving its natural values and unique feel. Please come out and see for yourself...its beautiful here.

Margie - Spin and Margies Desert Hideaway - www.deserthideaway.com

Suzy Beal at 11:23 PM March 27, 2012

To the self-advertising spam shown in the comments here, I have to add: Surely you aren't seriously recommending people go to the Desert Hot Springs Spa Hotel, even for a day pass. There are many other affordable choices in the area that aren't swarming with tattooed drunks and screaming unsupervised children, and that aren't broken down and dirty. Check any travel website for their reviews and make a better-informed choice. This place is well-known as the absolute worst "spa" in or near the Coachella Valley.

The Sun Runner Magazine at 5:51 PM March 26, 2012

I have to cringe every time I read one of these stories. They make poor recommendations, get things wrong, and leave things out that really would be helpful to include. This is anything but "well documented." I'm biased because I run the only desert-wide publication in California, The Sun Runner Magazine, but I also am a tourism professional (president, California Deserts Visitors Association), and writer with extensive desert experience, and this story, while I appreciate the attempt, is extremely shallow and doesn't do the reader justice (it's format may not have allowed the author to do better).

azbootcamp at 7:50 PM March 25, 2012

desert magazine has a lot of great articles (archives) www.mydesertmagazine.com
www.desertmagazine.net

joeyknow at 5:47 PM March 25, 2012

we visited joshua tree n.p and stayed at the pioneertown motel. it was a once in a lifetime experience. for a wanna-be cowboy, like me, pioneertown was great, the motel - stay at your own risk...

