

DRY SPELL

By SUNA KANGA

In Southern California, a cluster of small cities jointly called the Palm Springs Desert Resort are attracting celebrities and city folk with its promise of respite.





The masseuse hands are gentle as she spreads desert sage balm on my neck, shoulders and back. She follows the treatment with a warm herbal wrap of the Cahuilla Sage Cocoon body treatment that lulls my senses into oblivion.

Sage is a centuries-old herb used by Cahuilla Indians, the first people known to inhabit the Coachella Valley just three hours from Los Angeles. Sage, says my therapist, has mystical properties, and generations of native people have ignited the pointed ends of a sage bundle over a bowl of sand to create a fragrant smoke. "Wanding" the bundle around a room is an ancient sacred ritual of the ancients who used sage to cleanse, calm and open up airways.

At the fashionable La Quinta Resort & Spa (in La Quinta City) and a host of heavenly spas in the Valley, celebs have sought rejuvenation since the 1950s. What's unique to the region: Soaking in the desert sun in charming indoor-outdoor spas. At the Spa La Quinta, garden tubs, private open-air showers and al fresco massages beautifully reflect the majestic surroundings. In winter, a roaring fire adds to the ambiance.

The natural mineral waters of the California desert have long been a source of healing and wellness since Native Americans first discovered the area. Today the numerous spa facilities in the valley range from day and holistic health care facilities to destination spas, casino and resort spas, mineral springs spas and even mobile spas. Treatments featured on desert spa menus include Japanese Shiatsu, treatments from India, Swedish massage, hydro-therapy, body wraps with everything from sea algae to seaweed, essential oil massages, mud baths and an underwater treatment called Wassertanzen (Swiss for water dance).

Visitors are attracted by the innumerable spas for all lifestyles and budgets at the Palms Springs Desert Resorts. The name collectively describes a cluster of desert cities: Cathedral City, Desert Hot Springs, Indian Wells, Indio, La Quinta, Palm Desert, Palm Springs and Rancho Mirage. Spread over 150 square miles of the Coachella Valley, the cities are knit together by rows of tall palms (over 10,000 of them), citrus trees, verdant hedges and brilliant flower beds. Boutiques, restaurants, galleries and street sculptures add to the upscale atmosphere.



Freewheel through the town and the celebrity connection is obvious in street names: Bob Hope Drive, Frank Sinatra Drive, Gene Autry Trail, Kirk Douglas Way and many more signboards that pay tribute to the stars who sought the serenity of the desert in the fashionable Palm Springs resort. Today's spa guests include Mel Gibson, a spa fanatic, Barbra Streisand who sings their praises and Jennifer Lopez who is well-known for booking treatments for multiple dates. Meryl Streep, Goldie Hawn and Madonna are amongst the Hollywood stars that have soaked in the geothermal spring pools at the Desert Hot Springs Resort.

"The desert has always attracted people looking for a healthy lifestyle," says Peter Ellis, part-time desert resident and publisher of *Luxury SpaFinder* magazine and the annual *SpaFinder Worldwide Directory*. He is also the web guru behind the immensely popular www.spafinders.com booking site.

"Americans are finally learning what European and Asian cultures have known for centuries—that a spa is a great way to manage health and decompress. There's something to be said about cultures that allow stores to close for a few hours in the afternoon, and for people to indulge in taking care of themselves," he says, adding that "Europeans and Asians live in moderation, while Americans live in excess."

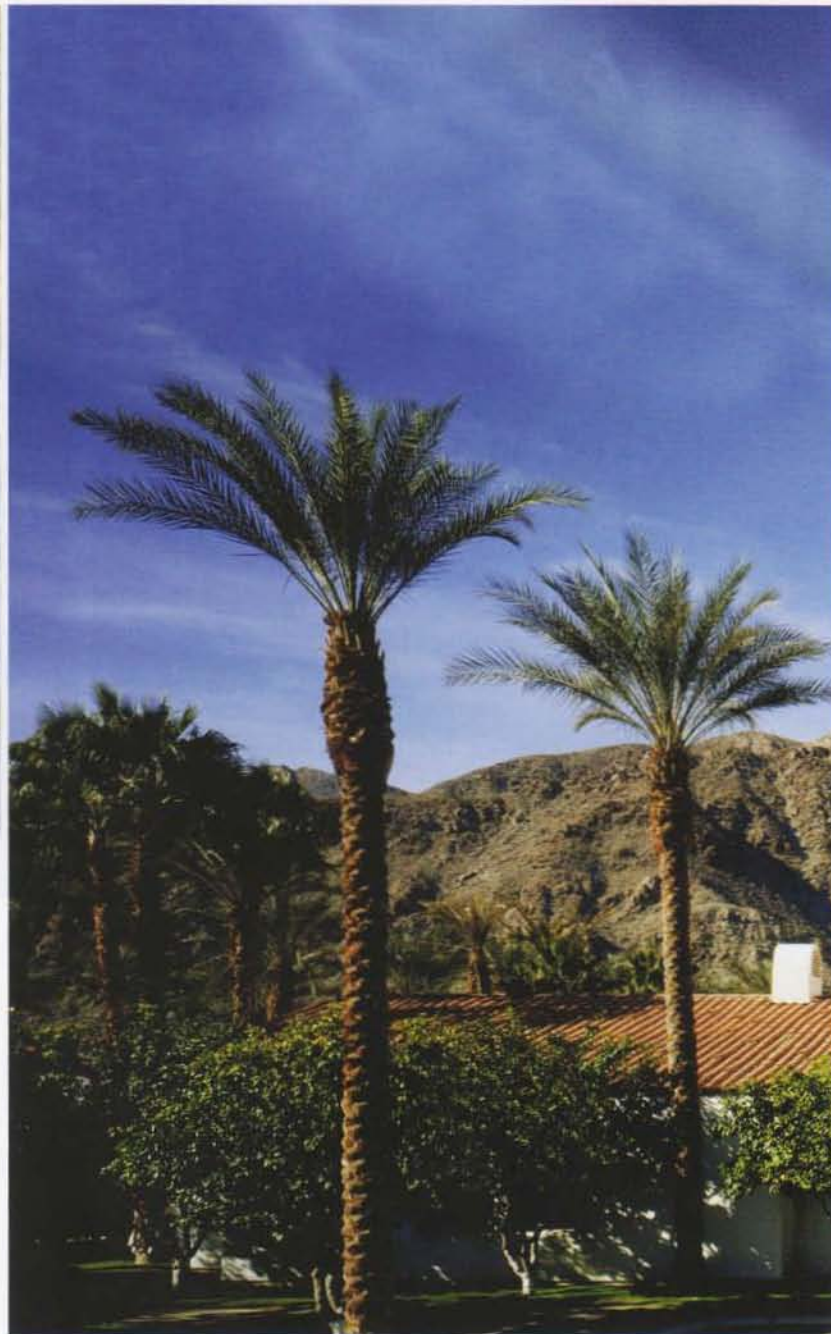
DESERT DETOX

The Spas at a Glance...

DESERT HOT SPRINGS

Famous for its abundance of natural mineral waters is the Desert Hot Springs. Most of the city's spas are fed by natural waters of 90 to 145 degrees, pumped from wells that lie deep below the earth's surface. The water is fed into several pools with varying temperatures attuned to the comfort levels of guests. Health benefits include relief for stiffness and pain in joints and muscles, increased circulation and oxygen flow to the body and reduction of fatigue and stress. Among the natural minerals found in spa water is silicone, which leaves the body silky and smooth after a dip.

A resort here that welcomes the entire family for soothing massages, facials and body therapies is Desert Hot Springs Spa Hotel (www.dhsspa.com).



"We've got sunshine 300-plus days a year, a beautiful mountain in the background, and we pump hot mineral water from about 150 feet underground into all these pools, then percolate it back into the ground, so it's like a virtual river of hot water," says a hotel executive.

At famous Two Bunch Palms (www.twobunchpalms.com), attractions include outdoor treatment gazebos, rock alcoves, al fresco showers and mud cabanas along winding pathways. Here, the mystical elements of water, heat, air and healing touch come together to create inner harmony. One of the spa's secrets is the use of Babassu, an ancient emollient sourced from Brazil. "Star-gazing" is never in short order here although one may not recognize the film stars under masks of green clay.

Also known for celebrity sightings are We Care Holistic Health Center (www.wecarespa.com) and The Spring (www.the-spring.com), where visitors take delight in the signature, one-of-a-kind Turkish Buff treatment. Living Waters Spa (www.livingwatersspa.com) is an award-winning European style clothing optional retreat. It was placed ninth in the world and second in the United States in the online travel web-portal, Trip Advisor's Traveler's Choice Awards.



LA QUINTA

A garden Oasis, La Quinta Resort & Spa (www.laquintaresort.com), has an exclusive guest list of the rich and famous who seek an interlude of privacy and some golfing – it has seven courses. Spa La Quinta works in unison with the Wellmax Center for Preventive Medicine to combine the relaxation of a spa experience with a programme that includes “aggressive screening for disease before symptoms present.”

Here, children and young adults are invited to experience a new spa menu that offers facials and massages side by side with parents or guardian in the couple’s massage room. While there, we see two little girls arrive with grandma to enjoy their Christmas gift – a facial session.

PALM SPRINGS

In Palm Springs, PSYC the Palms Springs Yacht Club spa, (www.theparkerpalmsprings.com) uses marine, mineral and botanical products for massages, scrubs, wraps and facials. It offers a spa pool, whirlpools, unisex areas where groups of friends can unwind and enjoy together and private saunas and changing areas. Designed by Jonathan Adler and his team, the spa has nautical nuances such as porthole windows and navy blue tones.

Aromatherapy fans head to the Viceroy Palm Springs & Estrella Spa (www.viceroypalmsprings.com). Set within a luxury boutique resort with a menu of premium services, the spa’s Regency style decor brings to mind Hollywood’s golden era of glamour.

INDIAN WELLS

Reflecting the calming lifestyle and historic nature of Palm Springs is Agua Serena Spa at Hyatt Grand Champions Resort, Villas and Spa (www.aguaserenaspa.com). At this oasis-retreat with a name that implies serenity, guests can watch the sunset while lounging by the Reflection Pool and gentle trickling waterfalls; or celebrate a girls’ getaway while enjoying champagne and manicures in the Patchouli Garden. The spa uses natural healing ingredients from the desert and the yam and pumpkin mask is a novel item on the spa menu

Also among desert spas that spell luxury is the Renaissance Esmeralda Resort and Spa (www.renaissanceesmeralda.com) that also offers a 36-hole golf course. From the spa’s Agim Salon, there is a therapeutic view of a spa garden and waterfall. The property was named one of the best hotels in the world by Travel & Leisure magazine.



Yet another outstanding desert spa is The Spa at Mission Hills (www.starwoodsspacollection.com). Generations of visitors have been travelling to the Valley for medically-supervised spa programmes. Some facilities offer nutrition and exercise consulting in their spa packages, which can include room, meals, classes, entertainment and seminars. Visitors can enjoy a Spa Day, take advantage of a la carte services, or stay for weeks of therapeutic rejuvenation.

The Medical and Skin Spa at Hyatt Grand Champions Resort (www.medicalandskinspa.com) in Indian Wells bills itself as "a true medical spa, where science and technology combine with the art of medicine, to make one healthy and beautiful, inside and out."

Over at the Miramonte Resort & Spa, is a new destination spa called The Well (www.miramonteresort.com). At this luxury California spa guests enjoy signature services in an intimate, Tuscan-style setting. Distinctive outdoor and indoor treatments are available to enliven the senses and bring relaxation and rejuvenation to both the body and spirit.

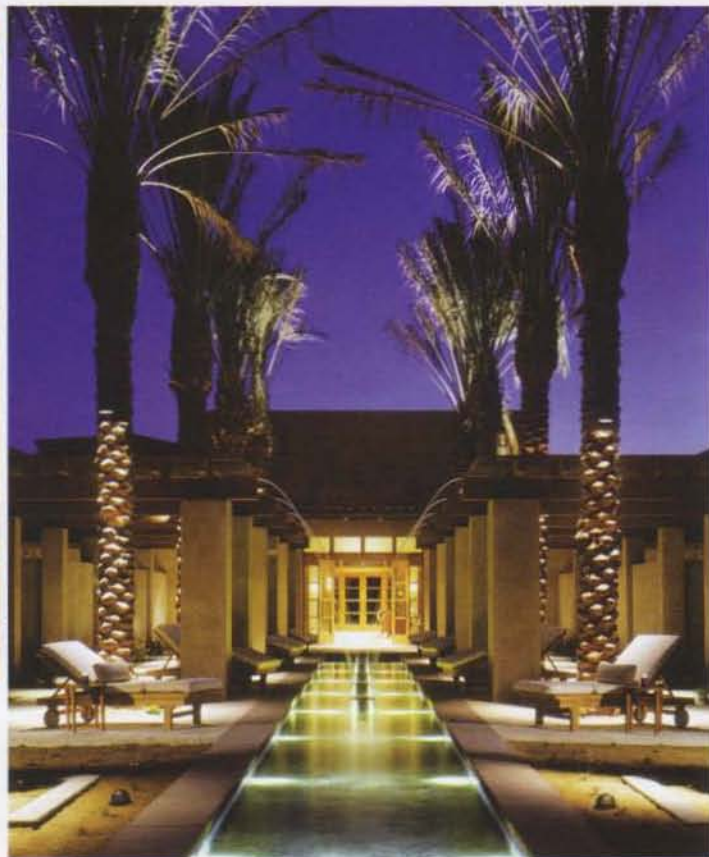
RANCHO MIRAGE

Two-year-old Sunstone spa is a popular retreat within the Agua Caliente Casino Resort Spa, a 340-room entertainment destination owned and run by the Cahuilla Indians. As the spa's name implies, the 10,000-square foot spa within the towering casino resort takes inspiration from the healing energy of stones. In Greek mythology, the sun-stone dedicated to the Sun God Helios is believed to bring positive energy to those who carry it. Hot stones and body balancing massages are popular here.

Secluded within the Palm Springs area are also smaller, private spa "studios" that offer services ranging from make-up to body treatments using elements from salt to mud. Facials, scrubs, detoxifying body work, energy balancing, therapeutic massage, and the more exotic specialty treatments make each spa facility unique and adventurous. Several serve as hideaways for those who seek total seclusion.

A sensorial pleasure in its entirety, Palm Springs California's spas offer visitors an opportunity to enjoy the natural beauty of the desert and mountains, and healing mineral waters in the region. It is no wonder that it remains a mystic lure for many. ▮

For more information on the California Desert, visit www.palmspringsusa.com.



FOUNTAIN OF YOUTH

Desert spas keep an old cast sprightly

Longevity is venerated in Palm Springs where one of the great attractions is an amazing show by the Fabulous Palm Spring Follies. The inspiring Broadway-calibre show recalls the golden age of variety shows and boasts a legendary line-up of performers aged 55 and above.

"We come to Palm Springs every year but were not interested in seeing 80-year-olds doing high kicks until we went and were truly amazed!" says a 'snowbird' from Canada.

The show was conceived 20 years ago by impresario Riff Markowitz who got bored with retirement and bought the historic Plaza Theatre. The spas of Palm Springs, of course, can take credit for keeping the large cast in great shape for the energy-charged, highly entertaining shows.