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Beyond Palm Springs: Four Adventures In Four Days

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We piled into our rented white Chrysler 300 -- a lowrider -- and drove towards the sunset. On our left the San Bernardino Mountains, dusky in daylight, blushed with red borrowed from the sky. "Look a roadrunner!" yelled a voice from the back. "Beep beep!" said another. We were four women -- old enough to remember that cartoon -- on a "girls" weekend. We'd picked Palm Springs for its weather and amenities, but we didn't plan to golf, lounge by the pool or shop.



Palm Springs wind farm. (Photo: Liisa Atva)

Palm Springs Wind Farm

Gusts of wind threatened to blow the car off the road -- the San Geronio Mountain pass is one of the windiest stretches of California. We arrived just in time for a spectacular sunset framed by the blades of 4,000 giant pinwheels. The turbine generators, or windmills, located eight kilometers outside of Palm Springs, produce enough electricity to power the entire Coachella Valley. Look familiar? In one of the *Mission Impossible III* movie chase scenes helicopters veer through the spinning blades.



A dog and a seal playing catch, Joshua Tree National Park. (Photo: Liisa Atva)

Joshua Tree National Park

On our first full day we drove 45 minutes north to Joshua Tree National Park, a 794,000-acre designated wilderness area. The helpful staff at the Visitor's Centre provided us with maps and suggestions on how to make the most of our one-day visit. With several hiking trails to choose from, we opted for three shorter ones.

The appropriately named Hidden Valley trail, a 1.6-kilometre loop in the western side of the Park's Mojave Desert, was once a popular hideout for cattle rustlers. We marveled at the massive boulders and rock formations scattered across the landscape like giant's Lego. Never quite sure we were on the right trail, we eventually retraced our steps before we were truly lost.

Our second hike was the 1.3-kilometre Barker Dam loop. Originally built to hold water for cattle and mining, the dam is now a rain-fed reservoir for wildlife. Nearby were small petroglyphs, the colours still surprisingly vivid. Jackrabbits, with their large heat-regulating ears, darted amongst the surrounding piñon pines, junipers, prickly pears and the desert's signature plant, the Joshua tree. The wild-armed Joshua, not truly a tree but a species of yucca, was given its name by 19th-century Mormon settlers, a reminder of the biblical Joshua with his arms stretched up in prayer.

It was back to the lowrider for a short drive to our next stop, the Keys View lookout. Unawares that we had gradually ascended almost a mile in height, before us lay an unexpected expanse of valley, mountain and desert. In the distance lay Palm Springs, and in front an ominous dark shadow cut the earth -- the famed San Andreas Fault.

Our last hike was into a sunbaked bowl of the Colorado Desert on the Park's eastern half. We'd already driven past the entrance to the Cholla Cactus Garden when we decided that we should have a look. Rather than backtrack we entered the trail at its exit, which is how we managed to miss the warning signs. We hadn't gotten far when my friend, who was a few feet ahead, yelled for help. "It jumped out and attacked me!" she said, pointing to her bleeding leg. Attached was a baseball-sized spiky cactus that took some doing to remove. When we reached the trail's entrance we found the sign. "Warning! Unless you are a cactus wren, be careful as you walk the trail not to brush against the Cholla cactus. The slightest touch can cause the cactus spines to penetrate your skin. Removing the embedded spines is difficult and painful."

Palm Springs Aerial Tramway

Our next adventure was the Palm Springs Aerial Tramway, 10 kilometres from downtown. Aboard the world's largest rotating gondola we were transported from the Sonoran Desert to the 2,600 metres high alpine wilderness of Mount San Jacinto State Park. The first thing you notice is the air -- refreshingly cool after the heat of Palm Springs. The temperature at the summit is usually 18 degrees Celsius cooler than the valley floor. The second thing you notice is the smell -- the park is home to the Jeffrey Pine with its distinctive butterscotch vanilla scent.

The park includes 87 kilometres of hiking trails from the easy 2.4-kilometre Desert View Trail to the expert San Jacinto Peak Trail, a 20-kilometre round trip to the top of the second-highest peak in southern California. The Desert View Trail meandered through mountain meadows, sub-alpine forests and outcrops of weathered granite, with five different outlooks onto the valley below.

The trail seems benign, but was featured on the Discovery Channel's *I Shouldn't Be Alive* in an episode titled "Date From Hell." A young couple on their first date wandered off the trail and ended up lost for three nights. On the fourth day they stumbled across the skeleton of a hiker, who had disappeared a year earlier. They used the matches found near the deceased to start a signal fire that ultimately led to their rescue.




Indian Canyons. (Photo: Liisa Atva)

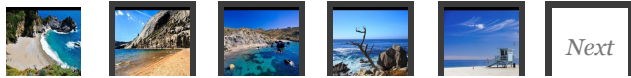
Indian Canyons

On the edge of town are the Indian Canyons: the Tahquitz, Andreas, Murray and the Palm. From the Palm Canyon trading post we wound our way down a rocky gorge to the canyon floor where we found the "heart" of Palm Springs. This is where it all began and why it is called Palm Springs. The Cahuilla Indians settled in these canyons centuries ago, drawn by the abundant water springs, plants and animals. Through it runs a creek surrounded by towering grass-skirted Palm trees. A cool breeze wafts through -- another respite from the desert heat. We lay on the picnic tables and looked up -- a very cool perspective -- at the world's largest California Fan Palm oasis.

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