

A Canadian “wakes up” in the High Desert

Tess Bridgwater, an Award winning travel writer from Toronto, Canada, made her first visit to this lovely area of southern California as a guest of Twentynine Palms Chamber of Commerce and Partners.

Just as Americans have their misconceptions about Canada (No, we don't have year round snow and speak only French). I had my misconceptions about southern California.

Isn't it a La La land of glitz and glamour and miles of asphalt ?

I found out how wrong I was, on a recent visit to the Palm Desert region, nestled between the San Bernardino Valley and the mountain ranges of southern California. Only a couple of hours from LaLa land and about an hour from the interesting little town Palm Springs, I found instead a wonderful high country desert oasis, full of friendly, culturally aware people, marvelous sunsets, spectacular scenery, prehistoric origins and some of the worst weather they have seen in years, with two days of much needed torrential rain, but the dreary atmosphere didn't matter, this fascinating place is full of memories that will remain with me for ever.

The region was settled about 150 years ago, when pioneers looking for adventure came to the area from the east, but it was home to the Caliente Indians of the Cahuilla Tribe long before that. Settlers fell in love with the wide open spaces, and glorious scenery and despite scratching out a living however they could, they never left. In the 1930's during the heydays of the film industry, many celebrities looking for a quiet retreat settled here and more recently others, like our guide Paul, who renounced a high profile legal career in San Francisco to embrace the slower pace of life have made 29 Palms and other small communities like Yucca and Joshua Tree their home. Now LA developers are eyeing the area for expansion but the locals are fighting to keep the region unspoilt and natural for as long possible. It is a well kept secret and I'm glad I was able to discover it before modern development encroaches on this hidden gem.

We rode up the Valley shrouded in mist, to Joshua Tree National Park which encompasses 1200 miles of the Mohave and Colorado Deserts, passing tiny communities, where many artists have settled and enriched the landscape with their artistic creations both outdoors and in interesting small art galleries.

And we marveled at the Giant Desert Fan Palms, one of the largest and longest living palm trees found in only 150 oases in North America, five of which are in Joshua Tree Park. Neolithic monuments dot the landscape, huge flat stones piled one upon the other, like some prehistoric Giant set them down in a fit of temper, but Geologists believe the modern landscape was born more than a million years ago when molten liquid oozed upwards and cooled below the surface of overlying rock. Many of them are Indian Burial grounds, part of native Indian traditions for centuries.

Among the scrubland and giant cacti, soon the famous Joshua tree of which there are several thousand, loomed in sight. A giant Yucca, part of the lily family, was long recognized by native Indians for its useful properties, both practical and medicinal but legend has it that in the mid 19th century, Mormons crossing the area, named the tree after the Biblical character Joshua, seeing the limbs of the tree outstretched and guiding travelers westward. Later recognized as globally significant Eco system, the area was first designated a monument, then a wilderness area and in 1994 became a National Park.

It also abounds with wildlife. Because of the weather, most of them were in hiding on our visit but on a sunny day you might see jackrabbits, coyotes, bobcats, tarantulas and many birds including the golden eagle, but it is illegal to feed them as it encourages them to forsake their natural hunting ability and habitat. A fairly flat terrain makes it great for hiking especially when the park is ablaze with wild flowers in the spring Schedules for Ranger guided walks and lectures are posted weekly at the visitor centre.

You can visit the park on a day trip from Palm Springs, but plan to stay longer and enjoy the hiking trails and magnificent vistas. There are several camp grounds in the park. Admission is reasonable; a day pass is \$15 per car, or \$15 per night for a camp site. Wear sensible clothes and shoes as the weather can change quickly, and drive carefully on this natural terrain. Do be sure to follow the park rules and regulations, to ensure this wonderful area is preserved intact for future generations. Other varied accommodations can be found in the Palm Desert area, from the rustic world renowned 29 Palms Inn, owned by the same family for five generations to B & B's.

It is truly a place to stop and smell the roses. Make the most of your stay and take in other unspoilt sites in this area of stunning, natural beauty: Indian Canyons near Palm Springs, Mountain lookouts, including the aerial railway up Chino Canyon, with spectacular views, over 8,000 feet above the town of Palm Springs or a scenic drive through the San Jacinto mountains to the mountain town of Idyllwild.