

Stranger

Take the road less travelled on a weekend trip from Los Angeles to Joshua Tree National Park and discover the hidden treasures of this starkly beautiful desert region, writes **Anne Fullerton**.



Joshua Tree National Park (above) and the yucca (opposite) that gives the area its name



of creationist propaganda erected by the owners who took over after Bell died. As it turns out, there's not a huge market for dinosaur-loving evolutionary denialists. This morning, the park's only visitors are a few stray cats wandering fearlessly among the predators. After refilling at the petrol station next door, I exit the prehistoric era and drive directly into the mid-20th century.

With its butterfly roofs, Instagram-friendly cactus gardens and Mid-century Modern aesthetic, Palm Springs is a Slim Aarons photograph come to life. There's plenty to do but to truly understand this desert town, it's best to do nothing at all. The one night I book at Ace Hotel & Swim Club (hotel.qantas.com.au/acehotelpalmsprings) quickly spirals into three, which, I'm told, is a common occurrence. Here, time is marked not by hours but by poolside cocktails, preferably of a shade not found in nature. A native New Yorker tells me that he came to Palm Springs for a week to look for a holiday house, before deadpanning, "That was 15 years ago."

Though Joshua Tree National Park is less than an hour away, I opt for what you might generously call the scenic route: a winding detour south-east that takes in former resort town Bombay Beach, on the Salton Sea, and Salvation Mountain, an impressive folk-art installation surrounded by kilometres of sand.

Salton Sea's shores were once a booming holiday destination favoured by Frank Sinatra, The Beach Boys and Jerry Lewis but today this body of water appears positively post-apocalyptic. As the lake was slowly poisoned by agricultural run-off and rising salt levels, the death knell sounded for local wildlife as well as Bombay Beach's motels and restaurants. You can still see the calcified bodies of fish like chalk outlines between the rusted-out boats marooned by evaporating tides. Even so, the place retains a desolate, macabre beauty and is an apt introduction to the Sonoran Desert. If America's eccentrics go to Hollywood to be discovered, this is where they come to disappear.

"It definitely takes a certain kind of person to live out here," says self-described desert dweller White Horse. His full name is White Horse Medicine Man, One Who Moves the Wind and the Air and Brings Medicine to the People. He'll also answer to "Bob". "Some people come here because they don't want to be found, that's just the truth of it. It could be a legal reason or just a personal, recluse reason."

Sixty-five-year-old White Horse runs the youth hostel in Slab City, a nearby decommissioned Marines base repurposed as a squatters'

THERE'S A saying you'll see graffitied on the bathroom doors of dimly lit Manhattan bars: "LA is for quitters." Tongue-in-cheek perhaps but it speaks to the belief of many hard-boiled East Coasters that the United States' second-biggest city is an escape hatch; New York Lite for lost souls who are as soft and insubstantial as a biodynamically farmed California avocado. And life *does* move at a slower pace out west. The bumper-to-bumper traffic in which I regularly sit is testament to a kind of infrastructure-enforced unhurriedness. But this slacker image does The Golden State a disservice. After all, California's hard graft gave birth to the gold rush, Clint Eastwood and a multibillion-dollar film industry. Its single-minded upstarts produced Silicon Valley, blue jeans and more religious cults than most other American states combined. Far from fostering lazy, cookie-cutter monotony, California is scattered with countless bizarre monuments to individual ambition – evidence that if you can dream it, you can do it, no matter how strange or inadvisable the vision. Pit these curiosities against a backdrop of wild, beautiful terrain and year-round sunshine and you have a recipe for the perfect road trip.

I leave behind the strip malls and overpasses of Los Angeles on Interstate 10, a long, flat artery to Palm Springs. Though my final destination is Joshua Tree National Park, the time-honoured retreat of SoCal (Southern California) yogis and psychedelics enthusiasts, I'm not in a rush to get there. Within an hour, the urban sprawl gives way to distant peaks. Bright sunshine throws every contour into stark relief, as if someone scrunched the San Bernardino Mountains into a tight ball and tried to lay them out flat. The confluence of desert and mountains feels surreal – and that's before I spot the dinosaurs.

My first stop is a 136-tonne brontosaurus forged from sweat, scrap metal and sprayed concrete. Dinny, as it's known, greets motorists 20 minutes before Palm Springs and is the 11-year opus of Claude K. Bell, a local businessman who began construction in 1964 in an attempt to attract visitors to his highway diner. Bell later added a companion piece, an imposing Tyrannosaurus rex that perpetually gnashes its teeth at the Burger King across the parking lot.

While plenty of drivers stop for a photo, few venture into the accompanying outdoor museum (cabazondinosaurs.com), a piece



(Clockwise from top left) Salvation Mountain folk-art installation; Salton Sea was once a resort destination of Hollywood's glitterati; climb inside Mr Rex at Cabazon Dinosaurs



Palm Springs has a Mid-century Modern aesthetic

paradise populated by retirees, army vets, hippies and artists. There's no electricity, sewerage, running water or government infrastructure. "But we're living that existence in order to experience something else: the freedom to be able to do what we want and not be encumbered by the city and all the demands and costs of it," says White Horse. "There's a lot of pressure to perform out there, a lot of expectations. Here, there have been times when I've worn my pyjamas every day for three or four days in a row. It's relaxed."

Plus, they stick together. It may be an anarchistic community but they have regular potluck dinners and solar-powered karaoke nights. White Horse insists everyone should stay a few nights but I'm here for the same reason as most daytrippers: Salvation Mountain.

Rising from the desert like the Emerald City in Oz reimagined in a *Willy Wonka* palette, Salvation Mountain (salvationmountain.us) is the area's crown jewel. The late Leonard Knight dedicated 30 years to creating the 15-metre-tall adobe hill decorated with biblical messages of love. (Today, less tender sentiments are delivered via megaphone by Ron, the caretaker charged with protecting the art from overzealous tourists.) "Profoundly strange and beautifully accessible" is how one California senator described it. The spectacular 360-degree view from the peak makes it easy to see why locals refer to this region as "the last free place in America".

On the road

Drive I hired a 4WD in Los Angeles and returned it there but many companies allow for drop-off in other cities, including San Francisco or Las Vegas. Some parts of Joshua Tree National Park are only accessible with a 4WD so if you have your heart set on specific areas, check the National Park Service website (nps.gov) before choosing a vehicle.

Pack Take sunscreen, a map, hat and generous supply of water, especially when venturing into the desert, where conditions can change quickly. Joshua Tree National Park recommends drinking four litres of water

per person, per day. It gets cold at night so pack a windcheater. **Sleep** It's worth splashing out on a hotel in Palm Springs to soak up the retro ambience. Joshua Tree National Park has camping facilities if you're keen to sleep under the stars but staying at an Airbnb (qantas.com/airbnb) on the edge of the park puts you in the desert while keeping the coyote calls at a reassuring distance. A word of warning: you're likely to attract unwanted visitors, like ravens and coyotes, if you leave your food scraps outside.

Flight path

LAX

Qantas flies to Los Angeles from Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne. qantas.com

On my way out, I stop at the area's most celebrated (read *only*) restaurant, Buckshot Deli & Diner (8120 Highway 111, Niland, +1 760 359 0595). With its mounted buck's head and taxidermied birds, the interior is an explosion of competing American tropes: a classic roadhouse diner, outfitted with hunting-lodge décor, that serves up vegetarian-friendly Mexican food. "It's weird but it works," comments a fellow traveller. "They should put that on the numberplates here."

By the time I reach my Airbnb on the edge of Joshua Tree National Park, twilight is throwing the region's namesake yuccas into silhouette. I toss some of the complimentary bird feed outside – such items seem as natural as hotel toiletries here – and wait for the ground squirrels and rabbits to cautiously emerge from the scrub. Move an inch and they immediately scatter. Like lots of things in the desert, unless you sit perfectly still, you'll miss the magic.

The following morning, I've barely made it into the national park before a dust storm begins rolling across the plain. After beating a hasty retreat to the car, I inch through a wall of sand in near-zero visibility. Not the kind of slow travel I'd hoped for.

It's a let-down but I'll just have to come back tomorrow and try again. After all, California is no place for quitters. ●