

# California desert's inland sea suffers identity crisis

PALM SPRINGS, Calif. — The southern California desert region has places of considerable interest besides its glittering resort communities.

One of them is the Salton Sea, about 45 miles southeast of Palm Springs. Within the past century it has been dry land, a fresh water lake and, now, an inland sea that's saltier than the Pacific Ocean.



## Gilbert Love

salts from the soil and drains into the inland sea.

That problem must soon be solved, the ranger said, because fish can't live in much more saline waters. Without fish neither fishermen nor migratory waterfowl will come to Salton Sea, as they now do by the thousands in the winter months.

Nearly everyone knows about the San Andreas Fault, the major fracture in the earth's crust that keeps threatening a big earthquake in southern California. It runs under the desert country, and there are possible faults.

You know one is below you when, away from man-made landscaping, you see a clump of palm trees. I understand that palms must have a sure supply of water, and faults bring ground water to or near the surface.

The town of Desert Hot Springs, north of Palm Beach, is over a part of the San Andreas Fault where underground water is heated by heat from the earth's hot core and comes to the surface at about 145 degrees. It contains minerals but is clear and

odorless.

The big Desert Hot Springs Spa Hotel pumps it to its hotel rooms and has a half dozen "hot tubs" built into a concrete plaza around a normal swimming pool.

Incidentally, prices there and elsewhere in Desert Hot Springs are generally lower than at comparable hotels in Palm Springs. Double rooms at the Spa Hotel "on season," mid-December to mid-June, range from \$67 to \$93 a day and weekly and monthly rates are available.

Canyons near Palm Springs have plenty of water and all sorts of observable plant and animal life.

Palm Canyon claims more palm trees than any other spot in the world — over 2,000 Washingtonians, thought to be the offspring of 2,000 years old. Andreas Canyon has the second most.

Mountain sheep and wild ponies can sometimes be seen on high ground above Murray Canyon.

The canyon area is part of a reservation established by the Agua Caliente (hot water) band of California Indians. It charges admission for hiking or horseback riding in the canyon. It also owns \$700 acres in

Palm Springs.

Pioneers in, the "high desert" above Palm Springs, got its start as a permanent set for cowboy-western movies. About 150 were filmed there, including such classics as "Annie Oakley," "The Cisco Kid" and the "Hopalong Cassidy" series.

When the popularity of cowboy movies faded, around 1959, so did PioneerTown. It came back for a time in the middle 1960s when a Cleveland real estate developer, Brenton Lefson, bought the town and 24,000 acres around it to create a big water reservoir.

Water scarcity defeated him at an estimated cost of \$10 million. The place went back to being a typically "old West" small town, but has proved popular with tourists. I understand the PioneerTown Palace, recommended by residents for food and drink, really jumps on Saturday nights.

On recent visits, I have been intrigued by large clusters of three-bladed windmills in San Giorgio Park, west of Palm Springs. Each machine has a small electric generator and the power produced is fed into the lines of local power companies.

Last year I thought the windmills were a government experiment, but a recent report on wind power production in the local daily newspaper, The Desert Sun, indicates that this is serious business.

In three California locations, including San Giorgio, 10,000 windmills produced enough current last year to supply 114,000 homes. They are operated by 50 small companies whose owners get substantial tax

benefits on their investments.

How can they be sure of wind? They can't, always, although one of the characteristics of the desert is wind. The Desert Sun article said none of the three "wind farm" regions in California produced as much electricity last year as expected.

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