

The view inside a wild palm oasis.



A statue of former mayor Sonny Bono welcomes visitors to downtown Palm Springs.

PHOTOS/HOPE S. PHILBRICK

DESERT ADVENTURES

Exploring California's Palm Springs and Morongo Basin

BY HOPE S. PHILBRICK

The sensation of swinging side to side, spinning around in a circle and ascending two and a half miles up the side of a mountain—all at the same time—can weaken the knees. I began riding the Palm Springs Aerial Tramway standing near the window, positioned to photograph the Coachella Valley on the way up. Midway through the 10-minute ride, I put the camera away so I could hold the railing with both hands. I didn't fear for my safety aboard the world's largest rotating tramcar, but felt woozy. While riding from the Valley Station (elevation 2,643 feet) to the Mountain Station (elevation 8,516 feet), the tramcar passes through five ecosystems, from the Mexican Sonoran Desert to the Alpine wilderness, each with unique plants and wildlife. Up top, the dizzying vistas of the San Jacinto and Santa Rosa mountains had me pulling out the camera again. Our tour lingered for about an hour, but it could have been a longer adventure: The Mt. San Jacinto State Park offers 54 miles of hiking trails, primitive campgrounds, a center for snow adventures (in season), a natural history museum, lounge and more. The ride back down seemed smoother, perhaps the benefit of experience or perhaps the winds had calmed.

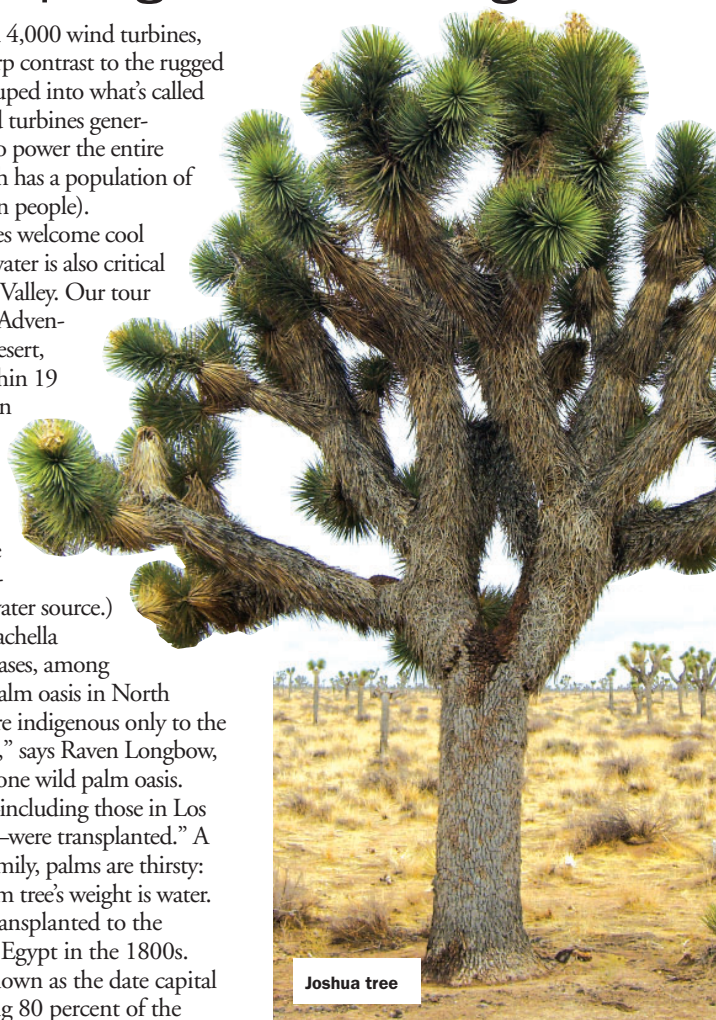
Palm Springs, Calif., is among the world's windiest places, thanks to cool coastal air mixing with hot desert air. The route along Interstate 10 known as the San Gorgonio Pass

is filled with more than 4,000 wind turbines, their sleek design a sharp contrast to the rugged mountain terrain. Grouped into what's called "wind farms," the wind turbines generate enough electricity to power the entire Coachella Valley (which has a population of approximately 1 million people).

While wind provides welcome cool on hot summer days, water is also critical to life in the Coachella Valley. Our tour guide Aaron of Desert Adventures says that, in the desert, a person would die within 19 hours without water. An underground aquifer, which Aaron says is about the size of one of the Great Lakes, supplies the bulk of the area's water. (The Colorado River is another water source.)

Water feeds the Coachella Valley's 60 wild palm oases, among them the largest wild palm oasis in North America. "Palm trees are indigenous only to the west of North America," says Raven Longbow, our host as we explore one wild palm oasis. "All other palm trees—including those in Los Angeles and Orlando—were transplanted." A member of the grass family, palms are thirsty: Eighty percent of a palm tree's weight is water.

Date palms were transplanted to the Coachella Valley from Egypt in the 1800s. Today, the region is known as the date capital of the world, producing 80 percent of the



Joshua tree

IF YOU GO

More Information ...

- **Palm Springs Bureau of Tourism**
800-927-7256
www.palm-springs.org
- **Yucca Valley Chamber of Commerce**
www.yuccavalley.org

Where To Stay ...

- **Morongo Casino, Resort & Spa**
49500 Seminole Drive
Cabazon, CA 92230
800-252-4499
www.morongocasinosort.com
- **Casa Cody**
175 S. Cahuilla Road
Palm Springs, CA 92262
800-231-2639
www.casacody.com

When To Go ...

All year every Thursday from 6 to 10 p.m. Palm Springs hosts **Villagefest** on Palm Canyon Drive from Amado to Baristo streets. The weekly street fair features arts, crafts, food and entertainment, plus many businesses remain open late. For details, visit www.palmcanyondrive.org. Palm Springs' first ever **Restaurant Week** will be held June 15–20, 2008. During the six-day culinary event, 40 restaurants will offer three-course prix fixe menus for \$26 or \$36 per person (excluding tax, beverages and gratuity). For details, visit www.palmspringsrestaurantweek.com.

crop. Hadley Fruit Orchards, operated by the Morongo Band of Mission Indians, is a great place to stock up on seven different varieties of dates, as well as trail mix and nuts.

Boasting four times the potassium of bananas, dates are healthy. But the best argument that the fountain of youth may be located somewhere near Palm Springs is the Fabulous Palm Springs Follies. In its second decade of daily performances, the cast and crew of this Broadway- and Vaudeville-style show are 55 to more than 80 years old. The singing, dancing, comedy and other routines feature spectacular costumes and physical maneuvers that even most teens couldn't handle. It's truly a "you've got to see this to believe it" phenomenon.

The Follies perform at the Plaza Theatre in downtown Palm Springs, a community easily navigated by foot. Filled with restaurants, boutiques, salons, galleries, specialty shops and museums, Palm Springs boasts a variety of architectural styles.

On the last day, we drove an hour to Joshua Tree National Park, which encompasses part of both the Sonoran and Mojave deserts. It rained all day, unusual for this desert region and not the best conditions for sightseeing. But the cartoonish, spiky Joshua trees were worth the trip. Locals promised a future visit would be even more spectacular, as the November rain awakens abundant wildflowers this spring. **SP**