

USA 1995

Reflections from a weekend at a hotel in Desert Springs, California.



Springs in the Desert: It's Biblical, I guess. Here in the desert, there are lakes. There is something wonderfully frank about America. One can only admire such a genuine lack of subtlety. Not for the Americans, a small desert adobe village full of cacti and sand and the odd oasis to break up the bleak heat. But hectares of lush, verdant grass and scillions of gallons of lake water. A boat that glides Venice-like into the hotel lobby and transports one on the lake to restaurants serving outstanding food from Tuscany or Tokyo. Three golf courses, with your motorised buggy, dotted with so much green grass and lush ponds that a sand trap looks like an intrusion.

But outside the concrete wall of the Desert Springs Resort Hotel is your actual desert. Real sand. Scrubby bushes that attach their seed pods to your moleskins. And the hot desert sauna breeze. It 150feels like a hundred and ten over the road. Back here in the hotel, it's air-conditioned.

California Girls: Amazons. The group of young women heading for Costa's disco (was that the name of the Greek lothario in Shirley Valentine?) seemed larger than life. God, they breed them big in California. Not fat big. It's just that little bit bigger everywhere. Like Wayne Carey. Everything is the right proportion, but 10% larger. And they were all wearing little black dresses. Everyone they passed, men and women, stopped what they were doing and stared. They went around me like a noisy wave. It rushed up behind me, full of extroverted laughs, yelps, and meaningless jokiness. Then it swished by. Left and right. More than a dozen legs and half as many flicking hemlines. And everyone in black. Save one. She seemed a little taller than the

rest. Her mini dress was white. And she had a single thin veil of white attached to her hair. The bride surrounded by her maids. Was it her birthday?

For a moment, they enveloped me with as much awareness of me as river washes over rock. And as much appreciation of my humanity. I saw them. They did not see me. They looked and walked right through me. I felt no resentment. Just a little sad.

The next morning, as I returned to my room after breakfast, a group of noisy young women came up the corridor. I made space for them to pass with their luggage. They wore the shapeless T-shirts and baggie shorts of the California summer. Quite unremarkable. Then I recognised the face of the bride. The same women looked smaller in the morning.



Golf: I walked on the golf links. Nobody else did. After thirty minutes I found a fence with a sign. “Pedestrians are not permitted on the golf course in consideration of your safety.” That this strikes no one in Palm Springs as odd, is itself odd. I always thought the whole idea of golf was to hit the ball and then walk after it. Not here. It is mandatory to use a golf cart. It comes with the green fees. And you must use it. People found not riding their golf carts WILL BE SHOT!

TV: I really hate these Donahue-style shows. I just turned the TV on at 11 am, and there are three of them running now. People yelling at each other. Anger. Self-centredness. Prejudice. Bitterness. An entire absence of compassion, tolerance, and selflessness. An over-blown interest in personal rights and individual justice, without any sense of balance for personal responsibility and community justice.

But wait. There is hope. Jenny Jones. I don’t know if today’s show is typical, but the theme is “Celebrity Makeovers”. Ordinary people who look a bit like stars have come on the show to be made over to look like the star. We have a Jamie Lee Curtis look-alike who wants to do the “seduction scene” from “True Lies.” Another one has the nose for Barbra Streisand. There’s an 18-year-old who wants to look like Marilyn Monroe and speaks with a Southern version of Valley Talk. Incomprehensible. Like, roolly, is this a known language! But wait. There’s more. Someone wants to be Dolly Parton. I am waiting for the wide shot. Oh yeah. She’s built.

Oh, I gotta stay tuned to see what these gals end up like! I'm hooked.

Bad news. They promoed tomorrow's show. "Men who get women pregnant." Really? The next day is "Children who have two sets of parents but didn't know." Excuse me? Are they running out of ideas?

And these people don't realise just how funny they are. Now that's funny.

Bush Fires: Freeway 91 was closed because a fire raged up the canyons. Five lanes of high-speed traffic were instantly transformed into a 30-minute traffic jam to move less than a kilometre. Two minutes earlier, and I'd have been through. Ten minutes later, and I am stuck for hours!

Big planes and helicopters whirled over the smoke, dropping water. Eventually, a line of houses at the top of the ridge might be in danger.

Off the freeway, I found a shopping centre and bought ice cream and bottled water. The ice cream person told me the freeway was the only way through the canyon. I headed North, looking for Carbon Canyon Road. A much more pleasant drive than I expected. Carbon Canyon was a desert version of Warrandyte (without the big houses). There was not much traffic, but at least it kept moving, so perhaps all those other cars were in a giant Freeway 91 car park until the fires died down.



Mount Jacinta Tramway: In a big stand-up-inside cable car, from 2,000 feet to 6,000 feet in 14 minutes. 110 degrees at the bottom. 72 at the top. And a vast alpine park full of sugar pine trees and lovely well-marked trails. And spectacular views back across the desert valley. Margarite Krakatan served me lunch in the cafeteria, although she didn't seem to have her keyboard handy for a song.