

REVIEW

California steaming

Splash out on a mineral-rich spa treatment, writes **Vanessa Hua**

Hidden behind high white walls, just north of Palm Springs, California, The Spring Resort and Spa is a desert oasis. Pink salvia flowers, purple duranta, orange tacoma, yellow lantana, star jasmine, and barrel and pencil cactuses flourish beneath the towering Washingtonia palms of this boutique resort, which is built around a mineral spring.

In the city of Desert Hot Springs, in a neighbourhood known as Miracle Hill, The Spring is around the corner from where eccentric homesteader Cabot Yerxa discovered hot and cold aquifers nearly a century ago. Yerxa's pueblo – topsy-turvy towers assembled by hand from old telephone poles, wagon parts, and doors and

windows from abandoned homes – is now a museum.

The cold aquifer is meltwater from the San Gorgonio mountain, which filters through the ground for seven years; the hot springs percolate at 77 degrees Celsius underground. A spur of the famed San Andreas Fault hems in the aquifer to Desert Hot Springs. The resort helps preserve this precious resource. Water from its swimming pool, indoor soaking pool and outdoor tub flows down a rock waterfall, seeps into the ground and returns to the aquifer.

In the 1950s and 60s, visitors seeking healing waters flocked to spa motels here. In time, many such properties were razed or converted into apartments, but in the last

decade, a handful of high-end boutique spas have opened.

Each season offers a different delight: in autumn, temperatures cool to moderate and tourism slackens; in winter – the high season – daytime temperatures hover in the 20-degree range and the snow-capped peaks of the San Jacinto mountains, set against azure skies, are breathtaking. In the spring, brilliant desert flowers and cactuses bloom against the severe landscape;

in summer, the heat of the day forces visitors to slow down, while the nights are long and warm.

Traces of calcium, magnesium, silica and other minerals are dissolved in the water, imparting a silky feel and leaving the skin soft. The spa, with six treatment rooms, offers massages, facials, manicures and pedicures, and body treatments including scrubs and exfoliation to prepare the skin for a soak. A session in the gas-fired, wooden Finnish sauna, which reaches temperatures of up to 104 degrees Celsius, relieves aches and opens pores. The spa's showers and changing rooms are quiet, clean and pleasant, and scented with eucalyptus. At weekends, yoga is offered outside on the lawn.

The drive into Desert Hot Springs takes visitors past churning wind turbines, through the wide open vistas of the Coachella Valley, past mobile homes, thrift shops and retirement homes, and past jackrabbits and roadrunners. These sights, infused with a desolate beauty and quirky charm, attracted owner Maria Lease, who opened The Spring in 2003, after renovating a rundown spa motel.

In the past year Lease has added a fire pit on a spacious patio and a poolside pedicure service. Night stands and shelves are made from renewable materials, such as bamboo and coconut.

Each room is decorated differently, with the prevailing aesthetic of what Lease calls "Zen modern": polished concrete floors, a granite boulder, gauzy white and tan canvas curtains, long birch benches, cream-coloured Egyptian cotton sheets and plush duvets, with azure or lime accent pillows, and charcoal grey or chocolate brown fuzzy throw blankets.

"There's a sense of the earth, the wind and water," Lease says, looking out of the large windows opening onto the courtyard and to the stunning view beyond.

In their rooms, guests will find a chilled pitcher of local spring water, a spray of flowers, incense and a CD player – but no television. Wi-fi, however, is available throughout the property, for those unwilling to disconnect completely.

The library is furnished with board games, magazines, books, a telescope, a fireplace and stacks of *Variety*, for the Hollywood hipsters looking for a hideaway. Breakfast, served in the library itself, includes wholegrain cereal, Rubschlager

bread, hard-boiled eggs, fresh fruit, orange juice, coffee and tea. Fruit and cheese plates and wine by the bottle are available on-site, and on the weekends, sandwiches and salads can be ordered from an off-site restaurant. Most guests bring their own supplies, storing them in the rooms' kitchenettes, which include a mini-refrigerator, stove, sink, cooking utensils and small dining table.

The trendy restaurants and DJs spinning music at afternoon pool parties in Palm Springs, and the shopping, golf and casinos throughout Coachella Valley, are a short drive away. However, guests of The Spring may find the relaxation and rejuvenation here reason enough not to leave.

lifestyle@scmp.com

DESERT BLOOM

★★★★☆

Desert Hot Springs is about 193 kilometres east of Los Angeles International Airport, and 18 kilometres north of Palm Springs International Airport. There are direct flights from Hong Kong to Los Angeles on Cathay Pacific.

• **The Spring Resort and Spa**, 12699 Reposo Way, Desert Hot Springs; www.the-spring.com. US\$119 to US\$279, depending on season and room type.

• **Cabot's Pueblo Museum**, 67-616 E. Desert View Avenue, Desert Hot Springs; www.cabotsmuseum.org. Open Tuesday to Sunday, closed Mondays.

