

CALIFORNIA

Desert's golden glory

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outstretched arms and from February to April are weighed down by a large single flower looking like a yellow artichoke or a hand.

From a distance these travellers believed they were the arms of Joshua welcoming them to the Promised Land - hence today's name for the tree and the park.

If it survives in this harsh area with high summer temperatures, it lives for hundreds of years, often a thousand.

Making the park even more interesting and ensuring its international status, we passed abandoned gold mines and graves belonging to the early pioneers, black bush, cactus as large as houses and looming piles of boulders known as inselbergs.

These are grotesque granite formations or protected rock piles, either isolated hills or small mountains pushed up from the earth by the movements of the Pinto Mountain Fault and with edges rounded and smooth from thousands of years of flash floods and winds. These are also given protected status.

At the end of a day of unique sights and experiences we were exhausted and decided there was no way we could continue travelling and we also wanted to stay here as long as possible.

There are only campsites in the park and none had vacancies, but on our way to Twentynine Palms on the edge of the Mojave Desert we came across Ash's Harmony Motel painted in desert colours, decorated with eye-catching motifs and surrounded by a beautiful wild cactus garden and a pool at the back.

It had seven rooms and bathrooms, air conditioning, heating, cable TV, room telephones, kitchenettes and even a library - in fact every luxury one expects in a first-class hotel.

Several years ago pop group U2 realised this and composed a record and also did a photo shoot here.

Our rooms overlooked the pool and spa and that first night we sat on our patio and just looked and marvelled. It is an unearthly landscape, even more so at sunset and sunrise when the desert floor is bathed in red light.

The stars were ultra bright as they always are in the outback and we weren't surprised the following morning to read that Twentynine Palms is one of the best places in the world for star gazing, so much so that constellations and even planets are clearly seen and the Andromeda Astronomical Society hosts an evening in the park on the Saturday nearest to the full moon.

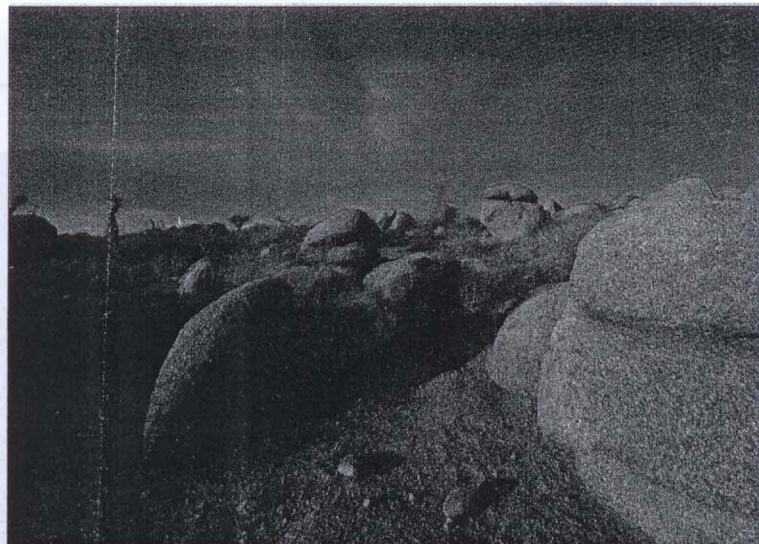
UNFORTUNATELY WE MISSED this by a few days, but we did have an almost full moon which highlighted the surrealist desert landscape.

To complete our evening we had another unique desert experience. We heard a strange noise in the far distance like nothing any of us had ever heard. It was the coyotes, the unique choir of the desert, whose eerie tunes echoed and re-echoed through the vast open space.

Ash told us they belong to this desert and, like the Joshua Trees and the cactus, they've found ways to survive the centuries - but now their battle for survival is over because they've learned to beg.

The next days we walked and drove through the black bush, never once tiring of the scenery, particularly the Wonderland of Rocks. These giant rounded boulders flank the road for 15km, making the park a popular rock climbing area.

We passed ruins of abandoned mines, graves of early pioneers and the more we saw, the more fascinated we were and the



Top: The Geology Tour Road in the Joshua Tree National Park showcases the area's unique topography.

Above: The park comprises a vast diversity of plants, with 813 species of vascular plants.

Right: The pathway from the swimming pool to rooms at Harmony Motel.



more we wanted to know.

Fortunately there are several visitor centres in the park and we took full advantage of them, particularly since many have a museum, bookstore and a full schedule of events, tours and talks.

We also visited nearby Twentynine Palms, a busy desert town stretching along Highway 62, which apart from being the gateway to the Mojave Desert, is the world's largest marine base, and it's full of history too.

It was settled by the miners in the late 19th century and became a rest stop for travelling wagoners and miners and obviously got its name from the 29 palms growing in the oasis along the Pinto Mountain Fault - and they're still there today.

Ash is a great hostess, motel

proprietor and a new friend and we all parted with promises to meet up sometime, somewhere. Amazingly fate took a hand, and far sooner than we thought. At the baggage collection of Durban airport a few months later, the first familiar faces Ash saw after an absence of nine years were those of my fellow travellers of the desert. All three "American South Africans" had come "home" for Christmas.

Harmony Motel, 71161 Twentynine Palms Hy, Twentynine Palms CA 92277. Telephone 001 760 367 3361

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TAKING ROOT

There's a little bit of Durban deep in the Californian desert – and local freelancer **Marjorie Copeland** found it

ON A RECENT TRIP TO WHAT is regarded as one of America's most unusual national parks, we did our advance homework carefully.

We expected the weird trees that made early Mormon settlers think they were the arms of Joshua leading them to the Promised Land as they crossed the desert, hence its name the Joshua Tree National Park; we expected the bizarre rock formations that make it internationally famous. But what we didn't expect was finding Harmony Motel 2km from the 49 Palms Oasis deep in the Mojave desert. There was a feeling that there was something familiar about its owner, a young lady – though we couldn't pinpoint it at first.

She took us to our rooms, showed us the library, the cold pool and the hot spa and the spectacular view of the Joshua Tree Mountains, then curiosity got

the better of us and we asked her name and where she was from.

She said, "I'm Ash Maharaj, from Durban in South Africa."

Ash, known to many of her Durban friends as Nalini, was born in Chatsworth and moved to Parlock in the early 1970s where her parents managed her grandparents' fruit and vegetable business while they were on pilgrimage to India.

The business expanded, they stayed and her mother and three brothers eventually became prominent local business owners.

In the late 1980s, one of her uncles moved to the US and in 2000 Ash, then living in Johannesburg, went there on a working holiday.

One year later her mother was killed so she decided to stay, and with her inheritance bought a rundown motel barely breaking even, but she saw it had unlimited potential.

It was nine years ago, when I

was visiting family in the US, that I first saw the Joshua Tree National Park – 130km² of freaky-looking trees in a sparsely vegetated landscape, making it one of the most unusual and fascinating of California's national parks.

We drove through a bizarre landscape, which our guidebook said was unmatched anywhere in the world and we looked out of our car windows and believed it.

The desert put on a dazzling display for us again this time round.

Against the distant background of rose-coloured mountains, we saw fantastically shaped steep rocky outcrops which erupted from the desert floor more than 100 million years ago and now attract tourists, photographers and artists from all over the world.

Some guidebooks describe them as dinosaur lookalikes ready and waiting to leap out of the jumbo



rocks, others say they are like a distant gallery of ultra-modern sculpture and both are correct.

There is only 100mm of rain a year, from February to late April, and we were there two weeks after a recent shower and so we drove past statuesque barrel cactus between 15 to 17m high, cholla cactus 4m high and so many varieties of flowers including lupine, blazing star, golden coreopsis, Mojave aster, scarlet locoweed and mallow.

All these, however, paled into insignificance alongside the bizarre-looking Joshua trees which are so unique that 2 250km², where the Colorado and Mojave deserts meet, has been set aside to protect them.

This name was given to them by a group of Mormons because each branch points upwards like

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