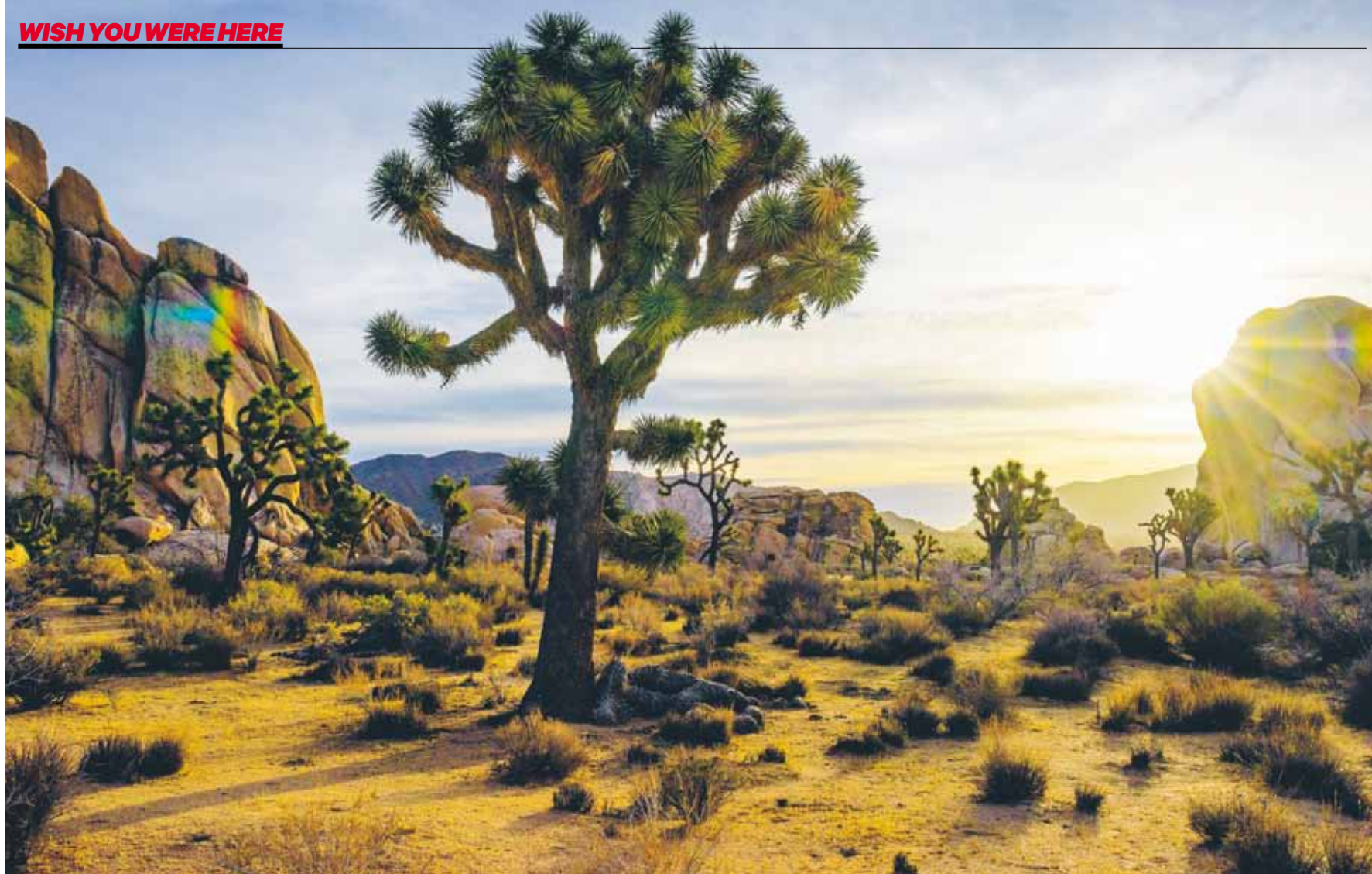


Travel & Outdoors

WISH YOU WERE HERE



Treasures of the desert

The magnificent Joshua tree is the star of the scrub in the eponymous national park in California, finds **Laura Millar**

Only a few minutes in, and I'm humming U2's *I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For*, as my hardy local guide, Nancy Cohee, steers us through the entrance gates of Joshua Tree National Park. Ironically, she tells me, the artwork for the cover of the band's 1987 number one album, *The Joshua Tree*, wasn't shot in the park at all, but 200 miles away. But then these iconic plants, known officially as *Yucca brevifolia*, grow plentifully throughout the Mojave Desert, which sprawls across nearly 50,000 square miles, covering much of southeastern California (and Nevada). Named by a group of Mormon settlers who were crossing the desert in the 19th century, and who believed they resembled the prophet Joshua throwing his arms out to welcome them, up close, they are strikingly lovely. A slender, brown trunk splits out into several offshoot branches,

which divide again, each topped with a spray of long, thin, green, spiky leaves, which look like a bottle brush. And, as we drive through the park, whole forests of them stand to attention, looking like something out of a Dr Seuss cartoon against the bright blue spring sunshine.

It's been a long-held dream of mine to visit, and I'm surprised when Nancy tells me this has only been officially recognised as a park since 1994. "Before then, it was classified as a National Monument," she explains. "And before that, it was just public land, famous for its goldmines." Yes, there was gold in them thar hills; it was discovered in the area in the 1870s, and mined up until the 1960s; today there are more than 300 closed and abandoned mines around the

There are more than 300 closed and abandoned mines around the park itself



Hidden Valley at Joshua Tree National Park, main; Lost Horse Valley, above

park itself, some of which you can still visit. Then, in the 1920s and 30s, thanks to an old wagon road called Highway 62, it started becoming more accessible to people from LA and the coast. The route was used to transport goods into the small towns which had sprung up nearby, including Joshua Tree, Twentynine Palms and Yucca Valley, and bring the gold out.

People would come and camp in the desert, but they would also dig up cacti which were hundreds of years old, hoping to plant them in their backyards at home. They'd even light the trees on fire at night,

for illumination. Today, nature lovers have a woman called Minerva Hamilton Hoyt to thank for the park's preservation; an environmental activist, concerned about the way the desert was being treated, she canvassed Franklin D Roosevelt, who in 1936 designated 800,000 acres of the area as a National Monument. However, homesteads were being built there, and cattle allowed to graze, so in 1994 it was fully designated a National Park, whose natural resources are protected from activities such as hunting, fishing, or sport.

The terrain is hauntingly beautiful; all around us are distinctive, crumbling piles of rock, which look like they were created inside the earth's crust, but have evolved thanks to volcanic movement pushing them up and outward. Some of them look like they've been precariously stacked and are about to topple off, or slide to the ground, when in actual fact they've been stuck in those formations for millions of years. The area is crisscrossed by numerous hiking trails, there are several camping sites scattered throughout,

and it's designated as a Dark Sky park, so you can stargaze and watch meteor showers at night. If you're lucky, you might also spot big-horned sheep, rabbits, coyotes or bobcats – though sadly I don't.

There are several 'must-visits', and first, Nancy takes me to the intriguingly-named Hidden Valley, a mile-long loop hidden, aptly, from the road by a series of vast boulders, which used to be used by cattle rustlers. The 'valley' is a wide, open area, covered in sand, blackthorn bushes – which will bloom bright yellow in the spring – and a variety of different plants. Nancy points out some of the cacti, including cholla, which are long and tubular shaped, sit low on the ground, and look endearingly furry (but of course are not), as well as beaver tails, which look as just they sound – flat and paddle shaped – and are a lilac colour. We also spot cute little rotund hedgehog cacti, which poke up between the rocks. "I call this nature's sculpture garden," says Nancy, gesturing to a handful of trees which have lost their leaves after being struck by lightning and stand in twisted, pointed shapes.

It's peaceful and quiet, our ramble punctuated only by the odd ground squirrel darting across our path. We come across a young Joshua tree, which hasn't yet grown very tall (they can take over 30 years to reach maturity and start sprouting branches), and Nancy explains how it acts as a larder for a type of local bird. "The loggerhead shrike is named the Butcher Bird", she says with some relish, "as when it's caught its prey, like mice or little frogs, it flies back to the tree and impales it on one of the spiky leaves, so it can return for its dinner later!" Well, that's killed my appetite.

It's been a privilege to connect in this way with the desert; I could have spent a week here, and many people do. However, I'm not done with this stark, stunning landscape quite yet. I've elected not to stay in the small town of Joshua Tree itself (infamously, one of its few hotels, the Joshua Tree Inn, was the site of the death of country star Gram Parsons).



Instead, just a 20-minute drive away, is one the region's quirkiest spots: the little hamlet of Pioneertown, home to a population of just 350. What makes this place – a collection of wooden buildings, including a hotel (the Pioneertown Motel), a post office, a pottery, and a popular barbecue restaurant, Pappy & Harriet's – unique, is that it's actually an old film set. Constructed in 1946 with investment from actors including Roy Rogers and Gene Autry, it was a thrifty way to churn out a range of Western films and TV shows, from *The Cisco Kid* to *Guns Smoke*. The one, sole main street (here named 'Main Street' in a nod to its Western roots) was mocked up as an 1870s frontier town, lined with facades of everything from a town jail to a General Store and saloon, while the Motel was used as accommodation for the casts and crews. After being abandoned for a few decades, it's now home to artists and creative types, who run galleries and boutiques or live in the buildings. In the evening, as a lilac dusk falls, all around is silence, desert and mountains. And in front of my porch at the Motel, stands a lone Joshua tree. Whatever I was looking for, I think I've found it. ■

WOW Air ([wowair.co.uk](http://www.wowair.co.uk)) flies from Edinburgh to LAX via Reykjavik from £357 return.
Joshua Tree National Park (nps.gov/jotr/) is 150 miles from LAX.
Rooms at the Pioneer Motel start at \$180/approx. £129 per night; book via pioneertown-motel.com.
Guided hikes and tours of Joshua Tree with Nancy Cohee can be booked via tallgrasshikingandtours.com; www.visitgreaterpalmsprings.com



Mane Street, Pioneertown, above; the Pioneertown Motel, top

STAYCATION



Relax down at the farm

At Errichel in Perthshire, sustainability and luxury effortlessly combine, finds Andy Shipley

Perched on a hillside, barely out of earshot from the thunderous waters of the Birks of Aberfeldy that inspired Robert Burns, is Errichel in Highland Perthshire. Meaning "on the wood" and set in some 600 acres of coarse farmland, this luxury B&B and restaurant is a labour of love for husband and wife team Becky and Paul Newman and their three children. As we kick the smattering of snow from our boots in the cosy converted farmhouse reception, chef Paul explains their ethos. "It's all about field to plate," he says, pointing to two recently awarded AA rosettes. Just avoid calling them farmers: "I think that would be an insult to thousands of years of farmers," laughs Becky. Rather, the couple are custodians of the land, only rearing what livestock they need and using what local produce they can. The result is an almost self-sufficient hideaway offering relaxed indulgence within striking distance of the Highlands. So how did a London-born chef and ex-pat end up here? The story begins nearly 20 years ago with Becky's parents, Alastair and Iris, swapping manic Hong Kong for a then derelict outpost towering above the Tay. "My dad was a civil engineer – he built the bridge to Hong Kong airport," says Becky, feeding flapping Cayuga and India Runner birds on the glistening duck pond. "This was a swamp when we came – full of horse manure," says Becky, 39. "A lot of what you see, they did with their own hands," she adds. Becky and Paul moved here in 2010 – building a bond with the land and embracing the slow food movement, the gastronomic activism which sets out to defend traditions and a more sedate pace of life. Homage to the movement pervades Errichel, from the Shetland cattle nibbling hillside turf to a snorting black boar – all breeds are carefully selected with efficiency in mind. So how does Becky square rearing meat for the table with her own vegetarianism? "Because I live on a farm, someone else is going to produce meat, so if we're going to do it, the animals will get support, protection and live long, natural lives," she says. Crunching through frosty heather on a hillside above the farmhouse, it becomes clear Becky's duty of care goes beyond livestock. She points out the site of an 18th century shieling – a summerhouse where families would spend the warmer months making cheese. Further on and we stand amid

a millennia old settlement. Plans are afoot to bring a group of young archaeologists into the hills to help excavate the site – preserving any remains for future generations. Back in Errichel's welcoming hunting lodge-style sitting room, the trinkets from Paul and Becky's global travels are everywhere – from Far Eastern ornaments to North African lanterns. Rooms are a mix of self-catering cottages and spacious, slant-roofed cabins – inviting cocoons of farmhouse furnishings. The local first policy extends to pre-dinner cocktails, made up by front of house manager, Fiona Sloan. A blueberry and plum martini bursts with the fruit from a neighbouring polytunnel – blast frozen at harvest to preserve freshness. Into the roundhouse Thyme restaurant and the table is lit up by one of Paul's signature starters – ruby-red salmon cured in beetroot. The mid-meal palate cleanser is a deliciously rinsing whisky sorbet – made with nearby Dewar's. Paul's policy is to serve only deer shot on the farm by a gamekeeper –

Clockwise from main: view of Errichel farm and the Thyme restaurant; one of the bedrooms; inside Thyme

it makes for a venison of magnified succulence. A vegetarian tagine, another legacy of Paul's adventures as a hotel chef in Africa, further encapsulates the slow food ethos. "Everybody knows more about food now than they used to," says Paul, 52. "There are more TV programmes and more books – people want to know where their beef comes from." The road from North London lad and corporate chef to slow food stalwart has meant side-stepping a few obstacles – some more fierce than others. "Last year I got cornered by the bull," recalls Paul. "It was like a rodeo. I was trying to get him in a trailer and he obviously didn't want to get caught." Fortunately, with the help of a neighbouring farmer, Paul prevailed, just. So what of future plans for Errichel? Paul hopes to market some of their homemade jams and chutneys while expanding the meat pack business that counts former Chancellor Alistair Darling among its regulars. A cookbook encouraging others to embrace Errichel's ethos is also in the pipeline, that and giving the bull a wide berth. ■

Rooms at Errichel (errichelhouseandrestaurant.co.uk, 01887 820850) cost around £120 per couple per night B&B, depending on the season

48 HOURS IN

El Medano, Tenerife

Friday, midday
Check into the newly refurbished three star Hotel Medano (doubles from £69, www.medano.es) and enjoy the fact that it recently escaped the wrecker's ball as you take in the sweeping views of Tenerife's most laidback beach resort town.

1pm
Ease down to the legendary Flashpoint Café (tel: +922-176 111), the epicentre of the thriving local watersports scene. Healthy salads and tapas style options tempt with ocean views.

2:30pm
Time to hit the surf now with Azul Kiteboarding (www.azulkiteboarding.com), who offer kiteboarding lessons for complete beginners.

7pm
Head to Familiar (tel: 627-587 758) and enjoy superb paella and fresh seafood in an unpretentious setting.

Saturday, 10am
Hike around the bay while it's still cool enough and ascend Montana Roja, the iron infused volcano that looms over Medano. The views are epic to the town and south to the sweeping sands of Playa la Tejita.

Sunday, 9am
Rejoin the local kiteboarders or try your hand at windsurfing or paddle boarding. Alternatively just make for the protected bathing area for a dip in the cobalt blue Atlantic and congratulate yourself at discovering this chilled out slice of Macaronesia. ■

Robin McKelvie

EasyJet (www.easyjet.com) fly to Tenerife South from Edinburgh with returns from £104.03. Holiday Autos (www.holidayautos.com) offer pick up and drop off car hire at Tenerife South. Lonely Planet's guide to the Canaries features El Medano.

BARGAIN BREAKS

Upgrade in Sri Lanka

Receive a free upgrade on an all-inclusive trip to Sri Lanka with Netflights.com. Book by Monday for selected dates in June and you'll get seven nights at the four star Centara Ceysands Resort and Spa on an all-inclusive basis from £929pp (saving up to £850 per couple), including flights from Glasgow with Emirates. www.netflights.com

The rose of Lake Garda

Prestige Holidays has launched breaks on Lake Garda, including a trip to the annual Moniga in Rosa festival (1-3 June), which honours the Chiaretto rose. They're offering a five-



3pm
Wander a few streets back from the busy waterfront boulevard and another El Medano appears of wee shops and cool café bars.

7pm
Return to the more touristy waterfront of El Medano for a relaxed tapas dinner at Imperio de Pintxo (tel: 922-176 304), where a creative fusion touch spices up the dishes on the edge of tiny Playa Chica. Their daily sliders are delicious.

Sunday, 9am
Rejoin the local kiteboarders or try your hand at windsurfing or paddle boarding. Alternatively just make for the protected bathing area for a dip in the cobalt blue Atlantic and congratulate yourself at discovering this chilled out slice of Macaronesia. ■