

Travel & Outdoors

WISH YOU WERE HERE



De-stress in the desert

Hikes, horse riding and healthy eating make a break to California's spectacular Palm Springs both thrilling and relaxing, finds **Josie Clarke**

It's just as well I love avocado. I've been in Greater Palm Springs for less than four full days and I calculate I've eaten 11 of them in various forms – one at every breakfast, lunch and dinner.

But even Californians must be getting sick of them, because at my last lunch at the elegant Ritz-Carlton Rancho Mirage – where they specialise in all things health and wellness – the waiter serves me battered avocado “fries”.

They may not be especially healthy, but my sense of wellness receives a considerable boost right then and there. Let me tell you, you really want them to start appearing on the menus of UK cafes as soon as possible.

A healthy breath of fresh air

Also contributing to my happy state is my location in the foothills overlooking the Coachella Valley, after a mini break spent hiking, horse trekking, eating invariably locally-sourced food, and managing to combine a yoga session with wine tasting.

Vino & Vinyasa, held at Hyatt Regency Indian Wells Resort & Spa (approx. £186 for two people;

indianwells.regency.hyatt.com), works by doing what felt like three minutes of yoga and then spending the rest of the two hour-long session in a heightened sense of relaxation guessing the grape and alcohol content.

This may work well for Americans, who apparently like to know how to select low-alcohol wine at networking occasions, but the Brits in the room managed to promptly turn the analysis into which might best be considered “snogging wine”. Our instructor agreed that health and wellness takes many forms.

The valley, with its extraordinary desert palm landscape dominated by the San Andreas and San Jacinto fault lines, is well known as a former playground for movie stars, back when actors under contract with Hollywood studios were allowed no further than two hours' travel away. More recently, it's found fame courtesy of the Coachella music festival. But the area's near-constant

You can just float in the pools gazing up at the cloudless blue sky



Desert areas close to the San Andreas Fault, main; the cable car in Mount San Jacinto State Park, above

sunshine, picture-postcard national parks and oases, vast underground aquifers of mineral water that bubble to the surface at hot spring spas, as well as an abundance of yoga studios and obsession with local produce, makes it a natural health and wellness getaway that's an easy drive from LAX.

Finding great faults

My break starts with a 30-minute drive by jeep to the San Andreas fault before temperatures reach their midday 42C peak, where we hike through a labyrinth of geological cuts and 'slot' canyons – so named as they really are slots that require squeezing through sideways – created by plate tectonics, water, wind and time.

The silence of this place is overwhelming and there is a peacefulness and stillness that you can easily forget exists any more.

I explore a natural palm oasis where crystal clear water reaches the surface from the underground aquifer and learn about how the Cahuilla Indians used the desert's plants for food, medicine, tools, weapons and shelter.

A Disney-worthy natural wonder

Surrounding us on all sides are mountains ribboned with trails for hiking, biking and horse trekking. The Palm Springs Aerial Tramway takes 10 minutes to lift passengers from the dry heat of the desert to the cool of Mount San Jacinto State Park, where trails extend over 14,000 acres of pristine wilderness.

Walt Disney himself once had a home in Palm Springs, and walking into San Jacinto feels like stepping into the pages of the *Bambi Little Golden Book*, with its fir-lined clearings and bubbling creeks. Visitors can stick to a three quarter-mile nature trail affording spectacular views of the valley below, or set off on the Peak Trail, a 12-mile hike to the second-highest peak in Southern California, with the chance of spotting a mountain lion or bobcat on the way.

On the trek down, I speak to two Los Angeles residents who have just spent a night camping out, and who consider themselves “exceptionally lucky” to be able to experience this,

just a two-hour drive away from the city.

The locals I'm meeting here also talk about their love of the outdoors and of leaving work and heading straight out for a hike. It is, therefore, no coincidence that they tend to look pretty healthy – slim and tanned, like they enjoy their lives very much.

I suddenly realise that I'm standing up a little straighter and breathing more deeply. I'm sleeping incredibly well. They may have the advantage of fabulous weather and proximity to mountains here, but I'm already determined to exercise outside once I'm home – over the summer, at least.

Riding like a true cowboy

For those who have been on one hike too many, but still want to venture peacefully into the outdoors, horse trekking is for you. Smoke Tree Stables offer guided treks through the scenic Indian Canyons on the Agua Caliente Indian Reservation, which are blessed with an unusually high concentration of natural springs that support several groves of California fan palms, including the well-known Palm Canyon Oasis (two-hour rides approx. £89pp; smoketreestables.com).

I borrow a dusty cowboy hat and we set off as a group along a trail, my horse Pablo allowing me to believe I can actually ride, as he picks his way along a rocky trail that takes us over hills high enough to look down over the fault lines and vast wind farms, to the mountains on the other side of the valley.

An eagle soars overhead before we carefully make our way down into a shady green oasis, where palm trees line a running stream. The temperature must be at least 10C cooler in the shade under the umbrella of palms, and the horses stand silently in appreciation of a break before we make our way back to base, passing a hiker who, asked if she is enjoying her day, replies: "What's not to love?"

Relaxing it may be, but two hours of riding in temperatures approaching 40C calls for just one thing – a hot spa to soak off the dust and ease the muscles. Fortunately in Palm Springs, you can do that outside too.



Josie Clarke climbing through a slot canyon

Dipping into hot springs

Two Bunch Palms pumps healing hot mineral water straight from the ground into a grotto-style series of pools and wooden tubs, while its no-children-under-18 rule and quiet-voice policy gives it a serene atmosphere (approx. £63; twobunchpalms.com).

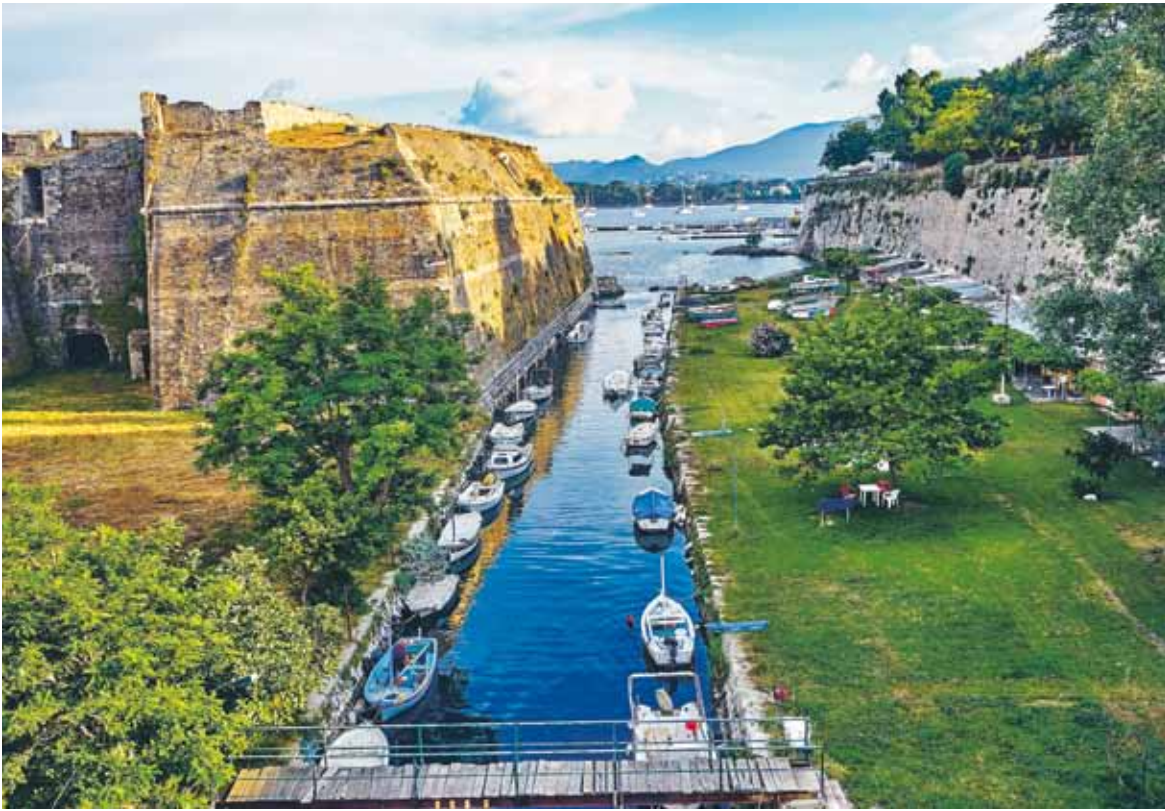
The upscale spa is especially well known for its mud baths, where you can spend 20 minutes soaking in clay and peat moss to achieve deep relaxation and moistened skin, followed by an Ayurvedic massage in which two therapists work on you simultaneously.

It also does hypnotherapy, spiritual counselling and angel readings, where you can "receive information that is needed in this incarnation to assist you with any blocked energy, and reveal to you answers for your life". All very quietly, of course. Or you can just float in the pools gazing up at the cloudless blue sky, while working out how to avoid eating avocado for dinner.

You will often hear the locals talking about the "craziness" of the Coachella festival and how they long for the peace and quiet that returns to the valley when the party is over. It is a landscape that sets the mind at ease and seems almost designed for healthy living. I feel better than when I arrived and I've had just four days here. Although it will be a little while before I eat another avocado. ■

Norwegian (norwegian.com/uk; 0330 828 0854) operates 11 weekly flights year-round direct from London Gatwick to LAX, using Boeing 787 Dreamliner aircraft. Fares start from £175 one-way and £320 return in LowFare economy, and £505 one-way and £925 return in Premium. Hyatt Regency Indian Wells Resort & Spa (indianwells.regency.hyatt.com) has rooms from \$350 (approx £261) per night. A three-hour Jeep Tour And Hike to the San Andreas Fault with Desert Adventures (red-jeep.com) costs \$139 (approx £104). For more information about Greater Palm Springs and its nine cities, see visitgreaterpalmsprings.com

SHORT HAUL



More than enough

Ikos Dassia on Corfu takes the all-inclusive model and improves on it brilliantly, finds **Laura Millar**

It's an odd feeling, leaving a restaurant without paying. My friend and I have just devoured several courses of hearty Greek food, including some delicious dishes which are local to Corfu itself, at Rex, a simple, yet chic taverna just off the main street of its atmospheric capital, Corfu Town. There's been octopus marinated in vinegar, served with a fresh, crisp Greek salad; a riff on a spinach pie, the bright green leaves cooked in cream and interspersed with crisp filo pastry squares; a huge helping of pastitsado – tender, braised beef flavoured with cinnamon and topped with thick, tube-like pasta; and veal sofrito, prepared with a vibrant white wine sauce, its name a nod to the centuries of the island's Venetian rule. Yet at the end, and after ample bottles of good Greek red wine, I might add, we just bid a breezy farewell to the waiters and walk off into the night.

No-one comes to arrest us, as the concept of eating at a local restaurant is part of all-inclusive resort, Ikos Dassia's, Dine Out experience, where – as well as having access to six à la carte restaurants (and one buffet) on-site – you can also choose from several nearby. Dassia is the newest offering from the Greek-owned company which already runs two, smaller resorts in Halkidiki. They

have proved so popular, particularly with us Brits, that Dassia is a much bigger prospect. It comprises of 411 rooms, which are divided between two main buildings (Sea and Sky), as well as a series of one to three-bedroom villas, and separate clusters of suites, some with their own private pool. If you don't have one, don't panic; the resort has seven, including a couple for kids. There's also a spa, a 24-hour gym, and several bars dotted throughout. And the good news is, you can eat and drink whatever – and as much as – you like.

Over the next few days, my friend and I put this challenge sorely to the test, sampling universally delicious food from most of the resort's restaurants. A couple have menus overseen by Michelin-starred chefs, including Ouzo, a pretty, airy space by one of the main pools, decked out in shades of blue, with bright pink splashes of bougainvillea on its walls. Alternately, if even dragging yourself to a proper chair and table is too much effort, you can order and eat beach or poolside. It was tempting to fall into a lazy, over-pampered existence – the staff are so unfailingly smiley, friendly and helpful they almost strong-arm you into never lifting a finger – but Corfu, after all, is where author Gerald Durrell lived, and set his evocative

autobiographical novel, *My Family and Other Animals*. If you've not yet caught the TV adaptation, you can immerse yourself in various parts of the island which will make you feel like you have.

Part of Ikos Dassia's all-inclusive offering includes one day's hire of a Mini Cooper, so you can set off on a day trip and explore. They also provide tickets to some of the museums on the island, so as well as taking in the magnificent scenery, you can get a good dose of culture, too. We start by driving across to the western side of the island to the beautiful bay of Palaiokastritsa, which, locals claim, has the most

Don't miss a swim along the fabulously-named Canal d'Amour

intensely turquoise-coloured sea of all the beaches. Legend also has it that Odysseus came ashore here, during his epic journey.

Another jaw-dropping beach is at Sidari, on the northern coast; don't miss a swim along the fabulously-named Canal d'Amour, a crystal-clear channel naturally formed by the rock formations by the water. Singletons, particularly, are to be encouraged – the story goes that any woman who swims its full length will meet the man of her dreams. We give that a miss, however, opting

Clockwise from main: Corfu Old Town; the Canal d'Amour; one of the rooms at Ikos Dassia

instead to check out the imposing, marble-white Palace of Achilleion, in Gastouri, built as a summer palace for the Empress of Austria in 1890. Finally, we finish at Corfu Town, as dusk is beginning to fall. The ancient, polished flagstones of the main street in the historic, UNESCO centre are slippery, but they take us past a couple of elegant Orthodox churches, with their stepped belltowers, and rows of elegant, balconied buildings, many graced with colourful flowers. One of the town's three forts, Palaio Frourio, constructed by the Venetians in the 13th century, looms over the eastern side of the port, while to the west is a newer fortress, built by them 300 years later, and marked with their symbol, the winged lion. And after seeing some of what this wonderful island has to offer, our 'free' meal in Rex never tasted better. ■

Seven nights in a double room with inland view starts from £1,115pp on an all-inclusive basis, including UK airport security fast passes, access to No1 Lounges, transfers and return flights from Glasgow with Sovereign Luxury Travel (sovereign.com, 01293 832 459). **Seven nights in a deluxe one-bedroom suite with pool view starts from £1,587pp, also including Ikos Deluxe Collection benefits.**

48 HOURS IN

Western Tenerife

Friday, midday

Check into the Hard Rock Hotel (doubles from £158, www.hardrockhoteltenerife.com), a sparkling modern abode in the quiet resort of Playa Paraiso.

1pm

Stroll along the new walkway that connects Playa Paraiso with Costa Salvaje, its up-and-coming sister resort.

1:30pm

Enjoy the picnic you picked up at the wee supermarket outside the Hard Rock Hotel with sweeping views of the Atlantic and the neighbouring island of La Gomera for company.

5pm

Ease back along to Playa Paraiso stopping off at any bar or café that catches your eye for an aperitif.

7pm

Dine in at Ali-Ole. Canarian cheese and Spanish hams are delicious tapas starters, followed by raciones of octopus with Canarian mojo sauce and peppers stuffed with rock fish. Best washed down with the local Tajinaste white wine.

Saturday, 9am

Relax by the massive pool at the Hard Rock Hotel's famous Beach Club, with its huge lagoon and live DJs.

Midday

Time for a light lunch in the informal Beach Club restaurant.

1pm

Arrange a transfer up to the picturesque mountain village of



Masca and then spend the next few hours working your way down through the famous gorge in search of the beach.

5pm

Catch a boat back to the port and resort of Los Gigantes enjoying epic views back to the 1,000m high cliffs you have just descended from.

8pm

El Rincon de Juan Carlos (www.elrincondejuancarlos.com) is not just the finest restaurant on Tenerife. This Michelin star wonder is also one of Spain's best places to dine. Splash out on the multi course tasting menu with matching wines. Sublime.

Sunday, 9am

Enjoy a beauty or massage treatment in the Hard Rock Hotel's award winning spa, or tour the hotel checking out all the famous rock and pop memorabilia. ■

Robin McKelvie

EasyJet (www.easyjet.com) fly to Tenerife South from Edinburgh with returns from £104.03. **Holiday Autos** (www.holidayautos.com) offer car hire at Tenerife South.

BARGAIN BREAKS

Mosey down the Moselle

Depart on 28 July for a six day Discover the Moselle river cruise on board A-Rosa Flora. Starting in Cologne, it will travel to destinations including Cochem, Bernkastel-Kues and Koblenz. Prices start from £1,294pp (based on two sharing) including return flights from Aberdeen, Edinburgh or Glasgow, a five night all inclusive cruise and one excursion to Luxembourg. Call 0344 874 8220 or see www.shearings.com

Say hello to Dubai

Prices start from £746pp for Travel Republic's four night holiday in Dubai with half board accommodation at the five star JA Ocean View Hotel

and return flights from Glasgow departing on 1 August.

Call 020 8974 7200 or see www.travelrepublic.co.uk

Cook's tour

Gisborough Hall is marking the 250th anniversary of Captain Cook's first expedition to the South Seas with a special maritime package, available until the end of the year. From £125pp per night, it includes an overnight stay in the Admiral's Room, dinner in their fine dining restaurant Chaloner's, a full Yorkshire breakfast, entrance to the Captain Cook Birthplace Museum in Middlesbrough and a museum guide. Call 01287 611500 or see www.gisborough-hall.com