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HOTTEST

Sunny delight

Sure, Palm Springs and Las Vegas have all the glitz, glitter, and glam you can eat. But for a *real* getaway, the comfort and hospitality of the cool Furnace Creek Inn makes Death Valley the hottest destination of them all

By William Campbell

Yea, though I travel through the Valley of Death I will fear no evil. A blown radiator? Now that's an entirely different anxiety-inducer and one with much more potential for reality. But evil? No way! For regardless of how harsh and unforgiving its expansive desolation may be, Death Valley is home to some of the most peaceful property on the planet—and definitely the most unique and extreme.

Let's see, there's Devil's Cornfield and the magnificent sand dunes to the north of Devil's Golf Course. South of that is Badwater, and some 5,475 feet above that are the spectacular vistas that can be seen from Dante's View in the Black Mountains. Then there's Stovepipe Wells, Funeral Peak, Deadman Pass, Dry Bone Canyon, and don't forget the Last Chance Range. All this and much more makes up Death Valley National Park, and as the names imply, without a doubt there are some bad lands out here. Almost 3.3 million acres of them.

Nestled in the heart of it all is the historic Furnace Creek Inn, a luxurious oasis of serenity that makes a stay in this land of extremes all the more special, whether it be in the dead heat of mid-July or in the entirely comfortable climes to be found in the late fall and winter months.

You read that right: comfortable climes. High temperatures in Death Valley average between 65 and 80 degrees from November through March—all the more reason to make the five-hour trek out there to discover this magnificent place that is as formidable as it is fascinating, inspiring as it is intimi-

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Let me show you why.

Out here for my second visit this year (my first was a camping trip in February), it's mid-July, midnight, and a few miles more than midway between Furnace Creek, the hottest spot in North America, and Badwater, the lowest spot in the Western Hemisphere at 282 feet below sea level.

How hot is hottest exactly? Try a record air temperature of 134 degrees, a mark that has stood since 1913. And if that doesn't impress you, try a ground temperature of 201 degrees registered in 1972—and don't you dare say, "Yeah, but it's the dry heat."

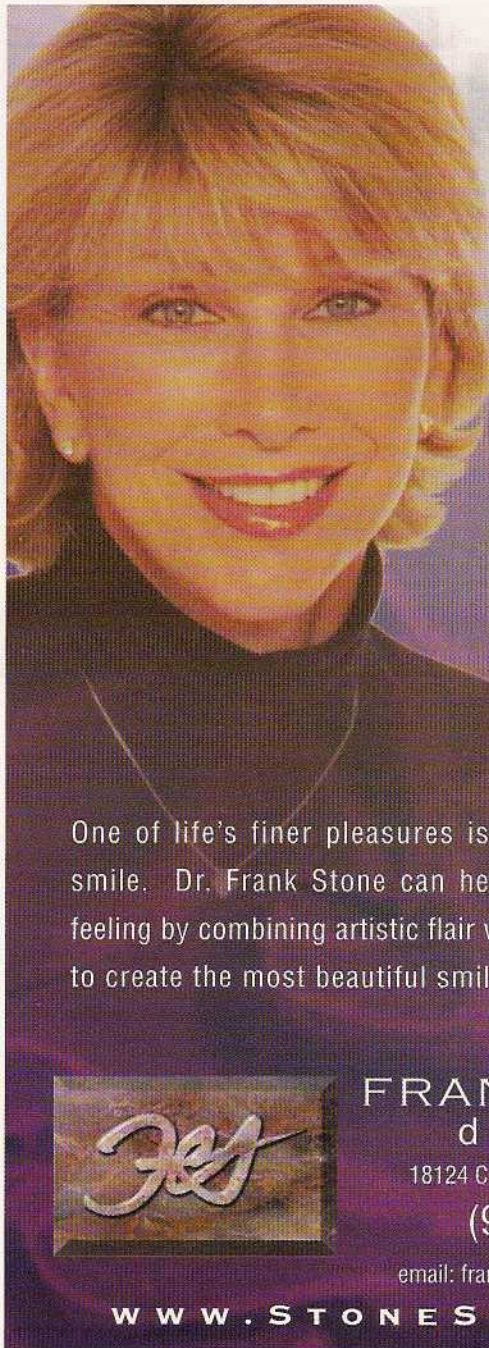
Just come with me.

From a dirt road that turns off of the two-lane highway running between those two meteorological and geographical extremes, it's a slow-going, half-mile hike in by flashlight over the gnarled terrain of the Devil's Golf Course inside the 2,000-year-old dry lake bed. So named because the rugged, seemingly endless, and ancient salt formations that have built up over the eons are pocked with myriad golf ball- and cup-sized openings.

Let's stop at a nice-sized salt pinnacle, which, just for kicks, we'll call the 13th tee—par unknown. Most immediately noticeable is the absolute stillness in such vast and timeless and pitch-black space. The deafening quiet produces an almost claustrophobic reaction that is at odds with this great wide open place. Breath is a little shallower. The heart pumps a little faster. In the heavy heat, which still hangs out well above the 100-degree mark, sweat glands work overtime.

There's not another human being for miles. And miles. Perhaps not even any sort of creature.

Looking up, company's arrived. The universe at large almost drowns out the silver sliver grin of a waxing crescent moon dropping in on the Panamint Mountains to the west. The stars seem to beat down like shimmering rain. So clear is the night sky that the swath of the Milky Way drapes distinctly across it like a sash. With a pair of binoculars and steady hands, the rings of Saturn are visible. Venus is a beacon of bright.




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HOTTEST

Furnace Creek Inn



Bedazzled and dizzied by the sensory overload, it's time to sit down, close the eyes, and take a deep breath. The weight of the heat and the silence retracts a bit.

But that's when the party really starts. Suddenly heard are tiny interruptions in the profound noiselessness, and the reasoning side tries to catch up to imagination and rationally process the other-worldly noise that grows to be a stealthy symphony.

Is the ageless salt crust breaking? Is it moving? An earthquake? A sinkhole? Imagination surges ahead and suddenly a scene from the movie *Tremors* fills the mental multiplex. Is there something moving under there? Something big? And slimy? With teeth? And it's hungry?

With heart and imagination now galloping off together, it's obvious that to go chasing after them across the dark and treacherous topography would be to invite a sprained ankle, or worse. So staying put, the remarkable sound hits a crescendo and levels off. Dropping an ear near to the sea of sodium chloride below, the source of sound is the salts themselves. This organic orchestra that's tuning up below is composed of the billions upon billions of molecular salt crystals now out from beneath the relentless sun and cooling and contracting with countless snaps, crackles, and pings underfoot.

Amid this landscape that is visually

and aurally surreal and alien, just sit there with the earth breathing below and the sky spilling light above and try to keep chills from coursing or eyes from welling up.

Earlier in the evening, watching the sun set while enjoying a plate of grilled venison and a fine Merlot in the magnificent dining room at the Furnace Creek Inn produced nearly the same effect.

The magnitude of beauty is astounding in this beautiful place.

Celebrating its 75th anniversary this year, it was borate ore that built this remarkable establishment, which expanded beautifully from the original 12 rooms that the Pacific Coast Borax Company opened for business back in February 1927. Built in the mission architectural style, the inn's distinctive red tile roofs crown buildings crafted of native stone and adobe bricks made on the premises by native Shoshone and Paiute.

Situated on 160 acres, backdropped by the Funeral Mountains and fronted by a lush garden of date and fan palms that shade and stand watch over meandering brooks and placid ponds, the Furnace Creek Inn looks very much the sanctuary it is and features 66 well-appointed guestrooms renovated in 1999, a 70-foot-long chemical-free swimming pool fed by a nearby natural warm spring, and a genuine way of making you feel right at home.

And it's not just the hospitality of the hotel's staff, led by Manager Toni Jepson. The peaceful, easy feeling the place exudes also has something to do with the numerous Leslie B. DeMille oil-paint portraits of past Death Valley '49ers that line the hotel corridors. It's hard not to get comfortable with such surroundings when passing pictures of kindly grandfather types at practically every turn.

But as good as the Furnace Creek Inn gets, one doesn't come to Death Valley to stay indoors admiring the artwork (unless it's 128 degrees outside, as it was this July). The inn also sports tennis courts on the premises. And if golf is your game, but a short trip down the road—no, that's not a mirage!—resides the Furnace Creek Golf Course, as uniquely situated and incongruous to its surroundings as the inn.

At 6,215 yards long, the challenging 18-hole Perry Dye-redesigned, par-70

course has the distinction of being the bottommost links in the world at 214 feet below sea level, thus allowing golfers good and not so good to shoot their "lowest" rounds ever.

Having only commenced with golf lessons but a few weeks prior to my visit, certainly I still have a lot of work just to move up to bad, but I took the opportunity seriously via a 6 a.m. tee time and had an entirely memorably blast amid the lush surroundings that are home to coyotes, turkey vultures, hawks, road-runners, dragonflies, various water fowl (or should I say water hazard fowl), zebra-tailed lizards, Panamint chipmunks, and much more.

Some three hours later, I came off the 18th green with a score that was four notches above the 110-degree temperature—and proud of it.

From a historical perspective alone, Death Valley and the Furnace Creek Inn are well worth the stay. Then when you get here, you can't help but be bowled over by the sheer divinity of the place and its overwhelming majesty, whether you're at the imaginary 13th tee on the salty Devil's Golf Course at midnight, the real 18th green on Furnace Creek at dawn, or any and all other points between and beyond.

Death Valley is alive.

OC

William Campbell wrote our May 2001 cover story on Sigourney Weaver. He'll be back in Death Valley this November.

the info

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E-mail: info-fc@xanterra.com

Room rates: October 11 through May 10, \$235 to \$365; May 11 through October 10: \$160 to \$230. For more information, visit www.deathvalley.com, or www.nps.gov/deva. The Furnace Creek Inn is online at www.furnacecreekresort.com.

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