

CALIFORNIA

# Palm Springs? But I don't golf ...

Numerous hiking trails offer 'diversity of topography and flora,' says author

**SUZANNE MORPHET**  
SPECIAL TO THE SUN

Palm Springs never caught my eye. I've always associated the Southern California city in the desert with retirees playing golf or whacking a tennis ball. I don't golf and I'm only a mediocre tennis player. But when a friend told me Palm Springs is a great place to hike, I was intrigued.

According to Philip Ferranti, author of 140 Great Hikes in and near Palm Springs, there are more than 140 trails totalling over 2,000 km and "nowhere in such a concentrated area will you find the diversity of topography and flora."

Diversity in a desert? Flying into the city in early March I was still skeptical. Green golf courses and tennis courts push up against the San Jacinto Mountains on the city's western edge. When I spot the telltale groove of a trail on the hardscabble rock beneath the plane's wing on our final descent,

I make a mental note that we'll need our hats and lots of water.

I could not have guessed that within just a few hours we would be standing in the shade of a thicket of palm trees beside pools of water reflecting the clouds overhead. Of course I knew desert harbours oases, but I never expected anything this stunning.

Looking up in awe at the towering fan palm trees is like looking up at a Douglas fir or a Western Red Cedar back home in B.C. And just as aboriginal people on the west coast used cedar extensively, the Cahuilla Indians once depended on the fan palm, eating its fruit and weaving its fronds.

This oasis might have lulled us into thinking that hiking in the desert would always be easy. Fortunately, we receive timely advice to the contrary. On the short drive from Palm Springs to the Lower Palm Canyon trail, we pick up a young couple hitchhiking. They're exhausted and sunburned after taking a 'shortcut' from one trail to another. "Stay by the water," the woman warns us, grateful for the ride and explaining that they had been hiking steadily for

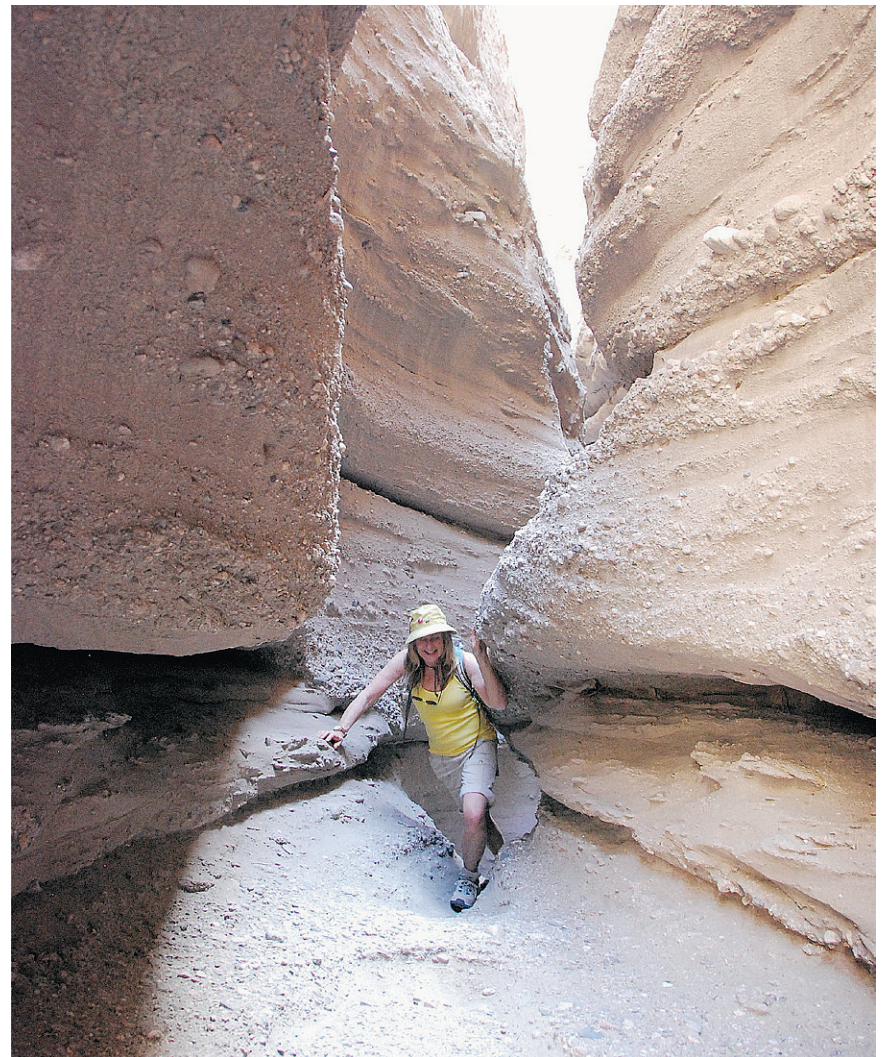
almost six hours.

Yet water — at least in the form of rain — is the last thing we want to see the next day. Beyond the citrus groves, strawberry fields and vineyards that blanket the southeast corner of the Coachella valley lie the Mecca Hills, with a fascinating array of canyons.

There are no marked trails; you simply walk along the sandy canyon bottoms. Soaring walls widen and narrow unpredictably, sometimes coming so close together that we must turn sideways to keep moving ahead. At one point, an elephant-sized boulder blocks our way. My friend crawls under it on her belly while I scramble over the top. We're feeling like kids again, but cringe to think of being caught inside a canyon during a flash flood.

Our third day finds us in a different landscape altogether. We've driven an hour northeast of Palm Springs to Joshua Tree National Park. It's more like what I expect of a desert, with wide-open spaces and little shade. But there are surprises here too. Who knew that tortoises and jackrabbits live in a desert? We don't spot any, but they're here. We expect to see cactus, but not the hundreds — maybe thousands — concentrated in the cholla cactus 'garden'. But nothing beats the weird and wonderful granite rock formations at Jumbo Rocks. Long-ago volcanic activity, combined with more recent water and wind erosion, has produced an otherworldly landscape.

A park brochure fittingly describes the rocks as "scattered across the land like careless piles of toy blocks." Perfect — another place to play — I mean hike!



A hiker climbs through a narrow spot in one of the box canyons hidden in the Mecca Hills south of Palm Springs. There are no 'trails' or signs to follow. Hikers follow the canyons until they decide to turn back when it gets too tight.

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