

A mission of Mercey

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Off the beaten path, a rustic resort in Central California offers travelers a chance to escape and relax in soothing mineral baths.

SUSAN DERBY
REPORTING FROM FIREBAUGH, CALIF.

In the resort's guest book, filled with many comments of the "relaxing" variety, one particular scribble caught my eye: "There are ghosts!"

The signatory gave no details, but I could easily imagine that old Mercey Hot Springs is steeped in stories of life and death.

The story goes that Native Americans journeyed to the springs with their sick to partake of the mineral-rich, supposedly medicinal waters. In 1912, a hotel here first hosted paying guests along what once was a stage-coach route but now is a hot, middle-of-nowhere dot off Interstate 5.

Nearly a century later, my fiancé and I, with our 19-month-old toddler, are healthy but suffer 21st century stresses, so we spent the night at the newly renovated resort in Firebaugh to break up a northbound trip.

Our cabin, No. 3, was cozy and clean, with cardboard-thin walls through which we could hear our neighbor's snores. It was the cheapest cabin (there are six), because it had received the fewest renovations. But it served our purpose, which did not include being fussy.

Our first stop was a tub near the swimming pool, where we happily soaked, a trio of peas in a pod. It was perfect for our toddler, allowing her enough room to splash within forearm's reach. After a bit, I broke away to exercise my limbs in the pool, kept at 90 degrees most of the year.

At day's end, we wandered along a

dry creek next to tamarisk-shaded campsites. Native American artifacts, such as mortars and pestles, have been found here, so we stayed vigilant. Artifact-discoverers are asked to submit finds to the front desk for a free two-night stay.

We saw nothing more than a few rabbits, which was good enough for Si-ona, our toddler. We met a few other visitors, among them Bina Pometta from Gustine, 50 miles away. She has been a regular at Mercey Hot Springs for more than 30 years.

"There used to be five baths in the bathhouse, and people lined up for them," she said. "The treatment was, you come up for three weeks, soak and drink the water, and your arthritis would be gone."

Entering Mercey, you see grounds sparsely sprinkled with pine and eucalyptus trees, and a registration office, which is in an old chapel-like building constructed circa 1908. It was once the "springs house" for a plant that bottled the water for pharmacies.

You see the bathhouse Bina spoke of, currently with three private tubs. And then there are newer facilities added by co-owner Larry Ronneberg, who has improved the property tremendously, Pometta said.

Recent additions include a sauna and nine individual outdoor tubs, which debuted earlier this year in a swimsuit-mandatory area. Behind the cabins is a clothing-optional zone with more tubs.

When former information technology manager Ronneberg bought Mercey in November 1995, it was "trashed," he said. "The cabins were all lopsided or needed to be leveled out." The indoor tubs existed, but the swimming pool was full of mud.

Its stark surroundings may still look forgotten, but the 160-acre resort property is now more delightfully rustic than woebegone. Plus, it's eco-hip: Far from commercial utilities, the resort runs on mostly solar and wind



SUSAN DERBY For The Times

ECO-HIP: Behind these soaking tubs are solar panels that help provide Mercey Hot Springs with its power.

Mercey Hot Springs

THE BEST WAY

From Los Angeles, go north on Interstate 5 (past the Panoche Road exit) to the Little Panoche Road/Shields Avenue/J1 exit. Go right (east) for 13 miles. 62964 Little Panoche Road, Firebaugh; (209) 826-3388, www.merceyhotsprings.com.

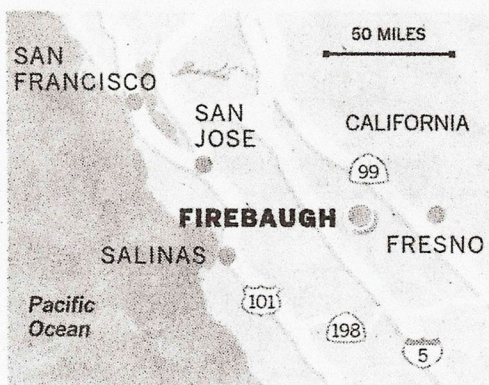
RATES

Cabins begin at \$80 a night, double occupancy; campsites and RV parking, \$30 per person.

power. A diesel generator is used, but it runs on waste veggie oil.

After my companions were tucked into bed, I braved the dark clothing-optional deck. I was the only one there for my bath, a tad hotter than lukewarm and perfect for the night.

As I lay back with my head heavy



against the porcelain, gazing up at stars, my edges erased. A cricket chorus serenaded. Otherwise, all was quiet. (The snoring did not commence until later.)

Pometta says she drinks the water as she soaks. I tried it, and it's not the most palatable beverage. A little sulfur, a little too fuzzy. Still, I sipped it that night and the next morning. I don't know whether it added minutes to my life, but, for what it's worth, I didn't get sick.

In the bath, I don't know how much time passed as my usual mental rodeo took a long pause. But when I saw a shooting star moving in slow motion, only to realize a second later that it was a plane, it seemed time to get my mushy mind to bed.

One thing about soaking — you get hungry. For breakfast, we made egg burritos on our small porch using the camp stove we brought. Having been warned by our friends about the lack of food resources (this stretch of Interstate 5 isn't known for gourmet fare), we packed an ice chest full.

But the days of roughing it may be numbered. Ronneberg, a self-described tinkerer, hopes to add a restaurant in the next year: "A very nice restaurant," he said, "where people can get locally grown food, grass-fed beef and lamb, organic eggs."

Until then, I'll toast to this place with my sulfury, water-filled glass and drink to timeless simplicity.

travel@latimes.com