



Formerly a bottling plant for the medicinal water at the hot springs, the facility's chapel is now the registration building at Mercey Hot Springs, 13 miles off Interstate 5 in Firebaugh.

J. Katarzyna Woronowicz
Special to The Bee

Moons and Valley stars

Hot springs resort off I-5 includes clothing-optional tubs

By SAM McMANIS
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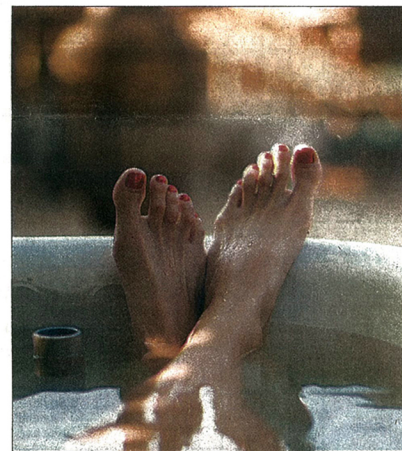
FIREBAUGH – In the buff, under the cover of darkness save a splash of brilliant Van Goghian stars overhead, I submerged my weary carcass into a bubbling cauldron, a pungent pool of mineral-rich water, heated to 112 degrees. Relaxation, at last.

My trapezius muscles, all seized up from hunching behind the wheel on another Interstate 5 death march, and my quadriceps, thrashed from a trail run in the nearby foothills, found succor as I began to marinate and ruminate in one of the tubs at Mercey Hot Springs, a soothing oasis for travelers and the watery-inclined, 13 miles west of the interstate in Fresno County.

As I stared at the night sky, thinking about man's hubris amid such cosmic evidence of our insignificance, my reverie was shattered by the intrusive beam of a flashlight.

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Late-winter fields bloom outside Mercey Hot Springs, which attracts people passing through the Central Valley as well as guests who are drawn directly there.



Mercey's soaking tubs are made of porcelain cast iron, and some of them can be enjoyed with or without swimming attire.

HIDDEN GEMS OFF I-5

Making a trip from Sacramento to Southern California via Interstate 5 can be a long, soul-sapping slog. For three consecutive weeks, The Bee's Sam McManis is featuring three notable stops, either hidden or taken for granted, that might temporarily relieve the tedium – or even be worth an overnight stay. For the first story in the series, go to www.sacbee.com/travel.

March 23: Miyazaki Bath House and Gallery in Walnut Grove

Today: Mercey Hot Springs in Firebaugh

April 6: Harris Ranch Inn and Restaurant in Coalinga

FROM THE COVER

Mercey: Resort includes some clothing-optional tubs

FROM PAGE H1

Oh, I had momentarily forgotten that there are other people at Mercey Hot Springs, that you must share the splendor of a natural elixir rich in sodium and silica, borate and calcium. So remote and self-contained is the resort – just six cabins, two rental Airstream trailers and some RV hook-ups – that it's easy to get lulled into a sense that this is your personal hideaway.

Sounds of steps followed the flashlight onto the wooden platform of the "clothing optional" tubs where I soaked. Just before the light was extinguished, robes fell and – *Don't ogle, Sam, just keep looking at the stars; say is that Orion, or the Pleiades?* – a middle-aged couple gave me a glimpse of, let's just say, full moons before safely sliding into parallel tubs across the deck.

I returned to my happy indolence, steam rising from my phosphate bath and curling starward. But then the spell was broken once more, as the hubby in the tub launched into a running commentary of the experience to the missus.

In another context – say, if I were dressed and had my reporter's notebook handy – I would've been scribbling down his musings about Mercey's mood-altering mystique. But this didn't seem the time, or place.

Besides, as a sign near Mercey's main entrance advises, silence is what's supposed to speak loud here.

I, however, was absorbing every word the guy spoke.

Husband: "See, that's a constellation. Sagittarius, I think."

Wife: "Um."

Husband: "This is *awesome*. Soaking in a tub under the stars."

Wife: "Um huh."

Husband: "And you don't need to worry about wasting water and the cost of heating it."

Wife: "..."

Husband: "Is your (tub) too hot?"

Wife: "Um, no. But not as bubbly as the one down below."

Husband: "All I know is, this is *awesome*."

Wife: "..."

Husband: "Barb and Kevin would dig this. We gotta tell them."

I pulled the plug – on my tub and on the guy's monologue. I hoisted myself up and showed them a full moon of my own, wrapped a towel around my waist and left them to play out their personal Cialis commercial.

Annoyed as I was, I must admit I agreed with the gentleman's sentiment, maybe not about Barb and Kevin, but certainly about his enthusiastic response to



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The refurbished pool at Mercey Hot Springs in Firebaugh is permanently set at 80 degrees. The soaking tubs beside it are swimsuit-mandatory.



Two Airstreams also are available for Mercey Hot Springs overnight guests, starting at \$200.



Mercey's one-room cabins are available nightly at \$125 and up.

a weekend getaway, to a family with small children heading back to Oregon, to the couple featuring the aforementioned voluble husband, and a group of six in the large cabin in the back.

"I like the feel of this place," said Sherman, who drove down from the Shasta area with her border collie, Charlie. "Some of the California hot springs, there's always a 'scene' going on. I really like that this is a family place. It's really quiet and laid-back."

Unlike at some hot springs, where nudity around the baths is rampant, Mercey takes a more modest approach. The pool and the majority of the tubs are in the family-friendly swimsuit area. Only the tubs behind the cabins are "clothing-optional," and even then, people are discreet.

and bathhouse, construction of the new tubs and sauna, and, most taxing, replacing old, rusting pipes that carry the mineral-rich water from the source to the people.

When Ronneberg first stepped foot on the property nearly 20 years ago, the springs were "functioning in the sense that hot water was coming out of the ground." But "the entire infrastructure" was crumbling.

"Everything was leaking, broken, tilted," he said. "Roofs leaked. The pool was full of mud and really in bad shape. One indoor tub would fill but wouldn't drain; the other wouldn't fill. Only two were functional at all. So we ripped everything out and replaced it all. ... I was part plumber, part electrician, part roofer, part carpenter, part everything. We couldn't afford to hire somebody to do it, although

MERCEY HOT SPRINGS

62964 Little Panoche Road, Firebaugh

Contact: (209) 826-3388;

merceyhotsprings.com

Directions from Sacramento: Go south on Interstate 5 for about 140 miles (24 miles past the Highway 152 interchange). Do not take the Mercey Springs Road exit. Instead, continue 8 miles farther to the Little Panoche Road/Shields Avenue exit. Go right (west) for 13 miles.

Cost: Day use rates are \$25-\$35 per person; private baths \$18 per person per hour; overnight accommodations \$125-\$250 based on double occupancy. No smoking and no pets.



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to the waters to mend phys- tribes first discovered sever- options, Mercey has an

Merced Hot Springs. It may not be the biggest or most lavish resort among the many hot springs that dot the state, nor is it set amid towering redwoods, lushly wood forests or overlooking the sweeping Pacific, but Mercey is the epitome of a hidden gem, tucked into the foothills surrounded by cattle-grazed private spreads and Bureau of Land Management acreage.

It's a great place to disappear for a few days – or even just a few hours of respite on that long haul down to Los Angeles.

"It's one of my best getaways," said frequent guest Patty Sherman, from Montague (Siskiyou County). "And it seems like it's kind of a secret. It's amazing. There's not many people here. The first time I came here was when my husband and I were driving by the exit on the freeway and saw a sign. We just came on a whim and stayed for the day because we were on our way to Arizona. I've been back about five times to spend the night."

"Know why I really like it? You don't have to go very far until you really feel like you're in the middle of nowhere."

Far from nowhere, Larry Ronneberg, co-owner with partner Grazyna Aust, prefers to see Mercey as a destination, the middle of everywhere, for a certain type of traveler who wants to take

ically and psychologically from the plugged-in frenzy that is modern living.

It's what he, himself, did back in the mid-1990s, when he wearied of life as a high-stress IT executive at Western Digital and bought what then was a storied resort that clearly had seen better days and, actually, barely functioned as a spring anymore.

"People looked at me and thought I was buying a mess and, yeah, it as a mess," Ronneberg, 61, recalled. "That's why it was pretty inexpensive as far as California property goes. My (Digital) co-workers thought I was crazy. And it took a long time to get it going. A lot longer than it should've. Many, many years. For many, many reasons."

Yet, what Ronneberg and Aust preside over today is a handsome, thriving resort that gives a nod to the past in many areas but has embraced modernity in others.

At Mercey, you check into a registration office that served as an adobe chapel back when rancher John Mercey (he later Americanized the spelling) first bought and developed the land and later became a spring house to bottle the water. You stay in one of the original seven cabins built by a San Francisco real estate developer who in 1912 turned the site into a resort. Most important, you soak in the same springs that Indian

al hundred years ago and flocked to for medicinal and spiritual sustenance.

But Mercey is modern in that those tubs now have new plumbing, the cabins electricity, thanks to solar panels and a generator that runs on waste vegetable oil. The pool, full of mud when Ronneberg first laid eyes on the place, now is gleaming and permanently set at 80 degrees. The original tubs in a bathhouse, those in the clothing-optional area and the newer, swimsuit-mandatory tubs by the pool, all run on new pipes installed by Ronneberg. Recent additions include a sauna, the two Airstreams that feature mini kitchens, and a large common room called the Phoenix, warmed by a wood stove, where you can sometimes get a Wi-Fi signal.

Not that you'd want to plug in and log on here. You want reliable Internet service and a continental breakfast, go to a Holiday Inn Express. Mercey is reliably rustic, so one must come with sufficient provisions. There's no restaurant or grocery store on site and, as Ronneberg said, "to get any decent food, you've got to go to Los Banos, 35 miles away." That, he admits, is a privation some cannot abide, but he's hoping to eventually turn a crumbling building on the northeast corner of the resort, near the road, into a restaurant.

Even without dining

impressive menu of attractions. He's built a Frisbee golf course on the hillside, and opened vast acres for hiking and mountain biking, and birders are drawn to the long-eared owls who nest in the pines and eucalyptus trees that dot what otherwise are grassy hillsides. And there's the night sky, as well. Because civilization is far, far from Mercey, there is little, if any, "light pollution" to obscure the stars.

"We've got some of the cleanest air and darkest sky," Ronneberg said. "We have one of the darkest skies in California. Right across the road is a guy who's building his own observatory."

But, let's face it, no one would make a mission to Mercey if it weren't for the hot springs. To that end, Ronneberg has fashioned the resort to appeal to an array of travelers.

"A lot of people associate hot springs with hippies," he said. "We actually don't want to be associated with hippies. Nothing against hippies. I was one once myself – 1970, living at Venice Beach. But that's not what we're going for here."

One early March weekend, Mercey's parking lot saw a hulking SUV, a van with a peace sign painted on the hood, a Beemer, a touring motorcycle and two RVs. Customers ranged from a mother from Northern California meeting her daughter from Southern California for

"The people that come here are – I don't want to say yuppies because a lot of them are baby boomers – but they are looking for a clean, quiet place to be where they can read and relax and get away from the city and the traffic," Ronneberg said. "We get mostly couples. It's a very difficult balance for us to be attractive to families, but yet, kids being kids, keep the place a quiet retreat for people."

Ronneberg and Aust have traveled to other hot springs to check out the competition, but he admits that he was hardly a hot springs aficionado. He had only been to two before acquiring Mercey, but he had a vision of the kind of place he would want in a vacation spot. Whipping Mercey into shape, of course, was anything but a vacation. Ronneberg used to work the crazy 60-hour weeks in high tech, but now he estimates that he puts in 85 hours weekly as host and caretaker.

He does both high- and low-tech work, too. He's long toiled and tinkered to transform the site to full solar power, and he says he's getting close. He put in the arrays on the hillside himself, and monitors the output and services the coffin-size battery storage cells in a shed he built himself.

His lower-tech work, at least early on, involved major restoration of the cabins

we now do have some people to help out seasonally. I pretty much learned it all myself. I just do a lot of studying. It's something I find comes naturally."

These days, Ronneberg, who still retains the blond, blue-eyed charm of a native Southern Californian, spends most of his days riding his bike between the "brains" of the solar panels and the front desk, often cradling a phone to his ear to talk to guests or maintenance people. Aust handles much of the customer service.

It took the couple 15 years, he said, to "get in the black," financially, and they still pump most of the profit back into the springs.

The owners, however, don't often get to luxuriate in the waters themselves. Too busy. Also, they don't want to affect the tranquility of the soakers' experience. "We don't want them to feel like, 'Oh, the owners are in the tub next to us,'" Ronneberg said.

Early the morning after my encounter with the chatting husband, I returned to the tub for a quick soak before facing I-5 once more.

No one was around. All was blissful, all was quiet. I felt like exclaiming "Awe-some," but the gurgling water quelled my impulse.

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