

Under covers



No-frills cabins, above, are small but clean. Long-eared owls, below left, winter in the area. Though cabins don't have their own tubs, outdoor tubs, below right, are available for a soak.

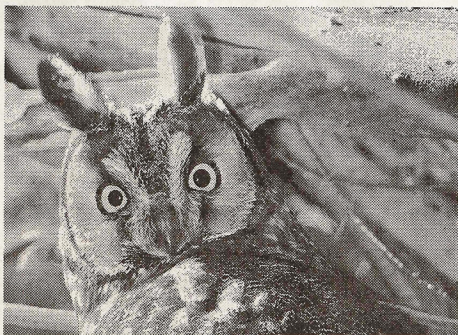
Eric Jungerman / The Chronicle

OFF-THE-GRID SPA

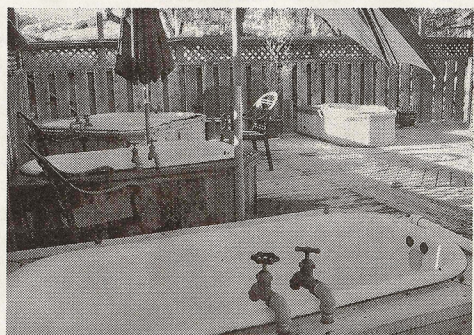
:: Mercey Hot Springs :: This is a spa the way Boomers remember spas: high on good spirits and low on frills, off the beaten track and a place your friends don't know about — yet. Two groups of fanatics already do, though: hot springs aficionados and birders. Overnight guests of Mercey Hot Springs, in the Panoche Valley between Hollister and Los Banos, have unlimited use of hot tubs and a small swimming pool. The area is also the winter home of long-eared owls, so don't forget to pack binoculars.

— Eric Jungerman and Katie Meadow, 96hours@sfchronicle.com

62964 Little Panoche Road, Firebaugh (Fresno County). (209) 826-3388, www.merceyhot-springs.com. Six cabins, one with kitchenette, no private baths. From \$70 to \$105 per cabin based on two-person occupancy, \$25 extra for third person; RV/camping, \$25 per person; weekly discounts available. Pets \$10. Day use \$15 for four hours. Owls? Priceless, with a \$5 parking fee.



Ron Wolf



Eric Jungerman / The Chronicle

Comfort zone

Accommodations include six quiet cabins, most of which date from the '30s, and an RV area. The cabins are very small and spartan but tidy and clean. Each has a small porch with table and chairs, and a heater; one cabin has a well-stocked kitchenette, two have fireplaces. One reading lamp was on a nightstand, a second was improvised by moving a table lamp. The bed was a bit too soft, but the sheets were fresh white cotton and the comforter warm and light.

Bath and beyond

There are no private bathrooms, but a cabin just steps away houses two attractive tiled baths with generous showers. The original bathhouse has two updated private indoor tubs and additional baths. The outdoor deck is the place to be after sunset. Seven large, old-fashioned porcelain tubs, each with hot and cold faucets, are arranged roughly in a circle. If you wish to soak "in the altogether," but have acquired a sense of modesty since the "me decade," dip in after dark; you have your own private tub, and no one can see you drop your robe under the stars. The water is mildly sulfurous and appealingly silky.

Grounds for approval

Originally on a stagecoach route that serviced the New Idria quicksilver mine, the property was sold in 1912 to a San Franciscan named Bourn, who built most of the structures that exist today. The Spanish-style "chapel," now the office, was once the bottling plant. The property suffered a fire and fell into disuse until the current owners purchased it 12 years ago and began serious renovations. Mercey Hot Springs is totally off the grid, powered by a combination of sun, wind and a diesel generator that's fueled by waste vegetable oil.

Geared up

Did we say no frills? No phone or TV in the cabins, but there is Wi-Fi access for \$5 a day.

In the vicinity

Other than raptors and people who love them, tourism isn't big here, so restaurants are scarce. The closest going concern is the Panoche Inn on Panoche Road just west of Little Panoche Road. OK, so it's a biker bar, but just when the valley seems way too warm and bright, this place is cool and dark. The beer is ice cold, the peanuts are salty, and the picnic tables are in the shade. To the west is San Juan Bautista, where the mission, established in 1797, houses a museum with some lovely original artifacts. If solitude beckons, go south and hike the Moses Spring Trail on the east side of the Pinnacles National Monument.

Good to know

Fill your tank before driving into Panoche Valley, and take lots of water, all your meals, a cozy robe, flip-flops and a flashlight — nothing is for sale here. The tap water may be potable, but it doesn't taste good. If your idea of heaven includes wine with your soak, bring your own plastic glasses because anything breakable is rightly forbidden in spa areas. Kids will like the pool, but the hot tubs are quite deep and slippery. Dogs are allowed only for RV customers and must be on a leash at all times. The best time of year to go is probably spring or fall, when the valley isn't too hot or too cold.

Highs and lows

Mercey Hot Springs is a work in progress. The mineral water is currently pumped from a single source and might not be hot enough in cold weather or for those who wish to turn pretty in pink. But on a mild evening, our nighttime soak was perfect.