



FIRST CLASS: HIKING

MORE THAN JUST BEAUTIFUL, PALM SPRING'S INDIAN CANYONS ARE NATURE'S EQUIVALENT TO AN ANCIENT HEALER

BY MELISSA SILVA

Gazing up at the San Jacinto Mountains before I depart on an early morning hike in Palm Springs, I feel almost paralyzed with awe. How could something this grand and this spectacular, have no human involvement? In a world where man-made creations are mass-produced by the second, it's hard to remember that there are existing structures that human hands can take no credit for creating.

"Palm trees came here before all the people," says Raven, my ranger and guide for my hike through the Indian Canyons — located on the mountain range's eastern slope — which include Palm, Murray and Andreas Canyons, the last of which we are about to ascend. "They did, didn't they?" I think to myself. How easy it is to forget.

The first settlers of Palm Springs were the ancestors of the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians (pronounced Kaw-we-ah), who settled in the Palm Springs area more than 2,000 years ago. Occupying the Indian Canyons, the Cahuilla Indians worked harmoniously with the land that offered rich vegetation and an abundant water supply.

As I begin my hike through the canyon, Raven explains that only a few people in the tribes had the privilege of communicating with plants and animals for remedies. "There's no price for medicine," explains Raven. "The rapport with nature develops a cure." I begin to realize that in addition to the streams, rivers and peaceful ambiance, the Canyons served as holistic healing grounds in addition to a reliable source of food.

As we climb, we pass the creosote bush, which I learn was the most important medicine plant to the Cahuilla due to its multipurpose nature. The leaves are considered one of the strongest known antioxidants and were used to make a tea that was served daily before the family's first meal for both the maintenance of good health and, if needed, to treat any stomach issues. The leaves could also be used to eliminate dandruff, by being used to make an infusion that was then applied to the scalp during washing. For congestion, the leaves were boiled and the steam inhaled. And for wounds, the leaves were ground into a poultice, which would be packed onto the wound and pressed with a hot stone to draw out any infection.

Continuing up through the canyons, we come across the brittle bush, which was a common choice among the Cahuilla for pain relief. If a member of the tribe was experiencing sore gums or a toothache, the leaves would be boiled into a decoction and used as a numbing mouth rinse. The sap of the bush, when heated, could be used as an ointment that, when applied to the chest, would



break up congestion, similar to present-day medicated rubs like Vicks VapoRub.

To my pleasant surprise, the canyons are also home to desert lavender, which, like the creosote and brittle bushes, could be used for treating particular ailments. Pulling a few leaves off the plant, I crush them by rubbing my palms together. Opening my hands, I am engulfed by the familiar scent known to comfort, soothe and relax. Beyond being capable of emitting a lovely aroma, the lavender leaves were often used by the Cahuilla to make a poultice, which could be applied to a wound to help the bleeding to cease.

Once we reach the top of the Indian Canyons, cacti are in sight. Readily available to the Cahuilla for consumption, I learn some cacti were also used for healing purposes. The buckhorn cholla is one such cactus. The buds and blossoms were harvested and consumed, whereas the stems could be dried out and burned, the ashes then applied to cuts and burns for soothing. The beavertail cactus, on the other hand, is known primarily for being one of the Cahuilla's favorite for consumption. In addition to the beavertail's buds

and blossoms, the Cahuilla would consume the stems and pads. Sliced into thin strips, the stems served as what we would regard today as string beans.

Walking back down to where we began our hike, I realize the relationship humans have with the land is often forgotten. Without any demand, the land offered the Cahuilla not only living quarters, but also sources for food and healing. Perhaps that is why only very few members of the Cahuilla were privileged to seek the land's assistance when in need, as they knew, through respectful dialogue, it would graciously provide.

Chatting with Raven as we depart, I learn various elements of nature were gendered in the eyes of the Cahuilla. To the tribe — and to many outside of such culture — the earth is female, commonly seen as a mother figure. I find my steps to be much lighter on the way down through the canyon, in comparison to on the way up. Perhaps I subconsciously know that Mother Earth isn't deserving of heavy stomping. Perhaps I realize I may need her help one day too. **■**

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