

When it comes to escaping it all, planning ahead usually results in a more relaxed and enjoyable time... but not always. Once in a while it's fun to know where you're going but have nothing to do when you get there. And so our recent trip to Joshua Tree began.

My husband Konrad and I left Long Beach on a fall Saturday morning with our dog Duane in the back seat, and just under two and a half hours later, via the 22, 91, 60 and 10 freeways, arrived in Joshua Tree.

We had booked our stay at Luna Mesa, a dog-friendly property under the Joshua Tree Highlands House group, and were delighted to find the one-room studio cabin comfortable and stylish with its mid-century modern décor.

Various outdoor areas were filled with comfortable seating arrangements, and neatly complemented by what can only be described as installation art pieces. Owner Frederick Fulmer explained that he and partner James Berg, both artists, planned it that way.

"We enjoy making each place special," he said. "We have tried to give attention to detail with regard to each new place. A lot of the furniture and objets d'art are from local yard sales that we have collected over the years. A lot of our friends are artists, photographers, and sculptors, so we have individual pieces of their work in the houses and cabins."

The Joshua Tree Highlands Artist Residency program, started in 2005, nurtures artistic talent from all over the world. Frederick described the program. "Artists apply for the one-month residency in July and August, with free accommodation, for their opportunity to work in the beauty of the high desert of Joshua Tree. Each year in September, there is an exhibition of all the work created during the summer at one of our local galleries. Last year's artists were from Vienna, Germany, United Kingdom, Tennessee, New Mexico, and California."

The desolate, but far from empty landscape, is the perfect place for the quiet contemplation that artists need. It provided just the right backdrop for relaxation of another kind for my husband and I, when a local massage therapist named Annica came over to our cabin for back-to-back (so to speak) treatments for both of us. While one of us was getting the knots and kinks from city life worked out, the other spent time winding down – reading, writing, drawing, thinking, watching hummingbirds quickly flit to the feeder for some sustenance, and listening to the wind whistle.

The relaxed mood continued through dinner at home (each cabin has its own kitchen), and into the deep dark of the night. A dip in the hot tub, with eyes pointed skyward to take in the breathtakingly clear Milky Way galaxy, was the perfect way to settle in for the night.

The next day we decided to get a bit more active. After a quick breakfast of a delicious cinnamon bun and coffee from the new Teacakes Bakery, we enjoyed a muscle-burning and yet strangely relaxing Pilates session with Frederick, a certified instructor, at his home studio. We loaded up



Photo courtesy of Alan Schaffer

the truck with bottles of water and snacks for us and the dog, and after a quick trip to the visitor's center to buy a permit from the Park Ranger, headed for the hills.

The Joshua Tree National Park Geology Tour was an excellent opportunity to see the incredible landscape up close and personal. Much to my husband's dismay, we didn't need to engage the four wheel drive in our truck, though the ranger had warned us we might need to. Joshua trees, California junipers, cacti of all sizes and gigantic smooth granite boulders dotted with rock climbers underscored the "High Desert" title the area has.

A return to the cabin had us cranking up the bubbles and slipping into the hot tub once more. We returned to Long Beach the next morning, fully aware that there was a lot more to discover at Joshua Tree. Frederick told us that this is a great place all year round, with each season offering something unique.

"Winters are perfect for viewing the Milky Way," he said. "It's warm during the daytime and cool at night with an abundance of star power in the sky. Don't be surprised to wake up to a blanket of snow covering the mountainside. In the springtime – March, April and May is the flowering season when all the desert flowers and cactus bloom. August is the month for the meteor showers display."

We definitely intend to make a return trip for the kind of spiritual rejuvenation we enjoyed the first time, but it's pretty likely that we won't get much further than the hot tub yet again. ■

Distance: 130 miles

Travel Time: 2 hour, 10 minutes

For further information, visit Highlands House at joshuatreehighlandshouse.com, contact the Joshua Tree Visitor Center at 760.367.5525 or go to joshuatree.org.