

Safeguarding the Spring

Preserving and honoring the rejuvenating hot waters that bubble beneath Palm Springs are key to the Tribe's vision for the future.



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The widening of Indian Avenue in downtown Palm Springs (now North Indian Canyon Drive) at the Tahquitz intersection, shown here in various stages, began in 1953. The road's expansion covered the Hot Mineral Spring, so a holding tank, or collection ring, was built to maintain access to the water.

“If there is magic on this planet, it is contained in water,” wrote anthropologist Loren Eiseley. In the heart of downtown Palm Springs, magic bubbles up at 105 degrees Fahrenheit near the corner of Indian Canyon Drive and Tahquitz Canyon Way as a natural hot mineral spring geologists have deemed “unique” in form and function. “There are lots of springs in the valley,” notes hydrogeologist Scot Stormo of Earth Systems Southwest. “However, most are associated with surface faults or where deep valleys intersect groundwater. But that’s not how this one works.” The edifice of the Agua Caliente Hot Mineral Spring is somewhat of an anomaly because “you have clean water climbing through about 800 feet of sand, silt, and gravel and discharging at the surface at 25 gallons a minute with no mineral crust to help hold [the orifice] open,” he says.

A 2011 U.S. Geological Survey study confirms that pressure pushes the water through a fractured basement complex and into the sediment filling the valley floor where a chimney-style pathway has been created by the action of the spring itself. As water comes to the surface, the movement of the water blows the silt out of the way but leaves the more permeable sand in place. Over millennia, the silt has settled around the periphery of the sand, creating a barrier that keeps the water within the chimney until it reaches the surface.

“If you had a pile of sand and put a hose at the bottom, would you expect water to come out at one spot on the ground surface?” Stormo asks. “No. It’s the fine-grain material being pushed out of the way and creating the chimney in this particular hot spring that is different and unique.”

The Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians, stewards of the spring, always knew the spring was special. The waters, also known as *Sec he* (boiling waters) in the Cahuilla language, were used for bathing and healing.

“I know Tribal members who go there and pray, and feel connected to our ancestors,” Tribal Chairman Jeff L. Grubbe says. “And whether they are making a big decision in life, or if something wasn’t going right, or if they needed to heal, not only physically but spiritually, that’s the place where a lot of members go. People go there for different reasons, but Tribal members go there for that reason alone, just to pray and think about life.”

For centuries, the hot spring was a place of ceremony for the desert’s native inhabitants. In the late 1800s, interest in the Agua Caliente Hot Mineral Spring’s restorative properties increased as settlers began planting roots in the Coachella Valley. Throughout the next 125 years, the hot spring and the area surrounding it underwent tremendous transformation, including four generations ►►



The Agua Caliente bathhouse, built in approximately 1910 in what is now downtown Palm Springs, offered direct access to the healing mineral waters.

of bathhouses, from rustic ones built in the late 1800s, 1910s, and 1930s at the site of the hot water to a glamorous hotel and spa built in the mid-20th century.

In the late 1950s when the City of Palm Springs widened what was then Indian Avenue, engineers constructed a bottomless tank with a 20-foot steel ring surrounding the spring's orifice. The original tank and ring protected the flow for six decades, but time eventually weakened the structure's integrity.

In 2014, the Tribe began demolition of the old hotel and spa that had been there for more than 50 years in preparation for a new vision for

the hot spring and its attendant land — a vision to honor and protect the magical hot waters.

The Tribe has hired JCJ Architecture of San Diego to work on creating the master plan for the future of the site.

"We have a lot of work to do," Chairman Grubbe says. "Members are talking about what we would like to see. Our members have some good ideas, and I know we'll come up with something pretty special."

Meanwhile, much work is being done to protect and preserve the hot spring for future generations.

"We want to learn as much as we can about the spring," says Tribal Chief Engineer

Rob Donnels, who acknowledges that the steel frame had exceeded its useful life. "Our goal is to take the roof off and install a new ring inside to protect the hot spring into the future."

Hydrogeologist Stormo, who is consulting on the project, says the plan is to pump water into a dry well, allowing access to the tank while not disturbing the spring's orifice or the water's natural flow. The pumped-out spring water — which comes from its own source beneath the San Jacinto Mountains — will replenish the valley's aquifer, ensuring that water is infused back into the natural environment during the restorative process. — Mona M. de Crinis