



The 105-degree mineral water of the redwood hot tub at Mercey Hot Springs attracts stressed-out city dwellers.

Have Mercey

Where, if you want history, you're soaking in it. **By Tracie Cone**

THERE ARE historic sites, like deserted battlefields and roadside markers, whose full ambience best can be appreciated by imagining what once was. Mercey Hot Springs, a time-worn oasis amid the high-desert desolation of the San Benito-Fresno County border is one of those places, yet it's also something that can be enjoyed as it is.

Just two hours from San Jose, this is a place where Hollywood starlets from the pre-choice era once quaffed the steamy, mineral-dense spring believing it would get them out of reproductive hot water. Now it's halfway through a restoration project that should restore its cabins and hotel to their original Depression-era modest grandeur. Meanwhile, a 105-degree redwood hot tub—5½ feet deep—and an 80-degree pool serve up dissolved carbonates, bo-

rates, silica, calcium and sodium to both stressed-out city dwellers, who have discovered the peaceful ambience of this hidden spa, and locals, who attribute their longevity to the reputed healing powers of mineral-rich water.

"I'm not going to say it will fix your arthritis, but a lot of people believe it does," says owner Larry Ronneberg, who two years ago gave up a stressful Silicon Valley job at Western Digital to buy the 160-acre once-thriving resort. "At a minimum, it makes you feel nice and relaxed."

Longtime regulars such as 94-year-old George Kincaid of Tres Pinos tell the story of a man who, in the 1930s, was brought to the

hot springs by ambulance, unable to walk. Kincaid says that when he returned two weeks later, the man was playing softball. The man and his wife bought the springs and

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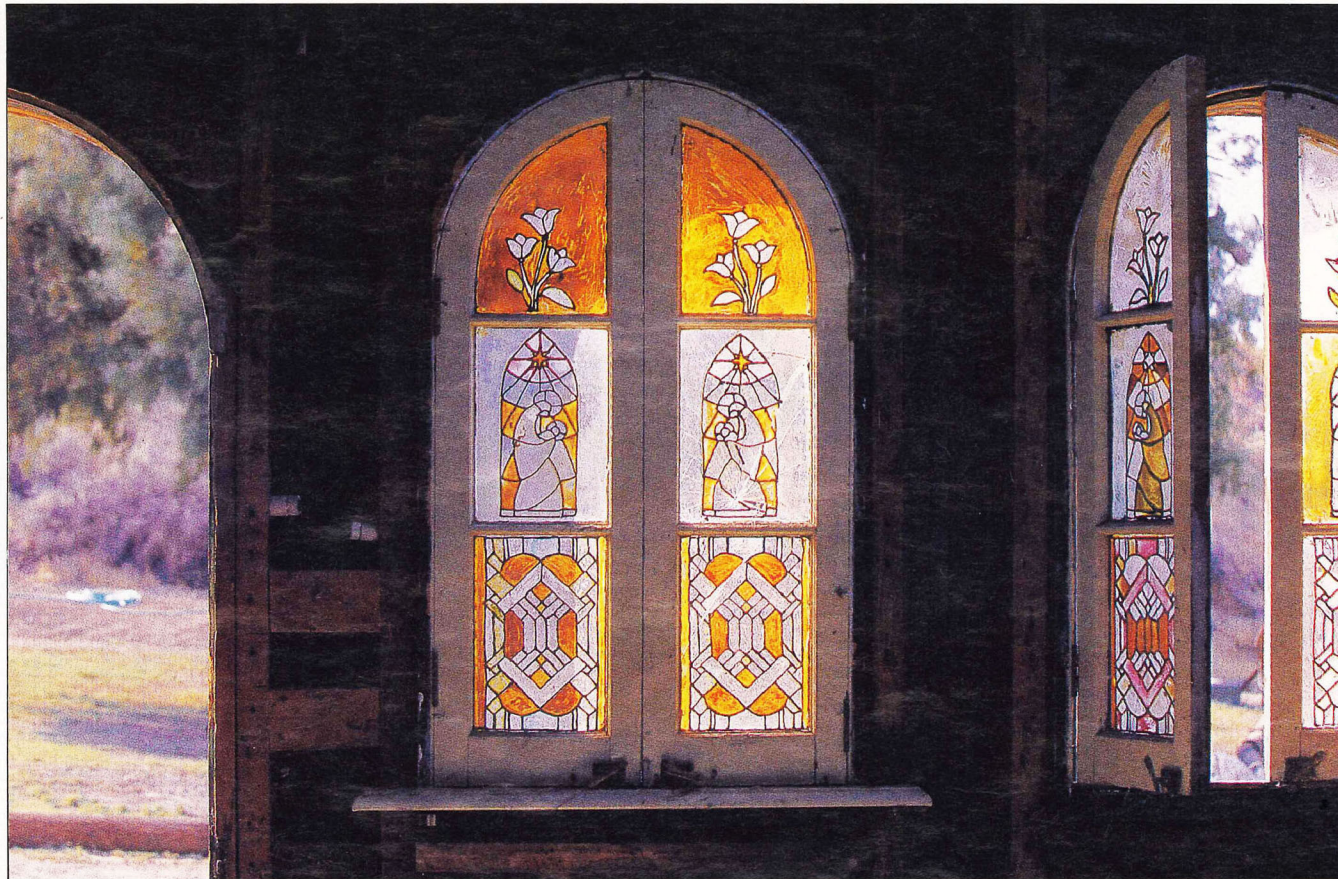
lived there until he died of a heart attack several years later. Kincaid still travels to Mercey once a week to drink the salty water while he soaks in one of the two private claw-foot tubs.

"I like to have the water sweat through me," says Kincaid, who attributes his spryness today to the hot soaks.

The spring is a quarter-mile off county road J1, the meandering byway connecting Paicines in San Benito County with Mendota in

Fresno County. There you'll find an accumulation of 12-by-12 foot wooden cabins in various states of remodeling, a well-worn hotel, a private bathhouse under renovation and a small adobe chapel with stained glass windows built in 1908 by a pharmaceutical company and from which it sold "La Merci Water" for its supposed healing powers (and its power to stop pregnancy, which locals decided was a fact after seeing that a nearby rancher's sheep could not carry lambs to term). The FDA eventually got wind of the claims and stopped water sales just before World War II.

Ronneberg and Kim Selesky, who visited one weekend from San Francisco and decided not to return to the fog, are the two-person crew slowly working to restore the cabins, available for \$55 a night, and a new RV area with full



The chapel, now under reconstruction, was built in 1908 by a pharmaceutical company that marketed the mineral water.

hookups for \$30. Already, Ronneberg has repaired all of the old plumbing and installed solar- and wind-powered generators, the only sources of electricity to this off-the-grid area. Later, they will tackle the bathhouse—where more private claw-foot tubs will be added to the two already in service—and the 1920s-era hotel. But for now their main task as word seeps out is to add enough outdoor public baths to accommodate the dozens of people who converge for their monthly special events, such as Octoberfest and November's fall harvest celebration.

Fall, spring and the dry, mild winters are the best time for visiting, but I found that soaking in the 105-degree water in the 95-degree heat of September a pleasure, as it zapped from my body every ounce of energy, including the negative kind that I turn to stress.

The place is so out-of-the-way that traveling families are unlikely to stumble in, which means the bathing areas are clothing-optional. Mercey Hot Springs is the only thing on J1 between the remote Panoche Inn, 30 minutes west, and Interstate 5, 30 minutes east, and the desolate location is what makes the journey so enjoyable. There are two ways to get there from the South Bay—the quickest and least enjoyable is to take Highway 101 south to Highway 152 and go over the Pacheco Pass to I-5, then head south to the Little Panoche Road exit and west until you

hit the well-marked entrance. Hard driving at a hurried pace seems to defeat the purpose of the trip.

The best way is to take 101 to Highway 25 through Hollister toward the Pinnacles National Monument. J1 begins at the quaint Paicines General Store, a great place to stop for a burrito, to gaze upon the eclectic inventory of hardware, groceries, motorcycle T-shirts and collectible model cars, and to fill the ice chest with your favorite cold beverage, as you will need to hydrate often in the arid region the springs occupy. J1 meanders through the Diablos, changing terrain as it passes through a pine forest and then to rolling-hill cattle country. At times, if you can ignore the patched roadway, the undeveloped Panoche Valley that leads to Mercey looks as it did when humans first gazed upon its grassy expanse. Besides a few ranches such as the Spanish Cattle Co., the only commercial establishment is the Panoche Inn, a bar frequented by hunters and locals, and open only on weekends. A mile past the Inn, J1 forks left toward Mendota and a small sign tells you it's also the way to Mercey (or Mercy as it's sometimes spelled) Hot Springs. If you're not in a hurry, the right fork leads to the old mercury mining town of New Idria and the Whimsey Mining Co., where the state's gemstone, Benitoite, is for sale.

After the fork, the road begins to rise

slightly and the hills turn to colorful sandstone. After about 20 minutes of driving (including a few stops for photos), a large sign marks the entrance to the springs, elevation 1200 feet. An abandoned mobile home in the distance and a couple of dilapidated houses tell you this place is not to be confused with the tony springs of Calistoga. But then for \$15 for a entire day of soaking and swimming (\$10 if you plan to stay two hours or less), what can you expect? I traveled with three friends on a Monday and we had the entire place to ourselves, which makes the price even more of a bargain. Besides the springs, the road was ours as well; between Paicines and Mercey, about 50 minutes of driving, we encountered only two other vehicles—a tractor hauling irrigation equipment and an RV.

"I believe it's going to be very successful some day," says Ronneberg. "So far people love it because it's peaceful and quiet, and so different geographically that it really feels like you're getting away."

Mercey Hot Springs, 62964 Little Panoche Road, Firebaugh, open daily, is not yet set up to handle more than just a handful of visitors at once. For information call (559) 283-0064. Or log on to www.merceyhotsprings.com.

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