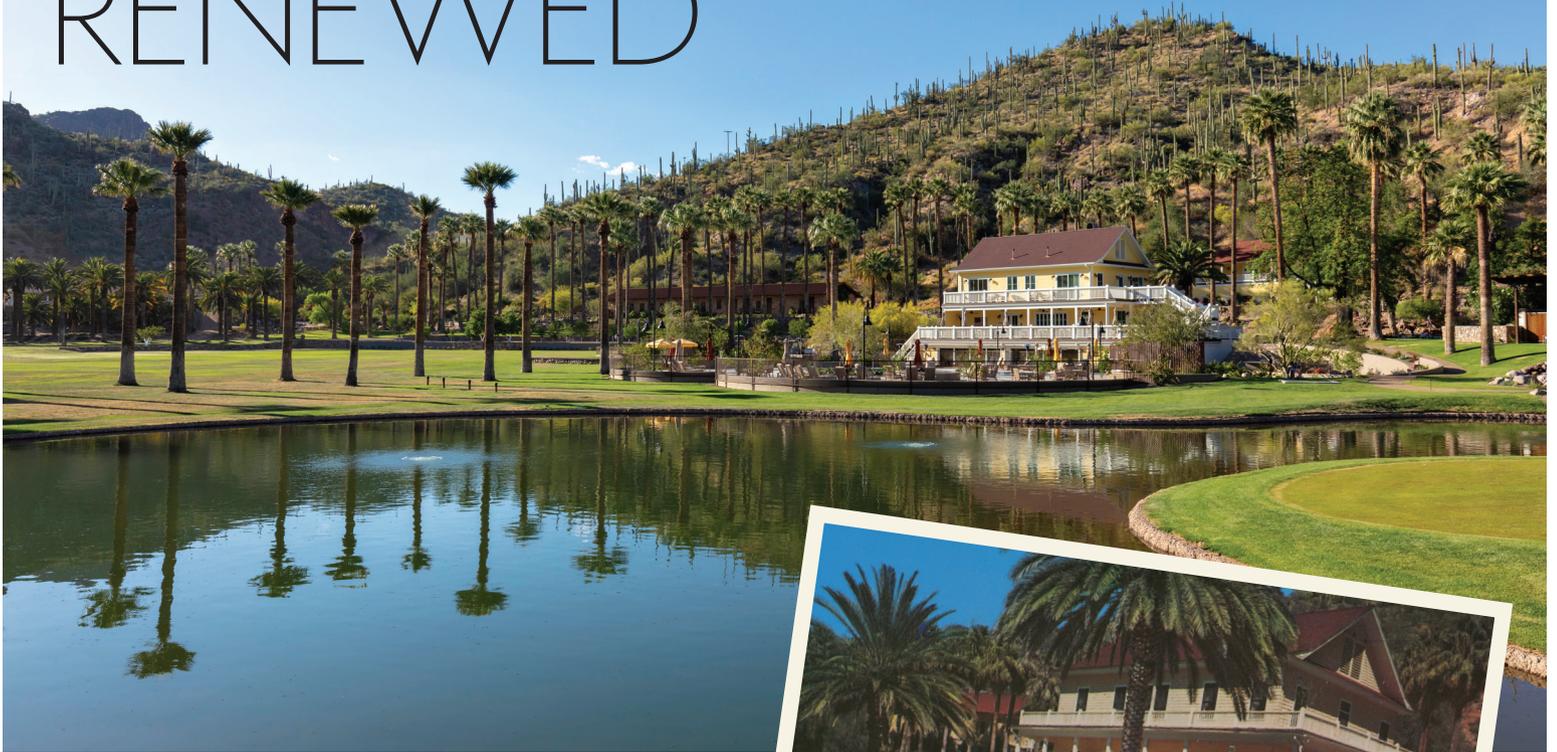


# AUTHENTIC

## AN OASIS, RENEWED



AFTER MORE THAN FOUR DECADES OF DISUSE, THE DESERT RETREAT THAT CAPTIVATED THE MAGNATES OF AMERICAN HISTORY REOPENS.

BY REBECCA L. RHOADES

A FEW MILES NORTHWEST of Lake Pleasant, just minutes off Interstate 17 and the Carefree Highway intersection, the blacktop gives way to a dirt road. The rock-strewn route meanders through craggy cliffs lined with saguaros and desert scrub. Wild burros graze on abundant greenery that flourishes on the banks of a wash. Signs of civilization are few and far between.

Suddenly, like a refreshing mirage, the mountains open up and an expansive swathe of verdant grass emerges from the rocky terrain. A dramatic allée, lined with towering date palms, winds through the premises, which is dotted with yellow-and-white

buildings more befitting a seaside locale than the dusty desert.

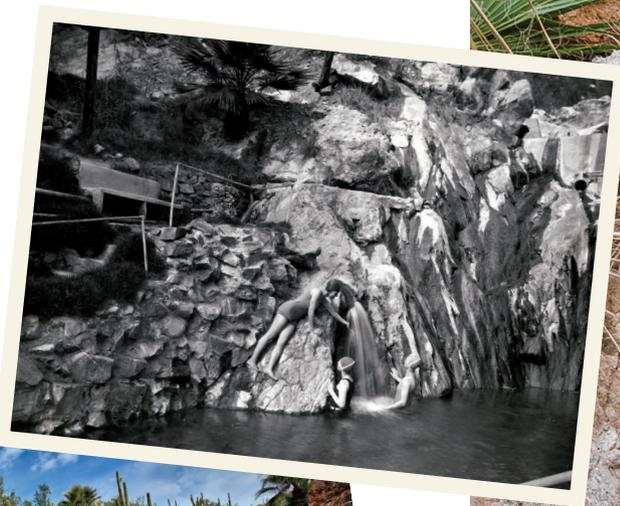
Welcome to Castle Hot Springs, the landmark resort that captivated presidents, celebrities and business tycoons for more than 80 years. After a soft opening this past spring, the property is once again welcoming guests to experience its transcendental surroundings and the crystal-clear waters that give it its name.

### A STORIED PAST

Cradled in the foothills of the Bradshaw Mountains, about 50 miles north of downtown Phoenix, Castle Hot Springs has a history as long and illustrious as Arizona



Located about an hour's drive from Phoenix, Castle Hot Springs was—and remains—a verdant winter escape. During the recent renovation, the canary-yellow lodge, built in 1902, was restored to its original glory. A postcard from the 1950s (inset) highlights the similarities between the old and new structures.



itself. For indigenous Native American tribes, it was a place to assemble, harvest saguaro fruit and plant maize and agave. They attributed the site's therapeutic powers to the hot mineral water found nearby. More than 200,000 gallons of steaming 120-degree water flow out of the rocks daily from an underground cistern into a series of rejuvenating pools.

In 1896, railroad magnate Frank M. Murphy purchased the land and built accommodations with the hopes of attracting affluent patrons from the East Coast. One early guest was Maxfield Parrish, who suffered from tuberculosis. The artist visited in the winter of 1901; he created 19 paintings during his stay.

"Castle Hot Springs started at the turn-of-the-century as a place for people to receive mineral cures. Guests would specifically come out here to treat asthma and respiratory illnesses," says Kristin Atwell Ford. A local filmmaker, she has been documenting the history, allure and now rebirth of the property. "Medicine changed, but folks kept returning for the Western experience."

Soon the resort was charming some of America's wealthiest and most well-known families, including the Rockefellers, Roosevelts, Wrigleys, Vanderbilts, Cabots and Carnegies. With all the comforts of a

proper Victorian resort at their beck and call, society's elite would spend their days golfing, playing tennis and exploring the rugged, untamed landscape.

"Guests could get out on their horses and experience that mythic territory of the West," says Atwell Ford. "It was a dichotomy of this rough, real cowboy adventure, and then going back and taking a soak in the pool and getting dressed up for dinner."

As the years passed, the list of who's-who continued to grow. John F. Kennedy recuperated at the resort during World War II. Local families such as the O'Connors and Goldwaters were frequent guests in the '50s and '60s.

In the early 1970s, Mae Sue and Franz Talley, owners of the Arizona Biltmore and founders of aerospace engineering firm Talley Industries, bought the property. "When I first visited the resort, I was surprised and fascinated to discover a hidden treasure where Arizona's history had been preserved, not as a reconstruction but as the real deal—a place where you could genuinely feel connected to the heritage of the state's past," says the couple's son, Steven Talley. "No one who has ever visited has been immune to the power of the towering mountains, the magical revelation of the hot springs hidden away in its cliffs, and the silence

**ABOVE** Underground reservoirs feed about 200,000 gallons of pure mineral water daily into three hot pools. Water flows from the rocks at 120 degrees, making it the hottest nonvolcanic natural spring in the world. **TOP LEFT** Early guests sought out the springs' purported healing powers. Bathers in the 1920s explore the upper hot pool, which remains a steady 105 degrees year-round. **BOTTOM LEFT** Temperatures in the middle soaking pool hover in the mid-90s. The surrounding desert landscape remains virtually unchanged more than a century after the pools were developed.

**RIGHT** The design of the lodge's public spaces was inspired by the Arts and Crafts movement and includes handcrafted tile and copper accents. A cozy fireplace sitting area offers the perfect spot to enjoy a handcrafted libation from the adjacent bar. **BELOW** "The trail rides at the resort were legendary," says documentarian Kristin Atwell Ford. "Guests could have a true Western adventure in a luxury setting."



During the middle of the 20th century, guests enjoyed a full schedule of recreational activities. Poolside fashion shows were a popular form of entertainment.

that clears away everything between a human being and his or her soul."

The Talleys' stewardship was short-lived. In the early morning of Dec. 11, 1976, a fire tore through the historic Palm House, destroying it as well as some nearby smaller buildings. The resort wouldn't see another paying customer for more than 40 years.

In 1982, Atwell Ford's mother, Sherri Chessen, known in the Valley as Miss Sherri on TV's "Romper Room," purchased Castle Hot Springs with a dream of transforming it into a luxury spa retreat. "She had a vision that it was going to be a place where you came and reconnected with yourself, where you had a massage, got some health treatments and maybe dropped a few pounds," Atwell Ford says. "It was going to be a nexus of beauty and healing."

Zoning issues prevented Chessen from achieving her goal.

Brothers Steve and Charles Trainer, heirs to the Schlitz Brewing fortune, made a run at the property in 1987 but were also unsuccessful in getting it reopened. Then, in 2014, local business owners and philanthropists Mike and Cindy Watts bought it with plans to return the land to its previous glory.

## RISING FROM THE ASHES

The Watts embarked on a three-year, \$25-million restoration and expansion that included rebuilding the historic lodge, cottage and stone house and adding a number of guest bungalows.

"The property was really in disrepair, but you could see the potential," says Doug Edwards, who along with his brothers Kevin and Barry, restored the original structures and designed and built the new additions.

"Mike had a vision for the resort, and he didn't want to go too far off the theme that was already established," Edwards adds. The lodge was torn down and rebuilt. An exterior staircase was added and, on the ground level, a floor-to-ceiling wall of pocketing glass now connects the dining room, which shares the same footprint as the original from 100 years ago, to the pool patio, providing a true indoor-outdoor experience.

Unlike the opulent vacation cottages and resorts championed by the industrialists and businessmen of the Gilded Age, Castle Hot Springs' decor, according to historic documents, favored the Arts and Crafts style that prospered in the late 1800s and early 1900s.

Interior designer Valerie Borden sought to establish that aesthetic in the lodge and historic cottage. "I didn't have any interior photographs, so I created my own interpretation of what they might have looked like, based off of old brochures and a few written accounts of what was popular at the time," she says.



Mission-style furnishings, copper and wicker accents, and Navajo-inspired textiles combine for a comfortable, organic look. In the lodge, clawfoot tubs that were original to the building were restored and plumbed with mineral water from the springs.

The 17 Sky View Cabins and 12 Spring Bungalows offer a more contemporary setting, with concrete flooring, leather furnishings and modern area rugs that interpret vintage patterns. "This is a living property. It's been around for more than 120 years, and we wanted to respect and consider that history with every selection we made," says Borden. Framed vintage photographs and ephemera connect the present to the past. Expansive patios on both accommodations feature open-air tubs for a more intimate bathing experience beneath the stars.

"It's so rare in life that something comes back from the dead, that something that has been lost and you think is gone forever is resurrected in a way that is an improvement on the original," says Atwell Ford.

## GOURMET GETAWAY

Agronomist Ian Beger oversees the property's ever-expanding gardens. "Our goal is to grow things that you can't get in the store," he explains. More than 300 varieties of fruits, vegetables and herbs are cultivated on-site and served in the restaurant. The menu changes daily, based on what fresh ingredients are available.

"We want people to experience what vegetables and produce should taste like," says executive chef Christopher Brugman. "When you're eating food fresh from the farm, it's really kind of eye-opening."

The large garden fans out from the southwest corner of the lodge, offering staff instant access to ingredients. Microgreens and edible flowers are picked fresh daily for use as garnishes. Produce that's not consumed immediately is pickled, cured or fermented, preserving the flavors for out-of-season use. Herbs and flowers are dried for use in teas and simple syrups. "It's a chef's dream to be able to take 20 steps outside your kitchen and harvest food for that night's dishes," Brugman says.

Beger and Brugman hope that as their farm programming grows, Castle Hot Springs will become a favored destination of gourmands. "In the four months that we were open this past spring, we saw it turn into more of a culinary destination. I think what makes us different is the intimacy factor. It's all about that connection with the food," says Brugman.

Beger agrees. "I do see our dining as being a huge driving force with our guests. We're really trying to be creative with it and take it to new levels." But he's quick to give praise to what made Castle Hot Springs famous in the first place. "We're all here because of the springs," he says. "They provide the heartbeat for this place."

**For more information, see Sources on Page 143.**

**ABOVE LEFT** Meals feature produce that is grown in the resort's on-site gardens. "What comes out of the ground that day is what we put on the menu," says executive chef Christopher Brugman. Edible flowers, harvested twice daily, add a finishing touch to dishes, such as this salad of farm greens. **TOP** The 12 Spring Bungalows are Castle Hot Springs' most luxurious accommodations. Modern in design, each features a large patio, complete with a fireplace, and a private outdoor bathing area that's fed directly from the hot springs above. **ABOVE** "We wanted to keep the decor clean and simple," says interior designer Valerie Borden of the newly built Spring Bungalows. "It's a look that honors the history of the resort but appeals to today's traveler."