

## **Water babies**

**Old hippies never die, they relocate to California's Harbin Hot Springs. Mary Hampshire meets the new age drop-outs in their natural surroundings**

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### **The Big Issue In The North**

British actress Jo Ridley is enjoying a naked lunch in the sweltering heat. The 29-year-old is completely starkers as she tucks into a salad sandwich. "I love being naked," enthuses Ridley, who has renamed herself Iona, twisting her long blond hair. "Nudity is an affirmation of freedom, not an invitation, " she adds firmly. "It's not a sexual thing."

Welcome to Harbin Hot Springs, an 'eclectic spiritual community' in California. It's a magnet for middle class downshifters and descendants of the Flower Power age. "We've dropped out of all walks of life," explains spokeswoman Treasure Miller. She was a high flying advertising executive for Revlon International in New York, and later trained as a psychiatric nurse before joining Harbin 12-years-ago. "There were also two marriages along the way," smiles the bronzed 58-year-old, between sips of coffee on a redwood sun deck with arresting views. "Many of us reached the pinnacle of success in our early years and found it did not satisfy us, so we sought an alternative lifestyle."

At Harbin, residents and holiday makers shed more than suburban stress and their birth names. Clothing is optional, invites the brochure, around the pools, sundecks, sauna, and trails. You might assume, on that basis about 50% of people retain some modesty. But you're about as likely to spot a bikini at this new age retreat, two hours drive from San Francisco, as Bill Clinton's chastity belt. The open air pools, showers, changing rooms and bathrooms are unisex. The only thing most people wear is a catatonic look.

It's a bit of a shock to the uninitiated. But you either lock yourself in your room and kid yourself you only came for the rest. Or you confine yourself to the walking trails where people tend to be fully clothed, so avoiding the mineral springs. Which would be stupid - as they are the main attraction. Alternatively, you get over your nudity phobia on the premise you'll look dafter clothed. Besides, the weather's much more agreeable than the British climate.

Based on 1160 acres, in the mountains north of the Napa Valley vineyards, and originally inhabited by the Miwok tribe, Harbin Hot Springs' main attraction is its healing mineral springs. Believed to release medicinal materials and change the composition of bodily fluids, the springs contain, for example, sulphur, sodium, potassium, iron and arsenates. During the 19th century, the site was a convalescence home for wealthy Victorians. They took to the waters for relaxation, and they were used internally and externally to treat specific ailments. As the 21st century dawns, hydrotherapy still pulls in the punters.

Today's visitors, city types; men and women in equal measure; and aged mainly between 25 and 60, are lured by the detoxifying hot and cold plunge pools, said to rebalance the body. They are open 24 hours. Talking is frowned on around the pools. Posters state sexual advances are not acceptable, giving extension numbers for security staff should people not abide by decency rules. Overall, the atmosphere feels reasonably safe and meditative. There's also a natural water swimming pool, a sauna and an assortment of complementary therapies on offer, as well as yoga classes and personal development workshops. Accommodation is simple and comfortable, various grades of wooden cabins or camping.

The retreat is run by more than 100 residents; ex-military, finance, health care and artist types who live on a small allowance and stay for a few months or many years. "My older brother thought I was completely mad giving everything up to come here," continues Miller, who emits a relaxed confidence. "But he respects my decision. "People come for the water, the land, the relaxed atmosphere and the open heartedness," she gushes. "It's not a place where people come to oggle. The vibration here is good. We work very hard on that. There are security patrols to monitor behaviour around the pools. Nudity is about respecting the body and is a great equaliser. "

Harbin Hot Springs is owned by Heart Consciousness Church - a 'non dogmatic church' where people are 'free to pursue their paths and goals' . HCC was established in 1975, is run by a board of directors, and operates Harbin Hot Springs as a non-profit organisation. HCC is not a cult, assures Treasure. She explains: "We do not follow any single spiritual orientation but respect one another's eclectic beliefs."

Named after James Harbin, believed to have settled on the land around 1856, the resort has been through several reincarnations also including a boxer training camp and a hippie commune. Known as Harbinger University, it was populated by the Flower Power generation, from the Haight Ashbury in San Francisco. According to Ellen Klages' book: 'Harbin Hot Springs, Healing Waters, Sacred Land,' the commune advocated experimentation with drugs, Eastern religion and rock and roll and by 1968 was the weekend party place for San Francisco hippies. The Grateful Dead played in the restaurant. "Oh, there were police raids; people made acid in the kitchen; there was a huge hepatitis outbreak. The place was quarantined," explains Julie Adams, 54, an art teacher and single mum who moved in 1984 from Colorado and now helps run the general office.

Its crazy past lives on in the minds of the nearest local community; a quiet and conservative place called Middletown, inhabited by farmers and ranchers, where the Greyhound bus drops visitors off. "Unfortunately, that's what Middletown remembers. But we are trying to build relations and convince them we are a sane and productive bunch," adds Adams. "Some of us are ageing hippies," she laughs. "But we are hippies who've found commerce. We give the town money to support education, parades and festivals. But as yet, not that many locals visit to bathe."

Residents' work includes marketing the retreat, maintaining the grounds, running the shops and cafes and managing the pools and visitors. They still get stressed, points out Miller. But the environment is conducive to a balanced lifestyle with the emphasis on personal growth as opposed to the American dream of making money and acquiring possessions, for example. "I haven't come to Harbin to make a living," she says, "I've come to make a life."

Jo Ridley, who used to star in the British sitcom *Me and My Girl* and moved to the States several years ago, is taking a few months out before training in midwifery. "I came here to immerse myself in nature. It's a refined slice of life," she continues. "Obviously you do get personality clashes. And when you fall out nothing is secret. It can become a bit of a soap opera. "But community living helps you learn about yourself and others. This is a conducive atmosphere to flourish," adds Ridley, who has been based at Harbin for a year and lives on a campsite.

Elizabeth Ritchie, 48, from Virginia, beams from ear to ear and looks a picture of health. Bronzed, relaxed and dressed in shorts and a t-shirt she explains how she gave up military life as a lieutenant corporal army nurse after 20 years. "I wasn't married. I had no children and I thought: 'What next?' I'd spent a lot of my life with disease, helping people who were ill or who'd suffered trauma. For example, I was part of Operation Desert Storm. My work was stressful and I knew it had taken its toll. I was ready for change. I'd visited Harbin annually since 1989 on vacation. I always felt tremendous peace. I loved the quiet, the fresh water and air and I always enjoyed lots of sleep. I contemplated all this as I was relaxing in the pools one visit," says Ritchie, who has been at Harbin for three years and works as a medical officer. "Then I met a man who recruits residents and decided to stay. He later became my husband." She adds: "It was strange at first. Previously, my whole identity was based on being a colonel and having authority. I was wrapped up with achieving. Now I have more balanced life."

As she talks, three deer brush through the undergrowth. It is common to see them feasting on the grass and nosing around the pools, during the quiet hours. This is how the retreat differs from holistic hotels in nearby Calistoga, a well-known and upmarket spa town, packed with establishments offering various body treatments. Harbin is not sanitised, posh or polished. Its attraction is its rustic, unpretentious setting; like a vast outdoor playground with space to move, numerous walking trails. Most visitors are from neighbouring cities or towns in California. Others travel from the East Coast or are foreigners who discover the place as part of a US tour.

Despite its new age slant, Harbin is visited by down-to-earth folk who want to enjoy simple and beautiful surroundings. One such couple was Ron, 43, a car salesman, and his wife Gina, 42, from Stockton, California, who have three kids. "I've visited five or six times," says Gina. "I heard about it through a friend. When I first came here I did feel a little intimidated. One of my friends couldn't move. She was locked with fear when she tried to go naked. I come from a conservative background. Once I let go of my inhibitions, there was no stopping me. In Stockton, some people do think I'm a bit weird coming here. But she

adds: "It's refreshing to escape home life. Our first time felt so relaxing, we wondered why we hadn't visited sooner."