LAND OF THE LEATHERNECKS

by
SLIM BARNARD

Courtesy of your Southern California Ford Dealers

MAP NO. 123

EXPENSES

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TRAVELOGUE

High Desert

Lying as a buffer between the Mojave and Colorado Deserts is the mountain-ringed Joshua Tree National Monument country known to dwellers and visitors alike as the "High Desert."

For more than a century the arid terrain, dotted with palm-tree fringed watering holes, multitudinous cacti and criss-crossed by canyons was the eminence domain of gold prospectors. When Fremont returned from his first exploration of Southern California in 1844, his report was not exactly complimentary.

"The contents of this great basin are yet to be examined. That it is peopled we know, but miserably and sparsely. From all that I heard and saw I should say that humanity appears in its lowest form and in its most elemental state!" Thus spoke Fremont to the War Department in Washington.

However, increasing gold mining activity plus the fact that the "great basin" as he put it lay athwart the main immigration route leading from the east into Southern California quickly altered the picture. By the 1870's the railroad paralleled the wagon-train and stage coach routes; a desert "resort" named Palm Springs came into being just south and east of the high country and a community called Twenty-nine Palms, probably boisterously named by prospectors, was born on the northern foothills of the San Bernardino Mountains.

Land of the Leathernecks

Just a few years ago Twenty-nine Palms was at the end of a paved road going east. Although the climate and settings were ideal for "fun in the sun" the desert community consisted of a few shack-like structures and outlines of boulevards and streets optimistically marked on the desert floor by exuberant real estate developers.

The population-explosion of

(Continued on back)
World War 2 (which still is in progress) changed the picture radically. Newcomers to the Southland quickly discovered that nearby fishing at the Salton Sea, water skiing on the Colorado River and snow sliding at nearby mountain resorts made Twenty-nine Palms an ideal location for family-living or family "togetherness" as far as recreation is concerned. The community grew and developed a personality of its own which many prefer to the neighboring glitter and glamour of Palm Springs!

However, the area's biggest impetus came when the United States Marine Corps marked out more than 900 square miles of adjacent territory in 1958 and brought into being the Twenty-nine Palms Marine Corps Base. Larger in area than two cities of Los Angeles and able to accommodate the USMC bases of Camp Pendleton, Camp Lejune and Quantico twice over, the "high desert" battle training area has given Fremont's "basin" a new identification—"Land of the Leathernecks."

Here officers, non-commissioned officers and enlisted men perfect themselves in the deployment of the tools of their profession. At all hours of the day or night can be heard the rumbling of tanks and self-propelled guns; the cracking of rifle fire; rippling bursts of machine-gunnery; the earth-shaking detonations of exploding shells and rockets and the whine and snares of jet aircraft and troop-carrying, armed helicopters.

However, not all is grim and ceaseless preparation for combat. The base also boasts ample recreational facilities, a championship military band which is the pride not only of the Corps but Twenty-nine Palms citizenry. When your HAPPY WANDERERS arrived here, following a carefree drive, the Marines played the role of gracious host, indeed.

Coincidentally with our visit was that of a group of Southern California newsboys. Under the personal guidance of the commanding general and his staff we were given "royal treatment" which included an impressive sign on the Base theater's marquee which, in effect, said: "Welcome aboard Mr. and Mrs. Slim Barnard."

Joshua Tree National Monument

Bordering on the Base and Twenty-nine Palms is the magnificent Joshua Tree National Monument of the Department of the Interior National Park Service. Your HAPPY WANDERERS entered the Monument at Cottonwood Spring which features camping facilities, a Visitor Center, restrooms and picnic facilities. The Park Ranger in charge is friendly and accommodating. Virtually around the corner from Cottonwood is the Cholla Cactus Garden, located in the colorful Pinto Basin.

The Cholla (pronounced CHOHL-YAH) is one of the prettiest of the cacti family but it has extremely sharp thorns. Although there are walks through the "garden" the thorns seem to leap out at passersby—hence the nickname "Jumping Cactus." Discretion is the better part of valor for strolling through this desert Eden. Booklets explaining the Cholla and other species of cacti including Joshua trees are available for ten cents—should one elect to keep the booklet. Otherwise the use of the booklets is free.

Twenty-nine Palms—Cultural Center

In the hamlet itself we obtained comfortable overnight motel lodgings in a following morning we dropped in at the ornate studio-home of John Hilton, one of the Southwest's most respected landscape artists as well as a connoisseur of semi-precious stones and pre-Columbian art. An old friend of your HAPPY WANDERERS, John let us "peek" over his shoulder while he put finishing touches to a new canvas of the "High Desert" country.

Old-time West

Was brought back to your HAPPY WANDERERS when we visited the "self-made" ranch and self-operated mine of Bill Keys, an 83-year-old ex-Montanan who was born, so he claims, "within spittin' distance of where General Custer was massacred" at the Battle of Little Big Horn fought against Sioux Indians. The Old Bill, a walking history of the Southwest, has built three dams, thereby creating three crystal-clear lakes on his property close to the tiny cross-road village of Joshua Tree.

He did admit that he was getting a "mite tired" and we could sympathize with how he felt: to build and maintain his buildings, fencing, water supply and mine is enough to tire a brigade let alone one single spry octogenarian. A colorful person, his friendly attitude is in sharp contrast to his past. At one time he went to prison for shooting an adversary in self-defense. However, as Bill put it: "He drew fast but I aimed best!"

Golden Egg Mine

Was the last "port of call" in your HAPPY WANDERERS journey through high desert country. Situated about 18 miles from Twenty-nine Palms is the Golden Egg Mine located on a ridge. Here, we met with Roy, its owner, another octogenarian named Carl Schapel who came here from Berlin in 1903. Now in his 80's, Carl knows all there is to know about gold-mining in the area.

Like his not-too near neighbor Bill Keys, Carl also has done an incredible "one-man" job of building, maintaining and perpetuating a gold mine. A favorite of nearby townsfolk, marines and itinerant visitors, Carl found out that the milk of human kindness truly overflows during adversity. On Christmas Day of 1961 his all stove exploded and burned his little world to the ground.

Folks from all around including Leathernecks flocked to the Golden Egg. Within the period of a week-end the house, buildings and all else were restored and the old-fashioned "House Raisting." When Carl told your HAPPY WANDERERS about this miracle, his eyes misted and, to be honest, so did ours.

He loves visitors. So if you follow our trail be sure to drop in on him.

SEASON: September to June. However, the high desert summer is actually pleasant so a visit to this area is feasible the year round.

WHAT TO WEAR: Casual sports clothes, comfortable walking footgear for men and women. During the winter "season" it can grow chilly so sweaters and "rough-going" coats are recommended.

“The Happy Wanderers”

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