



# Home on the Range

Enjoy the perfect date—and a great escape from everyday life—deep in the heart of Death Valley

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY  
BY JEFFREY LIBBY

**M**e and the 18-wheeler in my rear-view mirror are getting real intimate. And we're getting passed like we're standing still. There are no two ways about it. Limos and squadrons of motorbikes are roaring by, humping up the mountain pass to Pahrump. Yes, my pick-up's only doing 45 mph, but I've got the pedal to the metal.

That's city life. All packed tight, all pissed off and no way to talk about it. I can count the teeth on the truck's chrome grill. But instead of getting flustered, I'm choosing, like an Olympian, to visualize my finish line: a simple cottage with a screened-in porch, plunked down in a hidden oasis in Death Valley. It sits under cottonwoods, amid a few side-lawn figs and 1,000 date palms planted in rows that look out to a range of bald, ice cream mountains. It's called the Ranch House Inn, a bed-and-breakfast at the China Ranch Date Farm. It's a serene place where, staring into the great beyond, I've engaged in long, rambling conversations with perfect strangers. Yes, talking. It was even easier to listen.

But right now, I'm breasting the Spring Mountains, elevation 5,493

feet. I'm listening to a gear drop, hearing the truck engine punched full throttle, watching it roar past me.

It's the last vehicle that will pass me on this trip. Actually, it's the last vehicle I'll see on this trip. I've turned off Route 160 onto the Old Spanish Trail Road. It's a two-lane, 32-mile stretch that cuts through yucca plants and Joshua trees before flat-lining into all of the air-brushed ranges. With the entire stretch of roadway to myself, it's as though I've entered another country.

As the sun dies out behind the silhouettes of the Ibex Hills and Black Mountains, I leave pavement for a narrow dirt road that descends in hairpin turns past statuesque, crumbling hoodoos and the first of the ice cream mountains. Top speed is 10 mph. Even then, the wheels swim some as I pilot through sediment left from a 12-million-year-old dried-up lake bed.

Then I turn the corner, and I'm there. It's an oasis.

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Shelter comes in the form of 1,000 date palms and a quaint inn.

