

Retro Done Right

Despite my habit of lodging in quirky places around the country, the most remarkable accommodations I've recently experienced are surprisingly a mere few hours from my home. These digs feature such an overwhelming dose of authentic vintage ambiance that I had the rare sensation of actually stepping back in time—or at least stumbling onto a stunning movie set. The experience exuded the otherworldliness many of us seek on vacation ... except I was traveling for work.

My assignment was to collect groundwater data at remote locations in Arizona along the Mexican border. In carrying out the project, my coworker, Liz, and I enjoyed dramatic vistas of pristine Chihuahua Desert landscapes, searched out windmills—those lonely, rusting pieces of Americana—from which to collect samples, and encountered an individual clad in body armor stepping out of the underbrush and clutching a semiautomatic rifle. Fortunately



he appeared uninterested in us but I didn't let up on the truck's gas pedal to determine whether his affiliation was with the Border Patrol, local militia, or drug traffickers. There would be additional hydrology tasks the following summer day so Liz and I headed to our reserved lodging in the nearby town of Bisbee.

Although the town's current population is about 6,000 residents, back in the early 1900s Bisbee was the largest city between St. Louis and San Francisco and even boasted its own stock exchange. The town's wealth was due to rich mineral deposits, especially copper ore, that were extracted from over 2,500 miles of tunnels and a huge, man-made divot named the Lavender Pit.



Bisbee's declining ore production ended abruptly when Phelps Dodge closed down operations in 1975. Although some expected it to become a modern day ghost town, artists began settling in, attracted by its inherent beauty, historical ambiance, and low cost of living. Bisbee reinvented itself as a chic place to vacation, with nary a fast food franchise or convenience store found in the town proper; it's a very unusual place.

Tourists can explore the steep, hilly town by meandering along the many public staircases that provide access to homes and businesses that creep up the slopes of the Mule Mountains. These pathways even form the basis of an annual five kilometer race that includes going up and down 1,034 stairs. Most visitors stay in one of the many bed and breakfasts that have given new life to historic buildings ranging from schools to miners' lodges. Our destination that afternoon, however, was a trailer park opened in 1927 along U.S. Highway 80 that connected Savannah, Georgia, with San Diego, California.

At twilight we pulled up at the Shady Dell's office, a small but striking art deco structure highlighted in green neon tubing. An eye-catching mural advertising the trailer park was painted on the south wall. Messages were posted on the door indicating our trailers were ready for occupancy. Mine was not the compact, kidney-shaped trailer I had expected but the luxurious Royal Mansion. An attached sticky note read, "We've upgraded you!"

While planning our field work, Liz suggested staying at the Shady Dell since she had recently read about it in *Sunset Magazine*. We had each reserved a trailer that was priced below our travel allowance; I snapped up the economical 1954 Crown while allowing her the 1957 El Rey since it came equipped with a toilet and sink. While making my reservation online, I added in the comment section that I was the editor of the *SCA Journal* and eager to talk with the owners. My previous attempts at such name dropping had only resulted in blank stares; this was rarified terra indeed where I was elevated, at least for an evening, to regal status.

We left the pickup truck at the Shady Dell's office and walked on site, not wanting to disturb the park's intriguing atmosphere. Scattered throughout were nine fully restored

shiny aluminum travel trailers, a 1947 Airporter bus finding new life as a "Polynesian Palace," and a 1947 Chris Craft named the "Rita D. Yacht." The grounds were deserted but there was an aural backdrop of low decibel, rockabilly music mysteriously emanating from a multitude of unseen locations. I knew none of the songs but guessed they were from the 1950s or perhaps a modern recording done in the style of that decade.

My home for the evening was a 33-foot long, Spartan Classic Royal Mansion manufactured in 1951 in Tulsa, Oklahoma. The sleek trailer was parked on a small lot surrounded by a white picket fence. A red rose was in bloom adjacent to the entrance; nearby two vintage chairs were situated on a piece of Astroturf. An evaporative cooler was chugging along on the trailer's roof.

Liz left to explore her domicile and I stepped into my chilled trailer, surprised by its spaciousness. Moving from the hitch towards the rear, there was a living room, full kitchen, partial bathroom, and a full-sized bed all luxuriously appointed with vintage furnishings. The living room



Opposite page: Western style performance art; Shady Dell Office; Liz bummed at Doug's upgrade.

Right: Jennifer at Dot's Diner.

featured leopard-print carpeting, deco-style lights, a velvet sofa, phonograph, and a black and white television that was surreptitiously connected to a hidden DVD player. The living space was accessorized with classic vinyl records, campy 1950s movies, vintage reading material including Bisbee High School yearbooks, and board games such as Yahtzee. It was as if everything cool my parents had donated to the Salvation Army had mysteriously found its way to this trailer. No detail was overlooked and nothing was bolted down; every item called out to be enjoyed!

The kitchen was similarly stocked with wares of yesteryear including a classy cocktail shaker set and an electric percolator that I would figure how to use the following morning. On the kitchen table was a reproduction radio from which this strange rockabilly music emanated. Initially thinking it was permanently tuned to some funky pirate station operating across the border in Mexico, I



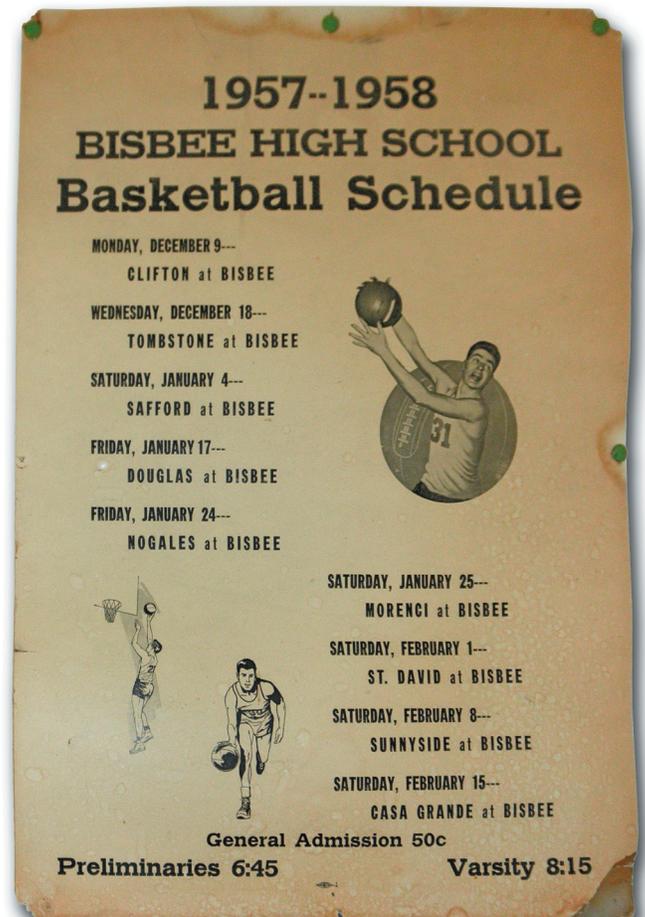
This page: Royal Mansion trailer; Royal Mansion trailer barware; 1957 Bisbee High School basketball schedule.

learned later it was an iPod feed. Out of habit, I opened the cookie jar and was surprised to find a little package of Fig Newton's.

Feeling a bit dazed at discovering vintage treasures in every nook and cranny, I exited the trailer to finally encounter another resident. Instead of destroying the ambiance, the fresh face only added to the park's time warp qualities. Outfitted in period dress, vintage hairstyle, and red lipstick she would have looked at home starring alongside Cary Grant in a vintage Hitchcock movie.

Introducing herself as one of the owners, Jennifer happily agreed to pose in front of Dot's, the 1957 Valentine diner on the premises that had its original home on the corner of Ventura and Topanga Canyon Boulevards in Los Angeles. Although the 10-seat diner was closed the next morning, Jen recommended the nearby Bisbee Breakfast Club that's housed in a former Rexall Pharmacy. It was a stroll that would take us along a commercial block untouched by time that included a Texaco, a Sprouse Reitz storefront, a snooker parlor and a stunning auto parts mural, all surviving in a state of suspended animation.

Before departing the next day, I had the chance to compliment Jennifer, her husband, Justin, and their long-time manager, Ken, on their attention to detail in creating a living diorama of post-World War II life. All





This page: Royal Mansion trailer logo; Justin and Jennifer; Dot's Diner.

were engaging but what I recollect most was Justin noting that occasionally they are asked by patrons why there isn't an Elvis or Marilyn Monroe-themed trailer. His response was that they weren't into clichéd, hokey nostalgia but thrived on presenting the Real McCoy. In a country filled with such predictable period offerings, kudos to them for crafting such an authentic place that's exponentially more fun. Circa 2011, the roadside just doesn't get any better than this. For more information, see www.theshadydell.com/. •

