TOWN AT A crossroad

As a record-breaking number of visitors pass through Joshua Tree, residents are torn by nostalgia and hopes for the future.

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Downtown Joshua Tree is only about four blocks long, but you can't miss it if you're paying attention to the signs on Highway 62 that urge speeding traffic to "Slow down, and enjoy the view."

On one end is a giant, roadside tortoise sculpture, guarding the laundromat that everyone wishes would get cleaned up. Just past the other is a creosote-ridden dirt lot where cars, RVs and trailers are lined up with "For Sale" signs at dusk.

The now-closed JT Trading Post beckons in psychedelic silence. Teenagers shoot the shit and stare at passers-by in front of Castañeda's Mexican Food. And Crossroads Café bustles with as many hipsters and hikers as there are flyers on the outside bulletin board. "Vinyl Records 4 Sale," reads one. On another: "Seeking … FREE FORM horn player in the attitude of Lester Bowie or Archie Shepp to play duo or trio with drummer in the attitude of Jack DeJohnette, Elvin Jones, Sonny Murray. I have a space to jam."

On Tuesdays around 6:30 p.m., cars kick up dust as they load into the dirt lot outside the Joshua Tree Saloon. Here, bikers, old-timers and tourists have chowed down on quarter-pound cheeseburgers for more than 30 years. An orange glow drenches the army bus parked opposite a line of Harleys as Teddy Quinn – the "unofficial mayor of Joshua Tree" – strolls up with his guitar to host an open mic. Drinks are poured, songs sung. Then locals head back to their homes nestled in dark coves lighted only by the moon and the Milky Way. A coyote's howl pierces the night.

But these days, new sounds are beginning to echo across the desert, where sound travels far. The buzz of a drone breaks the harrowing quiet, tires squeal on dusty back roads. Shovels slice into the crust to install movie sets on land that, to actors, might be "in the middle of nowhere" but is actually someone else's home.

"For the most part, Joshua Tree residents are very friendly and very considerate, and they don't like to make trouble for their neighbors," says real estate agent Phil Spinelli of JT Village Realty. "But I can see the friction building, and I think it's an indication of a really big change in the nature of the community here."

With Joshua Tree National Park on track to hit a record-breaking 3 million visitors this year, a new wave of tourists is descending on this unincorporated area – population about 7,500. And while they come for the landscape, most newcomers simply don't know what they don't know about the desert, and those who call it home. "It's been trendy for a while, but it's been trendy at a pace that people can keep up with," says Dan O'Dowd, a video producer who created the Facebook page, Joshua Tree's Totally Unofficial Tourism Bureau.

Today, residents face the task of educating this new generation about the desert ecosystem – and how Instagram filters can create a distorted view. As it stretches to accommodate increased water use, a burgeoning housing market and an explosion of short-term vacation rentals, the town itself is at a crossroad: Is it possible to balance nostalgia and reality in a national park gateway over time?

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Mention the word "hipster" to Joshua Tree locals, and it's as divisive as bringing up U2.

In the last few years, the proliferation of gauzy Instagram captures as well as neighboring Coachella Valley's entrée into the international music festival scene have brought Los Angeles, San Francisco and New York City to the high desert in droves. "It's kind of inevitable because anything that's cool, people find out," says Quinn, a child actor and musician who left Hollywood in '94 to move to Joshua Tree. "You can't blame anybody for falling in love with the same thing you fell in love with."

But change doesn't always come easy, and visitors falling in love with the landscape aren't always informed. The out-of-towners' versions of Joshua Tree outfits – white lace dresses with beige fedoras and Celine sunglasses – stand in stark contrast to those worn by locals, most of whom shop at nearby thrift stores. White lace dresses turn brown after about 10 minutes in desert wind.

"There is not one special tree! Everyone asks, 'Where is The Tree?' said Coyote Corner gift shop co-owner Christine Pfranger via email about what she'd like tourists to know before visiting. "The folks working at the shop would like everyone to know that they do not know where you can score some peyote! Haha!

"More importantly, we would like the visitors to know that the gifts of the desert are only found in silence and stillness," she adds. "It seems many come here only searching for a backdrop or prop for their next Instagram photo. If that is their goal then they are missing the point."

Scroll through the Instagram photos tagged in Joshua Tree, and you don't see locals scrubbing graffiti off boulders. You don't see the letters, crystals and scarves sent to Grateful Desert Herb Shoppe & EcoMarket owner Jenny Qaqundah at an Orange County hospital a few years ago, when she was treated for an infection that took both legs and fingers on her right hand. You don't see the methamphetamine use that has long run rampant in the area.

Joshua Tree's glamorization is built on a distinct disconnect: Its reputation as a trendy ecotourism darling, and the community that actually lives there.

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To fully understand the impact of tourism on Joshua Tree today, you need context for the history of the town.

Back in the '30s – at a time when the Small Tract Act of 1938 spurred the construction of the decrepit shacks that now dot 5-acre parcels across the dusty landscape – longtime resident Debi Walters says her grandparent silver-mined in the area, later building a home with a propane refrigerator and stove on 15 acres in the '50s. "There was just nobody," Walters recalls of childhood trips to the desert. "There was the homesteaders and us."

Residents who moved to Joshua Tree in the '60s describe the town as a "grey" retirement community, where kids sledded down Quail Springs Road in the winter. (This past year during peak season, an hour-long line of cars trying to reach the park entrance prevented residents on the hill from getting to their homes.)

The artists came in waves while cabins were still cheap, and creativity could be found in the harrowing quiet. "In the '80s and '90s, you could really hear a big rig truck coming up the grade from Morongo Valley," Quinn says. "It was perfectly silent. There was no sound at night. You could actually hear a truck going into low gear.

Teddy Quinn


Troy Kudlac reviews plans for Modern Joshua Tree.

"You could lay straight across [Highway] 62 for an hour," adds Qaqundah, who moved to town in 2000. "You could just sleep on 62 because there would be no cars, truly, it was dead in the summer."

When retired rock climbing guide Todd Gordon arrived in 1985, he opened his home to "dirt bags" from all over the world, who knew they could sleep on his couch for free. There were evenings when he'd arrive to find up to 30 people on his property, tents all over the backyard. "It never really bothered me," says Gordon, who is referred to by many in the rock climbing community as the "unofficial mayor of Joshua Tree." (Over time, it becomes apparent there's one for each group.) "Joshua Tree's one of the most diverse, accepting communities I've ever been in."

Qaqundah says her daughter was weighed on the scale at the post office when she was born, along with the other babies that arrived that year. And Gordon says letters don't need to have an address for them to make it to his mailbox. "People that live in Joshua Tree, they don't feel alone and they don't feel anonymous," the retired schoolteacher explains. "They feel like they're part of something bigger than themselves."

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In a back room at Cherie Miller & Associates real estate office in Yucca Valley, there's a cartoon hanging on the wall. "I'm not like everyone else," it reads. "I want a house in Joshua Tree on 5 acres with boulders, views and a midcentury vibe for $100K"

"We don't have these imaginary $100,000 cabins," owner Madelaine LaVoie laughs. "Those little cabins in the boulders with the view, they cost $300,000 to $400,000."

With the increase in tourism has come an explosion of the housing market, and Joshua Tree is the hot bed of the high desert. From 2015 to 2016, housing market prices increased more than 30 percent, while the number of homes was cut in half. Over the last year, real estate agents say prices have gone up about 10 percent. Everyone wants a one- or two-bedroom homesteader as a weekend getaway, either for themselves or to flip as a short-term vacation rental. Anecdotal reports range from 400 to 1,500 short-term vacation rentals in Joshua Tree alone, while San Bernardino County Public Information Officer David Wert says they've heard of approximately 500 short-term vacation rentals in the Morongo Basin – all of which are unregulated pending the implementation of an in-process ordinance and permitting process.

"It's not that the market's gotten crazy so much, it's that the market here has turned to the eyes of Venice Beach," LaVoie says.

A spot with boulders, privacy and views can draw "as much as a 50 percent increase in value over a similar property," Spinelli says. One or more of those attributes usually accrues multiple offers and, if listed with a good assessment of current value, cash sales. "It used to be possible to find a decent, livable house for $60,000 to $100,000 in Joshua Tree," he explains. "That's really almost impossible now."

Among locals, opinions are scattered across a wide spectrum. In truth, many say they are torn. Property values are going up, and they're happy for friends and neighbors (or themselves) who can make a living off the short-term vacation rental market, yet they feel for current or aspiring long-term residents who are now saying they can't find affordable places to rent. They're thrilled that business is booming for restaurants downtown (except when they have to wait in line) yet hate to see the influx result in damage to the desert. For some, this new-wave culture is rich and worth engaging. A few joke they're looking to Amboy to retire.

"Let's not forget history," says Copper Mountain College fine arts professor Cathy Allen, whose series of works, "Non-Urban Renewal Project" features dwellings made with found objects. "Let's not develop things too fast. … I think [of the] dwellings as a reminder of the past because there was a movement in the homesteading, and then it kind of fell apart. Many of those places are rotting. … How can we clean up a place without erasing the past?"

Ideally, Spinelli says, a gradual increase in supply would occur alongside a continued, "very moderate" rise in prices. That can only happen if locals or outside investors begin to construct new homes. Joshua Tree's supply of "flip-able" cabins has significantly decreased. "I think building will be the next change," he predicts.

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Building has already started. Property that has easy access to water, Spinelli says, is selling well. Troy Kudlac, founder of KUD Properties, is currently constructing four 1,300-square-foot houses on 10 acres in south Joshua Tree. Presale prices are $599,000, and the homes, slated to be completed by Thanksgiving, are designed for "vacation rental ease," with built-in closet space, fire pit timers and light switches away from the house.

Twelve minutes from the park entrance, Archillusion Design founder/principal Artur Nesterenko is currently in the process of building Casa Plutonia, a 10-room wellness resort with subterranean tunnels. He says the $3.5 million project will be complete by the end of next year. Between the increases in weekenders and new residents, locals are asking: What about the water?

One- or two-room cabins that used to house a family of four might now pack in 10 guests as a short-term vacation rental – meanwhile, many second homes that were only used occasionally are now occupied as short-term vacation rentals when owners aren't in town. Plus, numerous properties have added travel trailers and motor homes. "We're not seeing a lot of big booms in new home building," says Joshua Basin Water District Public Information and Outreach Director Kathleen Radnich. "We're seeing homes that weren't used that way once before being inundated with heavy use."

As the numbers continue to rise, JBWD President Mickey Luckman says the board is looking at banking water from the Mojave Water Agency's State Water Project, and is also conducting a rate study that they anticipate being completed in December. Currently, JBWD is only buying about 500 acre-feet of water when it could be purchasing nearly 2,000 acre-feet. To do so, the district, which also needs to meet California's safe water drinking standard for Chromium-6 by 2020, needs a bigger budget.

"It's time to have a big shift in how we have our water paid for, our rates paid for, for our service maintenance, for the overhead," Radnich says. "We've reached that point. It's a tipping point. We're having a very strong, professional evaluation of the situation. We don't have any answer yet other than we know rates are going up."

In the meantime, the 40-year resident heads out to the market every Saturday in an outreach effort. Most visitors and some residents don't realize Joshua Tree has no sewer system and homes function with septic tanks. And as all Californians know – or should know – water is becoming an increasingly strained commodity. Her personal dream is to receive a grant for a study to install manual and automatic shower timers in every short-term vacation rental. "Welcome to our home," she laughs, "but take short showers!"

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Business in downtown Joshua Tree is booming – for the restaurants, at least. During peak season, wait-time for a pizza at Pie for the People can be up to 30 minutes, and the line for a cup of Joe at Joshua Tree Coffee Co. heads straight out the door and around the building.

“How can we clean up a place without erasing the past?”

— Cathy Allen, beside Dwelling No. 62 at BoxoHOUSE in Joshua Tree

Royce Robertson, who founded the coffee company in his home kitchen, says he saw a 30 percent increase in sales from 2015 to 2016, at the same time the park saw a 24 percent increase in annual visitation. "Even if it's begrudgingly, I feel like pretty much any local or most locals would admit the only improvements that have … ever happened are thanks to tourism," says Robertson, whose company now roasts more than 100,000 pounds of coffee per year in the tiny, 500-square-foot bar that's open seven days a week.

In an area where, historically, businesses closed during the summer, Qaqundah says foot traffic has increased overall in her apothecary. Though, she speculates it does not translate to dollars the way it might for her neighbors, Natural Sisters Café and Joshua Tree Health Foods. Crossroads Café manager Daena McGarvie estimates their sales went up 20 percent year over year, and has increased staff size during peak season and added a dinner menu.

The trick, Robertson says, will be for businesses to find a way to grow with the tourism. Currently, commercial properties sometimes are listed at 50 to 100 percent over appraised value, he says, and locals complain that a complicated web of county planning processes has stymied growth.

Between these downtown crowds and the burgeoning housing market, locals are split on the topic of gentrification, not sure if the town is being upgraded or if the beginning of that process is underway. Merriam-Webster defines gentrification as "the process of renewal and rebuilding accompanying the influx of middle-class or affluent people into deteriorating areas that often displaces poor residents." Is Joshua Tree gentrifying or simply recovering?

"I don't think you can look at the downtown and call it gentrified," says local artist Eva Soltes. "Yes, there are people with money coming in that make it look a certain way. But I still think that it's so far reaching. There are so many individual environments that I don't think this is being made into a kind of sameness that gentrification implies."

"Without a doubt," Qaqundah says. "There are less methamphetamines on the streets, and so I'm happy about that. But I'm not happy about pushing out people that want to live here that can't afford it. All of that fresh culture does not bother me at all. It's creating housing also, though, that doesn't allow for the people that were here or that want to be here. So, yes, that is absolutely happening."

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When Dave Mayville moved to Joshua Tree and became a full-time rock climbing guide in 1988, he bought two houses on 5 acres in Monument Manor, now the most coveted neighborhood in town. Since then, he's sold that property and bounced around from various rentals as owner after owner decided to sell. He currently commutes to Orange County and lives in a friend's trailer on the weekends when he's town. "There aren't any more $300, $400 places in the back of people's houses with trailers that you can rent," Mayville explains. "Everything is an Airbnb."

There are currently 300 hosts and 440 listings in Joshua Tree (two rooms in one home are two different listings), according to Airbnb.

Lisa Starr built her Bonita Domes by hand with 85 percent earth.

ORIGIN DESTINATIONS

IN ORDER OF RANKING, HERE'S WHERE AIRBNB TRAVELERS TO JOSHUA TREE COME FROM, ACCORDING TO AIRBNB.

1 Los Angeles
2 San Francisco
3 New York City
4 San Diego
5 Santa Monica

Those numbers grew 48 percent from June 2016 to June 2017.

Mayville is one of many renters saying affordable housing is difficult to find. Some locals are choosing to convert their short-term units to long-term rentals to help. "This is very, very typical of even any urban area where artists come in, renovate things, take places that nobody else wants and make it desirable, and they get pushed out," Soltes says. "On the other hand, there are local people who are creating opportunities even if it's in vintage trailers."

An Airbnb spokesperson says hosts in Joshua Tree typically earn $16,200 per year. The market has created a livelihood for myriad residents, like Lisa Starr, whose Bonita Domes allow her to maintain her work as a drum medicine woman. "I go back to having integrity with what my offerings are," says Starr of the tension between being "served" by crowds she "didn't move here for." Qaqundah says it helps her as a small business owner "keep [her] home."

Eva Soltes reads inside Harrison House, which she rents on Airbnb to fund an arts and ecology site.

"We're permanently raising the tax base of this area for the county," adds Soltes, who rents her Harrison House on Airbnb to fund an arts and ecology site across the street.

Speaking of taxes, the enforcement of short-term vacation rental owners paying transient occupancy tax – a 7 percent fee charged to visitors staying in short-term accommodations – will not happen until the Morongo Basin ordinance is in place. During fiscal year 2016-17, only 96 taxpayers paid $261,134.07 in TOT, according to the county tax collector.

For locals concerned about how much of the money in the short-term vacation rental market will actually come back into the community, there is a partial answer: Wert says the county recently approved a program that allows chambers of commerce to apply to receive "some or all" of the TOT to promote local tourism. Currently, it is merged into the county's general fund.

As they await the new ordinance, locals are taking regulation of the short-term vacation rentals into their own hands, through informal education for the tourists who stay in them. Inside many Airbnbs (and at just about every business in town), psychedelic-colored placards and posters remind tourists to "have fun" but to "please use desert etiquette." The cards were created this summer by Pfranger, who's lived in town for 26 years, after she felt "frustrated and overwhelmed with the amount of people doing disrespectful and damaging things in and around the park."

In an area where individual acreage can stretch for miles without a fence, instances of trespassing on private property are increasing. Locals also lament "mini Burning Mans" at "party houses" that accommodate large groups, often with loud music and bonfires. On the first line of Pfranger's poster, it reads: "Welcome to Joshua Tree. If you are staying in a vacation rental, please be quiet and respect the neighbors. For us, a party half-a-mile away is close."

This is a community that spends its own time and money to fight battles that protect the desert – it's not surprising that the growing pains of tourism would trigger strong reactions, no matter how few and far between they might be.

"People are using the words 'gentrification' and the 'hipsters' and all those terms but from my standpoint, it's just another wave here like renewable energy or mining," says Mojave Desert Land Trust Executive Director Danielle Segura, whose nonprofit recently released educational material about the local ecosystem and surrounding national monuments. "… This group, this new wave of tourism, I think that there is a different kind of opportunity. The wind farms don't have a voice."

The more visitors with a transformative experience in the desert, the more who might invest in its preservation. Joshua Tree residents are ready to show newcomers how they've been doing so for years.

But as they stand shoulder to shoulder, some of their own are heading outside the 92252 ZIP code – east toward Wonder Valley and beyond. Now, it's the easiest way to realize a low-cost cabin dream.

"This new wave of kind of opportunity. tourism, I think that there is a different The wind farms don't have a voice."

— Mojave Desert Land Trust Executive Director Danielle Segura