

Because baby, you're worth it

Luxurious hotel spa breaks for parents-to-be are all the rage in the States. **Sarah Barrell** and her bump head to Arizona

Palm Springs is one of those great American anomalies: an improbable desert settlement wedged between the folds of inhospitable mountains. It's as if someone came out here with a mind to build another Las Vegas, took a hot soak in the area's eponymous thermal waters and thought, "Bugger it, who needs neon?"

The place is a testament to nothing, a celebration of still, somewhere to come to be far from anywhere. Between the 1930s and 1960s this desert town in back-country California became home to Hollywood on holiday, with stars such as Elvis, Sinatra and Sammy Davis Jr taking part-time residence. But somehow Palm Springs remained determinedly low rise, defiantly low-key – an anti-Vegas. Even its little airport, beneath the incongruously snow-capped peaks of the San Jacinto Mountains, looks like a small luxury resort with barely a signpost to hail its entrance.

Perfect for an indulgent spa holiday – the ultimate place to come to do nothing, in style. And that, as first-time spa visitors, is what we were after. This was new territory for the other half and I, accustomed as we were to holidays where frantic sight-seeing and socialising takes precedence over sleep and any relaxing. Add to this the new experience of travelling with extra baggage – namely six months of baby brewing in my belly – and we needed all the help we could get to wind down.

Cue the "babymoon", the latest fad to hit America's spa circuit. This rather comical phrase was coined by a Brit, author and childbirth educator Sheila Kitzinger, to describe the first few days of a parent and baby's life together. But the travel industry in the US has taken the idea and run to the spas with it. Now expectant parents are tourism's newest niche market with hotels offering relaxing last-hurrah breaks for parents-to-be; a sort of pamper yourself before Pampers.

The idea is fast catching on in Europe, but we decided to head to the source for our experience and pulling up outside the Parker hotel in Palm Springs, it looked as if we'd made the right choice. If it hadn't been for the navigation system in our car announcing, with a sunny American accent, "you have arrived at your destination", we wouldn't

have known we had arrived anywhere. Tall white walls covered in the richest coral pink bougainvillea concealed an elegant driveway and, we assumed, the hotel. Rounding the entrance, we were greeted by a teeming water fountain, which seemed obscenely luxurious after a two-hour drive through desert. A battalion of staff appeared, dressed in white cotton slacks and pink jumpers that matched the bougainvillea.

"Ah, the babymooners," exclaimed Bobby, one of the battalion manning the door, as our car was whisked away by a valet and our names and bags taken. "Welcome to you all!" he said, generously extending the hospitality to my bump without a hint of insincerity. What was in store was something of a mystery. Our weekend's itinerary had been tailor-made by hotel management after we'd answered questions on our favourite movies, music, books and leisure activities. The results had gone towards creating a weekend dedicated to pampering our needs, both as a couple and as individuals. First was something rather unexpected: a massage lesson for "dad", with me as guinea pig. Our masseuse, Andy, a youthful grandmother with an earthy Californian straightforwardness, was the ideal candidate to direct what could have been an uncomfortable threesome. With loooong, soothing vowels she explained to my sheepish dressing-gown-clad husband how to alleviate pain in my lower back, shoulders and legs: the parts of the body that come under most gestational strain.

Twenty minutes later I suspected these skills would never be put to practical use but it felt good to have an objective outsider explain how hard pregnancy is on women physically and emotionally. I relaxed into a smug stupor, only mildly perturbed by the odd sensation of two pairs of hands pummelling me from the outside while the baby did the same inside. For the last 10 minutes we swapped, so that Andy could ease hubby's lingering backache. "Wow, like most men this stress is really bottled up," she said as she ploughed her elbows around his spine. "Pregnancy can be a quietly angst-ridden time for dads-to-be." Rather than feeling miffed that attention had been diverted from the VIPP (very important pregnant person), I was struck by the urge to weep as my helpless husband

TRAVELLER'S GUIDE

The writer travelled as a guest of the Parker Meriden, Palm Springs, and Expedia (0870 050 0808; expedia.co.uk), which offers fly-drive packages to the West Coast from £475 per person.

GETTING THERE

To reach Palm Springs you can fly from Heathrow to Los Angeles; choose from Air New Zealand (0800 028 4149; www.airnz.co.uk), American Airlines (08457 789789; www.americanairlines.co.uk), British Airways (0870 850 9850; www.ba.com), United Airlines (08458 444777; www.unitedairlines.co.uk) and Virgin Atlantic (08705 747747; www.virgin-atlantic.com).

To offset the environmental harm of a

return flight from London to LA, you could pay £19 to Climate Care (01865 207000; www.climatecare.org).

STAYING THERE

The Parker Palm Springs, Palm Springs, California (001 760 770 5000; www.theparkerpalmsprings.com). Babymoon packages start at \$725 (£403) per person, which includes breakfast and dinner for two at Mister Parker's, movies/books/music in-room, baby-bites and activities. An 80-minute massage starts at \$220 (£122); tennis lessons from \$90 (£50).

TRAVEL TIPS

Flying is safest and most comfortable between 12 and 28 weeks of

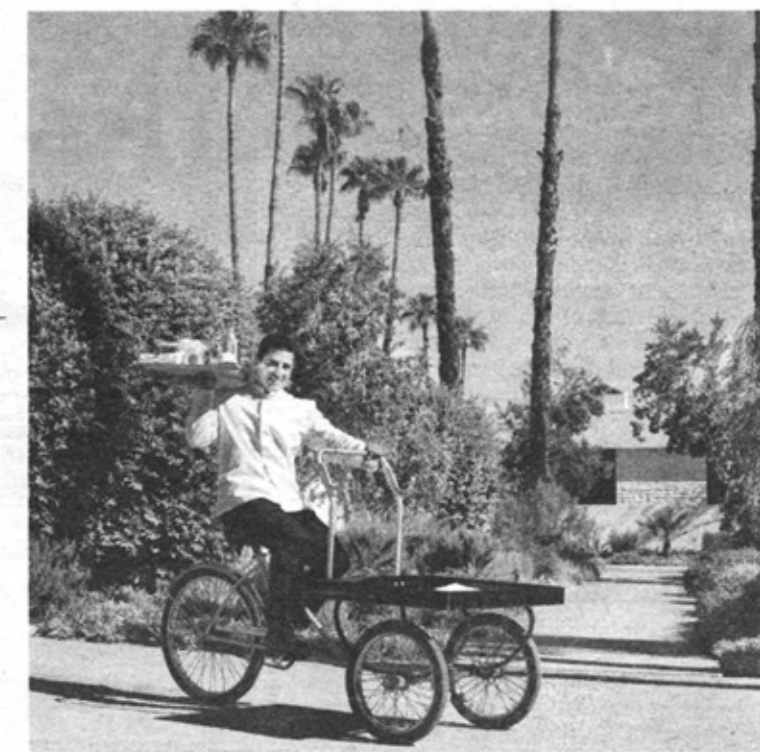
pregnancy. After 28 weeks, many airlines require a letter from your GP certifying your fitness to travel. Avoid countries that require malaria medication or vaccinations – you won't be able to take them.

Travel with a copy of your policy and record of your blood type. Pregnant women can be more susceptible to DVT, so wear special socks and move about regularly during the flight.

Travel with snacks, and stick to bottled water. In the spa, make sure your masseuse avoids essential oils and manipulating pressure points, in the feet and abdomen especially.

FURTHER INFORMATION

Palm Springs tourism (001 760 778 8418; www.palm-springs.org).



Bliss: a treatment room at Parker Palm Springs; waiter service; pregnant pause; the grounds (below) *Nikolas Koenig; Alamy*

