

TRAVEL / Kristen Nelson

## These suds for you

Soap Lake's miracle waters, cowboy lodge, and 59-cent burgers

SOAP LAKE MAY BE HOME TO THE ONLY healing waters this side of Baden-Baden, but the area has shifted in and out of vogue through the years. Located in Eastern Washington between Ephrata and the Grand Coulee Dam, Soap Lake was frequented by Chief Moses and his tribe in the 19th century and became known as the "Palm Springs of the North" in the 1930s, '40s, and '50s. In those days, people went to Soap Lake for the water. Families would make annual pilgrimages there, grandparents floating for hours in the alkaline waters—which apparently have a mineral content identical to that of Baden-Baden—hoping to cure arthritis, skin disease, circulatory problems, frayed nerves, and tired muscles. Drinking Soap Lake cocktails and "irrigating sinus and other cavities" solved more delicate problems.

Don't be misled. The lake looks sudsy, feels oily, and tastes terrible (during your stay, you'll find that distilled water for drinking is a must), and the area has always been more cowboy than posh, more plain than elegant. While neighboring towns—most notably Ephrata and Moses Lake—set up irrigation systems and became lively farming communities, Soap Lake withered away. By 1980 the last of the town's five sanatoriums had burned to the ground, as had the landmark New Beach Hotel; what remained was a handful of run-down motels and taverns, one good restaurant, and a desolate, black-beached lake with a trailer park.



SOAP LAKE'S OILY WATERS: HEAL YE, HEAL YE.

western-style theme rooms include the Ben Snipes Room, named for a Yakima cattle king; the Western Nostalgia Room, with a whirlpool and a pool table; and the Greek Sun Room, with Plexiglas windows for winter sunbathing.

Romary's 92 handmade tables and vanities, embedded with theme-appropriate souvenirs and mementos and covered in gallons of clear epoxy, are dispersed throughout. Ceiling borders in the lodge's office and the Business Men's Club are cowhide, and the lodge's switch plates are all hand-tooled leather, as are the matching menu covers at Don's Steakhouse, also owned by Romary, around the corner.

Room prices range from \$32 (single) for the John Wayne Room (complete with arrows in the logs and a rafter swing) to the \$100 Bonnie Guitar Honeymoon Suite (with an original Guitar guitar that's been transformed into a log table, and a gold microphone firmly embedded in another table). The Norma Zimmer Room (\$80), named for *The Lawrence Welk Show's* Champagne Lady, is big fun. Instead of a Gideon Bible on

Despite conflicting interests, Soap Lake is growing. Seattle attorney Bill Beeks bought the old Desert Inn Resort on the east side of the lake on a lark, but now finds himself a major mover in "getting the town back on track." His plan includes giving the Desert Inn's little cabins a Mediterranean look, complete with red-tile roofs. Beeks sees Soap Lake as a potential art community/desert retreat. And he can testify to the lake's healing powers. Beeks recently added a tavern and an abandoned service station—slated to become a general store—to his list of projects there.

On the downside, Sam Israel—well-known in Seattle for his holdings in Pioneer Square and the Denny Regrade area—owns three sides of Soap Lake, which remain undeveloped, and several downtown buildings that have fallen into disrepair. And because 50 percent of the residents are retirees, tax increases—to pay for a much-needed grade school, for instance—have consistently been voted down.

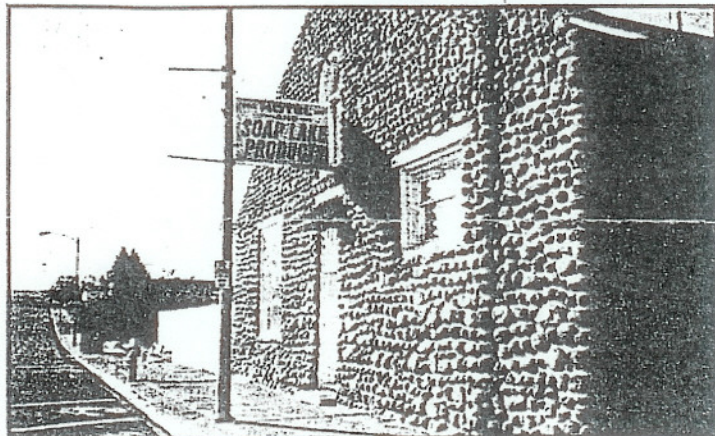
But while Soap Lake is busy sorting things out, there's plenty to do. As you enter town on Highway 17, check out Rick's 59 Cent Burgers (509-246-9950), a true time-warp experience. The town's two-block main drag boasts taverns, a great little cafe (Charlie's), a bait/tackle/liquor/gift store, and a health-food store that features Soap Lake products and special vitamin and herbal formulas.

On the short drive toward Ephrata, the only oasis you'll find for miles is the Country Gardens Nursery & Antiques (509-246-0101), a private home and business whose large yard is so green and unusual in the sagebrush desert that it is constantly mistaken for a park. By the time you go to check out their ornamental gardens, gazebos, and small pond, they may have completed work on their three latest projects: an enormous house, a huge pond with a bridge, and a fence to remind the public that it's private property.

Other recreational oddments include the nearby Lenore Caves on Highway 17 just north of Soap Lake, where you can climb countless manmade stairs to the top of a steep cliff and investigate huge caves carved into the rock face. (Soap Lake Chamber of Commerce president Joann Rushton ventures that the caves were formed by ice-age erosion of alkaline deposits.) A bit farther up the highway—out in the middle of nowhere and enclosed in cyclone fencing—is Gerke Windmill Park, whose windmills—a hospital bedpan with throw-up pans spinning wildly, a teapot with whirling cups, Frisbees and hard hats, brooms and dustpans, coffee cans and bowling balls—go around and around in the desert wind.

### Staying there

It takes just over three hours to get to Soap Lake. Take I-90 through Vantage up to George, and head north on Highway 28 to Highway 17, which goes right through town. The Notaras Lodge, on 17, is open year-round. For reservations, call 509-246-0462. From May 1 through the beginning of September, tourist information can be had from Dee Norton at 509-246-1821. ■



ON THE MAIN DRAG: HOTEL AT THE MARKET.

Ten years ago, a handful of residents—notably then-mayor and native Soap Lakean Marina Romary—made a last-ditch effort to put the town back on the map. Romary began by rebuilding the burned-out Soap Lake Business Men's Club, a private bar previously attached to the New Beach. The club has a no-holds-barred western motif. It's an underground saloon with a heavily epoxied red-cedar bar—Romary's first, but not last, stab at epoxy art—a glassy-eyed steer head, a dance floor, and a house act: country-music queen Bonnie Guitar, imported from Seattle in 1983.

Romary followed with the Notaras Lodge, a sort of cool, cowboy-kitsch version of Newport, Oregon's thematic Sylvia Beach Hotel. Immense and rambling, the "luxury in logs" lodge is a two-story structure with a wrap-around balcony and winding stairwells, all made from spruce logs—over 300 of them, some up to 42 inches in diameter. The 12

the nightstand, there's a copy of *Norma*, Zimmer's autobiography; her poodle pin, charm bracelet, and pearls, and pictures of her with Welk, are encased in tables and vanities throughout the suite. An original Norma Zimmer oil painting hangs on the wall behind one of the room's two epoxied bars, and a juke box—with a large selection of (surprise!) Bonnie Guitar tunes—stands in one corner, already primed with quarters by the thoughtful management. A large Jacuzzi—all of the lodge's whirlpools have both Soap Lake water and fresh water on tap—occupies an entire corner.

For total immersion in the Romary experience, head for dinner at Don's (509-246-1217), a windowless, boxy cement structure with plastic tablecloths and a waitstaff you'll also encounter later on at the Business Men's Club. The club, a good place for a nightcap, features entertainment from Bonnie Guitar herself (Wednesday through Sunday).