

# Arizona's very first luxury resort—originally opened in 1896—is back in business

BY CHADNER NAVARRO

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To travelers, Arizona is known for some of the Southwest's most iconic vacation destinations—from sprawling golf and tennis facilities to innovative wellness retreats to bucket-list natural attractions. But its newest luxury hideaway is in fact also its oldest.

The recently reimagined Castle Hot Springs—a 70-minute drive north of Phoenix in the craggy, saguaro-dotted shadows of the Bradshaw Mountains—originally opened in 1896, pioneering the high-end resort concept in the state.

Listed on the National Register of Historic Places, this 210-acre refuge was beloved by some of America's most renowned families (the Vanderbilts, the Astors, the Roosevelts, and the Wrigleys) thanks to its off-the-grid location and calming, restorative waters. But despite its sparkling past, Castle Hot Springs was through the years beset by challenges, including devastating fires. The most recent one, in the 1970s, damaged it so badly that the property was forced to close. It wasn't until new ownership took over in 2014 that the next chapter of its star-studded history began to be written.

“We acquired the property in 2014 though we had been familiar with it for years,” says owner and Phoenix-area businessman Mike Watts. “We were captivated by its rich history and the natural beauty of the area, and the one-of-a-kind experience with the natural spring waters inspired us to rebuild it to what it once was.”

In fact, many of Arizona's “firsts” have been celebrated at Castle Hot Springs: a tennis court, a golf course, and even a telephone. Today's pickleball court on the grand lawn, a chipping green by the pool, and a replica of that 125-year-old phone that is secreted away in a booth adjacent to the bar serve as quirky references to the resort's age-old legacy.

While this iteration of Castle Hot Springs that officially opened in October 2019 celebrates this past, it also strives to be the kind of modern wellness sanctuary that would appeal to today's in-the-know travelers. The 32-room, adults-only resort focuses on its famous springs as well as the photogenic natural terrain that surrounds it. There's a certain level of rusticity to the property that is then layered on with thoughtful, stylish details. Starting with lodge rooms (from \$650 per night) stacked on the upper floors of the main house—where reception, the bar, and the restaurant are also located—as well as the stand-alone, purpose-built units scattered throughout the grounds, accommodations are tranquil, comfortable, and are meant to complement the surprisingly lush Sonoran setting rather than upstage it.

Valerie Borden, the interior designer, says that the decor is supposed to be a supporting element to the overall resort experience. “Although there is attention to the smallest details, no design feature dominates,” she says of the Navajo rugs sourced through a nationwide search; the hand-cut stone milled from the surrounding desert; the Wild, Wild West–looking brown-leather headboards; and the deep soaking tubs that are fed by the springs. “Castle Hot Springs was created as an exclusive ‘home away from home.’ In bringing the property back to life, it was crucial to highlight this feeling.”



**The cabanas at Castle Hot Springs.**

COURTESY OF CASTLE HOT SPRINGS

And that could explain why different room categories feature distinct amenities. Considered the most luxurious, the Spring Bungalows (from \$1,350 per night) come with exceptional views of the mountains as well as indoor-outdoor fireplaces and heated stone bathtubs. The Sky View Cabins (starting at \$1,200 a night) have outdoor clawfoot tubs and spacious decks outfitted with telescopes for late-night stargazing. Bathing is such a big deal here that bathrooms are built with special attention. “[You’re stunned] when entering the shower and greeted with a wall of colorful opalescent glass mosaic tiles, recreating the feeling of seeing the hot springs for the first time,” Borden adds.

As enticing as it is to remain in these private cocoons, a trip to Arizona orbits around communing with nature. And at Castle Hot Springs, that means becoming intimately acquainted with its nutrient-rich waters. This water is in every part of the resort. The showpieces are the three rustic-but-picturesque hot-spring pools shaded by palm trees and surrounded by succulents and rocks varnished with a medley of mineral-stained hues. “The springs are still presented as they were back in the day,” Watts explains. “The floor of each pool is natural earth to remind guests to be grounded during their stay.” And they can soak in them whenever they please—even at night under the stars.

Many of the first wave of guests have been water-bound, but a slew of clever programming that complements the springs can offer a more holistic wellness holiday. There are fitness classes (tai chi, anyone?), massages inside stunning canvas tents standing right next to a babbling stream, horseback riding, and heart-racing hikes to Salvation Peak, where guests might meet a family of skittish donkeys along the way. Local lore has it that John F. Kennedy, who spent three months recuperating on the property when the United States military used it as a rehabilitation center during World War II, would hike that same trail (topped with a proudly waving American flag) every day during his stay.





Tomatoes on the vine inside the greenhouse.

COURTESY OF CASTLE HOT SPRINGS

What he is unlikely to have had in the 1940s, however, is the current culinary program supported by a verdant on-site farm. It might come as a surprise that Arizona is exceptionally fertile. Guests can tour Castle Hot Springs' agro-operations to learn about and taste produce before chef Christopher Brugman's recipes make them anew.

There's even a greenhouse where several species of tomatoes are grown, including an exclusive hybrid called Lucid Tiger. (Cultivating unexpected species is a favorite pastime for the farming team, and there are even plans to start planting heritage strains of agave!) This allows the kitchen to then prepare some truly remarkable meals, making dining a real highlight of the resort. Think: omelets stuffed with super-fresh radishes and peppers; the brightest-tasting gazpacho; or perfectly grilled meat and fish surrounded by slightly spicy purple basil, crunchy Napa cabbage, and sweet carrots—all of it just plucked from the garden. Spring water is generally used for the farm, too, so some of these ingredients might even take on slightly different flavors than what many are familiar with.

But the best part? Food (as well as most activities) is bundled into the hotel's inclusive pricing structure.