

# The Heart of Harbin

We're two demanding, high-strung lesbians from San Francisco. She's a social worker here to unwind from an overwhelming caseload; I'm an anxious writer looking to serenely celebrate my birthday. We've brought a gym bag full of sex toys, and we're desperate to relax. But can we? **By Heather Boerner**

Sure, Harbin Hot Springs, located atop a hill in the arid region just north of California's Napa Valley, has all the trappings of a dyke oasis. It boasts a large vegetarian kitchen for the crafting of communal meals, an organic restaurant, daily yoga classes, miles of hiking trails, a full-service spa and even nightly movies including Margaret Cho's *Notorious C.H.O.* Harbin's got a coffee bar and a market in case you forgot your Tom's all-natural toothpaste or want a honey-sweetened chocolate truffle. There are booths where you can indulge your shopping jones if you like batik sarongs and toe rings. Most important, there are four natural spring tubs: two warm, one scalding and one arctic.

Like most dykes, we're frugal, and Harbin is accommodating. You can stay on the cheap by camping, or you can opt, as we did, for a hotel room. Save money by choosing a half-bath or no bathroom, and by staying in the middle of the week, when it's less expensive and crowded.

But Harbin also boasts straights — lots of them. From the curt woman who checked us in to the kind man who gave me a massage, there are straights everywhere. On the weekend, the tubs are packed elbow-to-elbow with them. Harbin also prohibits some of the finer things in life, like alcohol, drugs and cell phones. If you're looking to party, look elsewhere. If you want to run and scream, take it to town. But if you want to inject some relaxation into your life and reconnect with your honey, welcome to Harbin.

That's not to say our relaxation was automatic.

## Challenge One: Suspicion

Upon arrival, we suspiciously eyed the nearly naked. Clothes were flung on: cotton drawstring pants on the men, falling off and exposing hipbones; loosely tied sarongs or gauze dresses on the women, floating over braless breasts and panty-free butts.

We noted what seemed to be overt gender roles: women with long hair, men with short, women in dresses, men in pants. Where did this leave us? I'm as femme as the next girl but my girlfriend, George, is not. With short hair, a sports bra and wardrobe comprised of boxer-briefs and the Gap men's department, George is anything but your typical hippie flower.

Naturally, she had a harder time than I did transitioning from clothed San Francisco dyke to naked

## Quick Facts

### Harbin Hot Springs

18424 Harbin Springs Rd.,  
Middletown, Calif.

### Information and

### Reservations:

707-987-2477  
California toll-free:  
800-622-2477  
Harbin.org

Rooms range from \$30 a night to camp to \$250 a night for your own cottage. All visitors who use the tubs must pay for a "membership." A one-month membership is \$10.



hippie lesbian. When we visited Harbin two years ago, George was somewhat traumatized by being engaged in small talk by a guy she vaguely recalled from college: They were both naked. It was a special moment.

So when we arrived this time, we stripped off our clothes but defenses didn't fall so easily. We'd been in the tub for 20 minutes when we discovered that someone had stolen George's flip-flops. She was enraged.

"Damn straights!" she bellowed over and over again. "You can't trust 'em!"

We spent dinner playing foot patrol with everyone who walked past. When we returned to the pool, her flip-flops had reappeared.

### Challenge Two: Pervert Alert

If you're visiting a place designed for nakedness, you shouldn't be surprised when people look at your body. And we weren't surprised. Heck, I love being naked and don't mind the attention. But there's a difference between looking and gawking, and some of the straight men at Harbin haven't quite worked out the difference yet.

Case in point: Our first day, we stood in the large warm pool next to a straight couple. Claspng each other under a sign reading, "Sexual activity of any kind or unwelcome advances are grounds

for immediate expulsion from Harbin," the couple was clearly having sex. They grunted softly and gyrated in that familiar way. George and I tried to move away but were pinned in by the guy next to us and the massage therapists giving water massages, called Watsu, in the middle of the pool.

On the far wall were the lurkers. They were lined up, like they'd been caught up a tree with binoculars. Forty-something and balding, they didn't miss a beat. They knew the couple next to us was having sex. They noted the protruding nipple of the woman who getting a Watsu massage.

And yes, they noticed the big-breasted lesbians hugging each other on the side of the pool.

A few days later, we saw in the shadows beside another pool that a curly-haired man was removing his man-skirt and tropical print blouse. He got in the tub and sat on the steps. For the next 45 minutes, he stared. He didn't waver, he didn't seem to meditate. He watched George gently swirl me around the tub. He watched me reciprocate.

At one point, I leaned in to George and suggested, "We should give him a show. I'll grab your boobies, you grab my boobies, we'll make out and get kicked out of here."

He left before we could. "I guess he went to cruise another tub," George cracked.

He may have been the same guy who, earlier that night, elicited alarm from a middle-aged woman sharing our tub. After he left, she came over and said, "Did he give you the willies, too? He gave me the willies!"

I don't know if it was him. Like a caged animal or a subway commuter in New York, I never make eye contact. God forbid he tries to engage me in conversation, and if I see an erect penis, I'm out of there. So instead, I choose a world of denial. He's not really fixated on the angle of my hips as I lean into George. No, he's ... meditating. He's looking at the stars. He's staring into space.

Eventually, it became a sport. Is that guy facing the side of the pool to relax or to hide an erection? Is that guy meditating or watching my breasts mash against George's? Is that guy sitting close to us unconcerned about personal space, or does he wants to be our third?

### Verdict: Come on in, the Water's Fine

By the end of the week, we'd become the naked people we scowled at upon arrival. We played Scrabble under umbrellas on hot days in nothing but loungewear as a man with long hair wearing a tiny skirt watered plants.

We spent afternoons in our room reading, dozing and having sex. We retired early from the tubs for the same purpose. We saw a buck out our bathroom window the first morning. The meals



were delicious. Adapted to the nudity, I only smiled when I saw my massage therapist naked in the hot pool. We nodded and closed our eyes.

And most important, the trip was worth it when, after the lurkers left, my girlfriend wrapped her legs around my waist and floated backward. I watched the light from the pool speckled across her belly, making the tiny air bubbles clinging to her abdomen sparkle.

I could get used to being a naked hippie lesbian. And Harbin. ■