

ELLE DECOR GOES TO PALM SPRINGS

This mecca of midcentury modernism offers pleasures beyond great architecture, with glamorous hotels, sybaritic spas, and sensational shopping.

BY BETH LAPIDES



Driving into Palm Springs, California, one of the world's most sublime time capsules of midcentury design, the first piece of architecture you see is God's work. Or Mother Nature's, if you prefer: the San Jacinto Mountains. It's these peaks—their grand scale, their nubby, almost Brutalist texture, and the fact that they wall the city off from the rest of the world—that make all the magnificently sleek architecture in Palm Springs possible.

The mountains, and their ability to block out storms, pessimism, and static, also make possible the miracle of your shoulders dropping, your breath deepening, and your mind opening. Thus relaxed, your eyes are free to feast on the splendor of the world-famous midcentury-modern landmarks by William Cody, Richard Neutra, John Lautner, Donald Wexler, and Albert Frey. The Frey-designed visitors center—formerly a gas station, and maybe the best thing to come from our petroleum-based economy—welcomes you to town. The roofline soars and swallows the sky while the building itself hugs the earth. It seems to pop up out of nowhere, as if to say, Unexpected things happen, and some of them are good.



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This delightful coupling of excited optimism and relaxed ambition is the one-two punch with which Palm Springs wins you over. And this powerful combo is articulated in the city's fabled architecture. Standouts are everywhere—from the Wexler-designed airport to bank façades and, most of all, the houses spread across town and into the hills.

From the beginning, Palm Springs has been a city steeped in fantasy second-home architecture: Spanish colonial, Hollywood Regency, midcentury modern,

postmodern, all the way up to today's revisionist midcentury modern. Of course architecture is a stage set for life. And the visionary homes in Palm Springs helped create a glamorous setting where the Hollywood elite could escape. Or maybe it was the Tinseltown celebrities who engineered the design credo that defines Palm Springs. The two went hand in hand, like five o'clock and the cocktail parties the town is so famous for.

Palm Springs was, most notably, a second home to Frank Sinatra, Elvis Presley, and Bob Hope, maybe because the mountains were like a cosmic bodyguard or because the stars in the breathtakingly clear night sky reminded them of themselves. Or maybe just because Palm Springs is as far from Los Angeles as actors under studio contract could drive and still be on call. But even in today's post-studio-system landscape, boldface names like Tom Ford, Barbra Streisand, and Diane Keaton still flock to the snowbird-filled oasis, which offers instant privacy, laid-back glamour, and access to a creative force field that isn't readily available in other glitzy destinations.

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You won't see a single white picket fence here. What you will find are white-painted stone and steel walls framing private outdoor rooms. You'll also notice a lack of eye-level front windows—the roofline-hugging clerestory windows let light in, keep the heat (and prying eyes) out, and offer peerless views of blue sky and palm-tree tops. You can actually get behind those privacy walls with Michael Stern, coauthor of *Julius Shulman: Palm Springs*, who leads tours of some of the city's most fabulous houses. "Europeans are always shocked that people will let us walk through their homes," Stern says. "Especially because the homeowners are often there. At dinner parties in New York, you see the living room, the powder room, and maybe the kitchen. In California, houses are more "open"—both to the elements and socially. Indeed, there's something welcoming about these houses, especially the ones featuring orange doors. The vibrant color may be an homage to the fruit that grows in yards all around town, or maybe orange doors are popular because the red door recommended by feng shui masters is just too hot a color for a city where summer temperatures can flirt with 120 degrees. Orange is complimentary to blue, so it makes the sky pop. It's also the color connected to the sex chakra. And Palm Springs is, on top of being a design haven, a sexy city.