

Palm Springs, remixed: A retro classic is reborn

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(Photo: Robert Hanashiro, USA TODAY)

PALM SPRINGS, CALIF. -- Even on an unseasonably cool weekend in Palm Springs, the palm-tree- and mountain-framed pool at the Ace Hotel & Swim Club is populated with the young and beautiful. Women lounge under circular sunshades in bikinis and straw fedoras, while for guys, shaggy facial hair is de rigueur. DJ dance music pumps out while a young waitress with tattoos snaking up her arm, wearing a T-shirt that reads "P.S. I (heart) You," takes drink orders.

Jane Schmidlapp, 25, a grad student at Cal Poly Pomona outside L.A., says she was expecting to drink martinis and soak up an Old Hollywood vibe when she came here with two classmates -- Tiffany Davis, 30, and Lina Chan, 25 -- for an architecture lecture at the Palm Springs Art Museum. They instead found themselves checking out the boutiques and chic new restaurants downtown.

"I'm from SoCal. I remember coming (to Palm Springs) as a kid. This is a completely different side of it," says Davis, surveying the scene at the Ace Hotel. "My mom would be like, 'What is this?'"

Long-time residents of Palm Springs speak proudly of the city's heyday as a celebrity playground in the 1950s and '60s, pointing out Bob Hope's hillside mansion, the piano bar where Frank Sinatra crooned, or the midcentury hideaway where Elvis and Priscilla honeymooned. A 26-foot sculpture of Marilyn Monroe on the main drag draws scores of tourists to take photos under her billowing skirt.

Even after its Hollywood luster started to fade, the small desert city about two driving hours east of Los Angeles remained a popular spring-break destination. Accounts differ on why it fell off the party circuit in the early '90s (many cite then-Mayor Sonny Bono's crackdown on drinking and thong bikinis in public), but Palm Springs settled into its role as a sleepy resort town.

Now it has reawakened, fueled by a renewed fascination with its midcentury modern style and by an annual music festival -- the Coachella Valley Music and Arts Festival -- that in recent years has become a celebrity-laden cultural juggernaut. The result is a growing youth-oriented scene that remixes classic desert style in new ways.

"People come in here now who are 22 years old and they know every designer and the year it was made. It's incredible," says artist Michael Weems, 47, who owns a gallery in the trendy Uptown Design District -- a mix of modern furniture stores, boutiques, galleries and restaurants on the city's downtown corridor.

In 2006, Modernism Week was founded to celebrate the bold angles and wide expanses of glass that defined desert architecture in the '50s and '60s. Modern architecture guru and [tour guide \(http://themodernrtour.com/\)](http://themodernrtour.com/) Michael Stern describes Palm Springs style as "discreet to the street" -- designed to lie low and horizontal in deference to the landscape and the verticality of the surrounding San Jacinto Mountains.

'The kids' are all right

The youth scene in Palm Springs also could be described as discreet to the street, much of it happening poolside at the rehabbed midcentury motels and new boutique hotels that have sprouted like desert wildflowers in the past few years. Though Palm Springs has always banked on retirees, golfers and an ever-active LGBT scene for its tourism, newer hotels are looking to attract younger visitors with music events and weekend pool parties.

The influence of the area's music festival in drawing visitors in their 20s and 30s cannot be overstated. The Coachella Festival, held each April in the nearby city of Indio, has grown into a sonic extravaganza that brings an estimated 200,000 festivalgoers to the wider Coachella Valley region. Now, the month of April, when tourism traditionally winds down, belongs to "the kids," says Mary Jo Ginther, director of the Palm Springs Bureau of Tourism.

Twelve new hotels have opened in the past two years in this city of 45,000 people. Upcoming additions include a boutique Kimpton hotel downtown and a 32-room luxury hotel and restaurant owned by Facebook millionaire Ezra Callahan.

The newest entry, a Hard Rock Hotel downtown, is also hitching itself to the Coachella train. The rock memorabilia that is a Hard Rock staple has been purposefully skewed younger here, says hotel owner Andy Carpiac. Among the glass-encased items -- including Elvis' leather jacket -- is Justin Timberlake's vest and Lady Gaga's white moped. The hotel recently signed an exclusive deal with the festival's producer to host year-round poolside events.

"Palm Springs has always been about the pool and it always will be," says Carpiac, 37, who developed two other boutique hotels in town. "Every successful hotel here focuses on their pool. Not just the feel and the layout, but what's going on at the pool."

'More stuff is happening'

Even competing hoteliers credit the Ace Hotel with uncovering the potential within languishing midcentury properties. In 2009, the boutique hotel chain known for its stylized design transformed a defunct Howard Johnson's and attached Denny's restaurant into a resort with a retro-mod camping-lodge aesthetic. The refurbished properties blossoming around town still look like '60s-era motels — large and squat, with simply furnished rooms and atomic-age porte-cochères — only funkier and more luxe.

When the developers of The Saguaro hotel just down the road from the Ace took over a rundown Holiday Inn, it was painted a dismal "GI Joe green," says Michael von Wittenau, director of sales and marketing. The Technicolor watermelon, lime, tangerine and royal purple hues that now adorn the exterior and interior walls reference indigenous desert flowers. The Joie de Vivre-run Saguaro has also tapped into the local music scene since it opened in 2012, hosting pool parties on Coachella weekends.

The revitalization is a welcome change for younger locals, too. A few years ago, when Donovan and Molly Funkey moved to Palm Springs to help Donovan's parents run their two restaurants, they saw a need for a watering hole between pricey hotel bar and local dive. The couple opened Bar, a laid-back downtown joint that serves craft cocktails and hosts local musicians and DJs.

"When we first got here it was a little tough. There wasn't a lot for young people," says Molly, 26, as she hustles around the bar in a black leather jacket, serving locals and out-of-towners.

Now, she says, "more stuff is happening."

If you go

Where to stay: The Ace Hotel & Swim Club (760-325-9900; acehotel.com/palmsprings (<http://acehotel.com/palmsprings>)), a revamped former Howard Johnson motel, is now a bohemian haven with a buzzing pool scene. Rates: \$279-\$649. The Korakia Pensione (760-864-6411; korakia.com (<http://korakia.com>)) is a Moroccan- and Mediterranean-inspired enchanted garden tucked at the base of the panoramic San Jacinto Mountains. Rockers with a more ethereal bent have been known to rent out the hotel for Coachella weekends. Rates: \$200-\$900. Bedecked in a rainbow of Technicolor hues, The Saguaro (877-808-2439; jdvhotels.com/hotels/california/riverside-hotels/the-saguaro-palm-springs (<http://jdvhotels.com/hotels/california/riverside-hotels/the-saguaro-palm-springs>)) is a rehabbed atomic-age motel with sprawling grounds that pop against the desert landscape. Rates: \$160-\$250.

Where to eat: Tinto, Iron Chef Jose Garces's restaurant at the Saguaro, focuses on sophisticated tapas and small plates from the Basque region of Spain. An added bonus is the option to drink and dine poolside at your own personal firepit. Plates: \$8-\$26. Seemingly all of Palm Springs brunches on fresh, seasonal fare at Cheeky's, an airy downtown spot. Entrees: \$9-\$14. Workshop Kitchen + Bar continues the farm-to-table and small plates trend in an industrial-chic space set off from the main drag. Entrees: \$9-\$39. The preferred caffeine stop for locals, Koffi serves up organic coffee and homemade pastries at two Palm Springs locations.

Where to drink: A funky downtown lounge, Bar (760-537-7337; barwastaken.com (<http://barwastaken.com>)) serves reasonably priced craft cocktails to locals and visitors alike. The dungeon-like bar at the Ace Hotel, the Amigo Room (760-325-9000; acehotel.com/palmsprings (<http://acehotel.com/palmsprings>)) opens onto the pool and offers specialty cocktails and a rotating menu of craft beers. Toucans Tiki Lounge (760-416-7584; toucanstikilounge.com (<http://toucanstikilounge.com>)) is a Palm Springs institution popular with

For more information: 800-347-7746; visitpalmsprings.com (<http://visitpalmsprings.com>).

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