

# Palm Springs, remixed: A retro classic is reborn

Meghan Lewit, Special for USA TODAY 7:46 a.m. EST December 20, 2013



(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://themoderntour.com/) (<http://themoderntour.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.