



## Rejuvenating Palm Springs

By Jayne Clark, USA TODAY

PALM SPRINGS, Calif. — Inside the Elvis Honeymoon Hideaway, caretaker/tour guide Laura Ramstead weaves through the asymmetrical rooms, all but oblivious to the fuzzy blown-up photos of the King, the leather-jacketed mannequin and the '60s-style jukebox. **(Photo gallery: [Not your father's Palm Springs](#))**

Time & Place Homes

Instead, she's focusing on the architectural details that inspired editors at Look Magazine to splash the dwelling on a 1962 cover and proclaim it The House of Tomorrow.

"It's been like pulling teeth to get Elvis to leave the building," Ramstead says with a laugh, as she points out peanut-brittle stone walls, a free-standing conical fireplace, terrazzo floors and other features that make the place an icon of swinging '60s modernism

The Elvis connection (he leased it for a year in 1966 and honeymooned here in 1967) still gets top billing. But increasingly, visitors are drawn to the house as a hallmark of mid-century modern architecture, a style that shaped Palm Springs from the 1940s to the '60s.

A revived interest in that sleek, bold style has brought new vitality to this desert resort city of 45,000, once considered God's waiting room. Now, after years of languishing touristically, Palm Springs is heating up with a passel of re-invented lodgings and new restaurants that are drawing a younger, hipper crowd.

"We've played on the past for so long," says Mark Bellinger, head of the local tourism bureau. "Now we want to go after a younger demographic."

So it's a bit ironic that what's attracting that younger demographic is, in many cases, a retro style exuberantly showcased in a growing number of lodgings.

The latest entry to the market is the 163-room Hotel Zoso, which opened Thursday. The former Pepto Bismol-pink conference resort that had sat vacant and forlorn in the center of town has been reborn as a chocolate-brown, uncluttered modern space with faux snakeskin lounges, a backlit onyx bar and high-tech trappings.

Hotels get a glam makeover

Frank Sinatra's Twin Palms home is now a vacation rental.

Last year, the Parker Palm Springs opened after a \$27 million makeover that blends high design with tongue-in-cheek humor. Personality wise, the former Merv Griffin Givenchy Spa and Resort couldn't be further from its new image than geriatric diva Zsa Zsa Gabor is from punk bad girl Courtney Love. Pottery-artist-turned-interior-designer Jonathan Adler turned the former hotel's over-the-top ornateness on its head, creating a lobby/lounge space that evokes the home of a well-traveled and wholly eccentric aunt. Outside, the hotel's 13 acres of formal gardens have been replaced by desert flora.

A decidedly non-Zen, 16,500-square-foot spa dubbed the Palm Springs Yacht Club (PSYC for short) opened in October. Among its credos: We believe you are only young once ... but can be immature forever.

The Viceroy Palm Springs, whose bungalows housed Clark Gable and Carol Lombard back when it was the Estrella Inn, has re-emerged in high-glam Hollywood regency style. And at dozens of small hotels, such as the Orbit Inn and the Movie Colony Hotel, hipsters with a taste for Eames-style chairs and blond-wood furniture gather poolside for cocktail hour.

### 'Dramatic change'

Beyond the spate of hotel makeovers are other developments designed to attract a crowd, including a striking copper and stone addition to the city's convention center. In January, Cirque du Soleil-style performances debut in a new tented pavilion in the heart of downtown. And new shops are gradually moving into formerly shuttered storefronts on North Palm Canyon Drive.

The dining scene is looking up, too, with a handful of chef-owned restaurants opening in the past two years.

"It was horrendous five years ago," says Jeff Hocker, a local marketing expert. "It was mostly steak and martini places and hadn't really changed since the 1940s. But there's been a dramatic change."

Still, in its current incarnation, Palm Springs is more about ambience and attitude than activity. Committed golfers hole up in the newer "down valley" resort communities of Palm Desert, Indian Wells and Rancho Mirage, which in recent times eclipsed this city as a retreat for wealthy retirees and tourists alike.

Here, however, visitors lounge around the swimming pools that are the crown jewel of every hotel, whether it has nine rooms or 90. They linger at outdoor cafes along Palm Canyon Drive, the main drag of the compact, pedestrian-friendly downtown. Or wander through art galleries and shops specializing in mid-century modern furniture and accessories.

It wasn't always this way. With its spectacular setting in the shadows of the San Jacinto Mountains, dry sunny weather, natural mineral springs and proximity to Los Angeles two hours away, the area became a retreat for the Hollywood glamour set as early as the 1920s and '30s. Cocktail culture was in full swing in the '50s and '60s with celebrities such as Bing Crosby, Frank Sinatra and Dean Martin lounging by the pool, along with wealthy Easterners and Midwesterners and a growing middle class.

But in the 1970s and '80s, the city had reached a nadir in the boom-and-bust cycle experienced by some resorts areas. Economic doldrums prompted an exodus, and some who stayed couldn't afford to maintain their homes. The moneyed set moved to newer resort communities in the Coachella Val-

ley. And much of Palm Springs proper "was becoming a ghost town," says Robert Imber, who operates Palm Springs Modern Tours. "All this architecture was left to decay until it was rediscovered in the late '80s and early '90s."

Hundreds of atomic-era gems were constructed between the 1940s to 1960s by modernist architects including Richard Neutra, Albert Frey, Donald Wexler, William F. Cody and E. Stewart Williams. They put their stamp on the city with hundreds of sleek, rectilinear buildings of glass, steel, aluminum and concrete.

In the past decade, the city blossomed as a modernist mecca when buyers came seeking homes built in the post-World War II boom years by the father-son team of George and Robert Alexander. The duo constructed upwards of 2,500 homes (including what came to be known as the Elvis Honeymoon House) that were marked by wood post-and-beam construction, open floor plans and floor-to-ceiling windows that brought the outdoors in.

That interest sparked a mini tourism boom, says Jay Ramstead, co-founder of the town's small hotel association. "Half the clientele weren't necessarily coming to experience Palm Springs. They were here to hook up with real estate agents. And that interest in housing has helped fuel the hospitality industry."

Indeed, investors began buying up long-neglected small hotels, (many of which had been converted to apartments), attracting a youthful clientele with an appreciation for irony, as well as older baby boomers with a nostalgia for mid-century modern trappings.

"A lot of people are comfortable with this style," says Ramstead. "Somewhere in their past is one of those pink-tiled bathrooms."

But while the architectural movement certainly spurred Palm Spring's renaissance, some, including Ramstead, wonder if the intense interest in it has peaked.

"There's less slavish devotion to modernism," says Ramstead. "I think what's unique about Palm Springs is that it's a city that's on the brink of finding itself. Nobody really knows what it is yet, but they're about to find out."

• **Getting there:** Palm Springs is 110 miles east of Los Angeles and 140 miles from San Diego. The local airport is serviced by 14 airlines, with non-stop service from

16 cities.

• **Where to stay:** Most of Palm Springs' 150 or so lodgings are small hotels of 50 rooms or fewer. Rates listed are for high season, generally from January to May.

The new centrally located **Hotel Zoso** (760-325-9676; [hotelzoso.com](http://hotelzoso.com)) features 165 contemporary rooms. A spa and fine-dining restaurant open in the spring. Rates: \$189-\$350.

The 144-room **Parker Palm Springs** (760-770-5000; [theparkerpalmsprings.com](http://theparkerpalmsprings.com)) bills its interior jumble of thrift store art, Moroccan prints, fake fur and Naugahide as "happy chic." From \$395.

The 29-room **Korakia Pensione** (760-864-6411; [korakia.com](http://korakia.com)) occupies several imaginatively redone buildings unified by a Moroccan/ Mediterranean theme. Rates: \$139-\$600.

**The Orbit In** (877-996-7248; [orbitin.com](http://orbitin.com)) exudes Jetsons-style cool in 18 rooms with vintage '50s and '60s furnishings. Rates: \$279-\$299.

• **Where to eat: Zin American Bistro** features a changing menu of seafood and other specialties. The Belgian beef stew and fried chicken are favorites. Entrees: \$14-\$29.

**Copley's** on Palm Canyon, in a house once owned by Cary Grant, specializes in contemporary American cuisine. Entrees: \$24-\$34.

• **Diversions:** The new **Palm Springs Pavilion Theatre** ([pspavilion.com](http://pspavilion.com)) premieres Jan. 11 with the opening of a Cirque du Soleil-inspired performance through May 20. Tickets: \$45-\$59.

**Palm Springs Modern Tours** (760-318-6118) unravels the mysteries of modernism in 2-1/2- to 3-hour tours of downtown for \$65.

The **Elvis Honeymoon Hideaway**, where the King honeymooned in 1967, is a stellar example of mid-century modern architecture. Tours by arrangement, \$25-\$30; 760-322-1192.

• Information: 800-347-7746; [palm-springs.org](http://palm-springs.org). Also, [bestofps.com](http://bestofps.com).

E-mail [jeclark@usatoday.com](mailto:jeclark@usatoday.com)