

Travel



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Palm Springs: 'suntan-and-gold-chains country'

Rich and famous love this oasis

By Mary Augusta Rodgers
Special writer

HERE IS something dreamlike about a town and Palm Springs, Calif., is no exception. Situated in a desert valley, ringed by mountains, it is a rapidly growing resort town and, at the same time, a fantastic hideaway for the rich and famous.

This is suntan-and-gold-chains country, where bright days and blue skies are practically guaranteed all winter and everyday reality is only part of the picture.

It is no surprise to learn that "Lost Horizons," the movie famous for its portrayal of Shangri-La, a hidden paradise of eternal youth, was filmed near here.

For the land of the Caballeros Indians, the valley was discovered by the Spaniards in 1774, and a spring, named by palm trees named Agua Caliente. This became a stagecoach stop and, later, a one-store railroad town called Palm Springs.

THEN, IN the late 1920s, the dusty little place was discovered by people in Hollywood, who were making surprising amounts of money in a crazy new business called "the movies."

They liked Palm Springs' winter climate and location, close enough for easy access, but far enough — with its mountains and desert scenery — to make a difference. It was, they decided, the perfect place when you wanted to get away for a while and take life easy.

It still is Palm Springs' assets of weather, location and scenery remain the same. But almost everything else has changed.

The town itself is still relatively small, with a year-round population of 22,500, and easy distances. But the Palm Springs area includes Palm Desert, Desert Hot Springs and Idyllwild and nearly 3-million people visit here every year.

THE SEASON is late November through March, but it's stretching every year as people come earlier in the fall and later in the spring. "Easter week in Palm Springs is pretty much taken over by western high schools and college kids, who come here in the same spirit that obviously kids go to Ft. Lauderdale, Fla."

Palm Springs has many kinds of accommodations, from luxurious resort hotels to economy motels, and a variety of restaurants. There are so many swimming pools, golf courses and tennis courts that it all looks like a mirage sometimes. A town where millionaires are almost as common as cactus plants is obviously going to have tempting stores and shopping here can be considered a sport.

People-watching possibilities are good, too. You see all kinds downtown, in all styles of dress: for

instance, a girl wearing a tank top, short shorts and leg warmers at high noon, with the temperature hitting 100 degrees. And an elderly man in a complete cowboy outfit, being pushed in a wheelchair.

THE PALM SPRINGS Desert Museum, in the heart of the downtown shopping section, is a contemporary building that reflects the colors and textures of the nearby San Jacinto mountains. It has devoted art and natural science exhibits and collections, including a display of beautiful woven baskets, now a lost art of the Caballeros Indians, and also the William H. Miller collection, the Ansonby Theatre for the Performing Arts and the Frank Sinatra Sculpture Court.

Taking a bus tour of "celebrity homes" is a popular pastime, although many places — like the Ansonby and Sinatra estates — are well hidden behind oleander hedges. Bob Hope's mountain-side house, seen from a distance, resembles an airplane hanger; the dining room, a bus driver revealed, seats 300.

In this secluded world, security guards and signs are everywhere. Armed Response, Guard Dogs on Duty, etc. One sign says: Never Mind the Dogs — Beware the Owner.

The San Andreas fault is marked in places by a line of palm and date trees, the result of surface water in the cracked earth. Local people joke about getting lost by buying land on the east side of the fault: one of these days, they say, that'll be the new California shoreline.

YOU CAN SEE spectacular views of the Palm Springs area, aloft in a hot-air balloon, or you can take the Aerial Tramway on its 2½-mile trip close to the summit of Mt. San Jacinto. The Tramway is open from mid-October through April.

If you like to stay on the ground while seeing the countryside, there's horseback riding, and hiking and bicycle trails. A toll road just south of Palm Springs leads to Indian land and Andreas Canyon, where there's a perfect spot — cooled by palm trees and a rocky stream — for a picnic.

The Moorish Botanical Gardens, in Palm Springs, provides an interesting look at desert trees and plants, weird sights, some of them, with names like the Boojum tree, the wax-and-minute bush and fescuegrass cactus.

At the Living Desert Preserve, in Palm Desert, you'll see desert animals like the kit fox and the kangaroo rat and, if you're lucky, catch a glimpse of bighorn sheep in the foothills of the Santa Rosa mountains.

THE BIG Morongo Wildlife Preserve, near Morongo Valley, is a splendid bird-watching site, as well as a natural oasis.

After even a short visit to the Joshua Tree National Monument — more than 870 square miles of



The country surrounding Palm Springs is one of the area's major attractions. The rugged terrain which includes boulder formations, mountain ranges and lush trees provides scenic beauty to residents and visitors.

desert territory — you'll begin to understand the fascination of the desert: the subtle colors, surrealistic shapes, the surprising variety of plants and creatures and their stubborn struggle to survive.

The land is blazingly hot in the summer, can be cold in the winter, and is full of blossoming wildflowers in the spring.

HOTELS in Palm Springs include the Hilton Riviera, the Spa, the Canyon, the Sheraton Plaza and the Ingleside Inn.

Restaurants: Las Casuelas Terraza, La Vallauris, Melvyn's and Lyons English Grill.

Tour guides: Roy White (714-325-4546) offers bus tours in and around Palm Springs and is a knowledgeable guide to the Joshua Tree National Monument.

For information, contact your travel agent or the Palm Springs Convention and Visitors Bureau, Airport Park Plaza, 251 N. El Cielo Road No. 315, Palm Springs, CA 92262.

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Palm Springs has a wealth of famous residents who stay for a few weeks or for the season. One who has a house here is Liberace. One of his many candelabras can be found outside his front door.

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