

## Palm Springs, California: A Gay Spa and Wellness Haven

**Customizable trips & dates**

by Pride Travel's certified Palm Springs Experts

Palm Springs is dotted along the entire valley with resorts and spas catering exclusively to the Gay or Lesbian traveler, not to mention the dozens of Gay and LGBT Friendly properties.

Whatever your ideal relaxation, wellness or romantic vacation, this idyllic California desert can deliver year-round. Over the coming months, we will be adding sections to this fact sheet featuring our customized options. In the meantime, please enjoy the clipped article below.

### Palm Springs, California A Gay Friendly Vacation Destination

By Victor Weinblatt, GoNomad.com



The surrealistically beautiful San Jacinto mountains rise straight up at the desert's edge, like a cosmic, not quite to be believed movie set, Nature's version of the ultimate special effect.

All day long the colors and the play of light, shadow and geometric form transform the mountain range. No matter how late you may have partied the night before, get up a half hour before dawn and watch as the sunrise turns the range into an exquisite terra cotta expanse. This only lasts for about 20 minutes, so don't be late.

Forget everything you know about Palm Springs: this is not the PS of Dinah Shore, Gerald Ford, or rich Aunt Martha. Forget the renowned golf courses and the Rodeo Drive like shopping (unless you are a gay golfer in need of a pair of Bruno Maglis).

For a provincial easterner whose image of the desert was formed by vintage Lawrence of Arabia movies and whose idea of a warm weather vacation always involved the shore, PS is nothing short of a revelation. Beware of getting bitten by the bug: one week-end quickly turns into more, and the real estate search usually starts by trip #Two.

Palm Springs first came on the map as a place for Howard Hughes and Hollywood moguls to keep their mistress du jour, as well as a retreat for stars to dry out and lose weight at the fat farm.

The first heyday spans the years from Marilyn Monroe's discovery to her death. In the seventies and eighties it went into a tailspin and became the elephant's graveyard for blue-hairs with money. PS has preserved the largest collection of mid-century modernist architectural masterpieces by accident: during its decline, there was no economic incentive to do tear downs.

When Sonny Bono became mayor in 1989, he started to bring out his Hollywood pals. With the 90s retro

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revival, PS once again became hot: along with martinis and cigars, Frank Sinatra and the Rat Pack, it was once again back in vogue.

### 35 Gay Resorts

There are 35 gay resorts. Estimates run as high as 40% for the permanent gay population. The mayor is an openly gay black progressive, and this in a very conservative region.

What makes Palm Springs idyllic is that it has something for everyone: the strong gay presence is relaxed, laid back and unselfconscious, with a small town friendliness and camaraderie, and without the cliquishness and self imposed ghettoizing of so many gay meccas.

For the butch among us, it is an outdoorsman's paradise. Few places on earth can boast over 120 superb hikes in such a concentrated area, ranging from easy and wimp-like (o.k., I have an excuse, just four weeks out of arthroscopic knee surgery), to advanced iron-man caliber.

Before you go, get a copy of Feranti's "120 Great Hikes In And Near Palm Springs." Before very long you notice that there is no humidity and no mosquitoes, reason enough to fall in love with the place.

First on your list should be Indian Canyons, a short ride by car or bike from town. Indian owned and run, you will pay a \$6 charge at the gate house. A paved road will take you to several different parking areas, jumping off points for your hike. Start at Palm Canyon, with its tiny Trading Post stocked with all kinds of useful pamphlets. Bond with the Indian ranger guides who are all about: they are friendly, eager, habitat interpreters with a wealth of information.

### Ranger Chris

I met ranger Chris Fritsche, an Indian from the Mid-west, who could not have been more helpful. Ranger led tours are also available, taking about an hour and a half, covering a mile of trail, for a \$3 charge. Here the enormous groves of luxurious California Fan Palms, with their long dried beards, rise out of oases and waterfalls juxtaposed with rocky gorges and stretches of desert scrub. The abundant waves of yellow and lavender spring wildflowers bloomed early this year after record setting January rains, and the usually browner ranges were startlingly verdant.

Palm Canyon 's moderately graded foot path winds down into the canyon proper for picnicking and awestruck contemplation beside the stream. This is also a good starting point for a whole range of more challenging hikes.

The hummingbird feeders next to the Trading Post are overrun with several important species, including the Anna and very rare Costa varieties. But you really don't need a feeder to find one: they are all over Palm Springs. As one local put it, Palm Springs is the "south" where birds go to escape winter. Roadrunners are everywhere, from your hotel garden to the canyons. Before you go, try to find a copy of "A Birder's Guide to Southern California " by James A. Lane, an invaluable guide.

Head the short distance next to Andreas Canyon, a lush oasis with 150 species of plants within a half-mile radius. The rock formations here are otherworldly in their graphic, geometric compositions: Nature as the ultimate sculptor, with a bold, modernistic sense of form and a dynamic flow of line, color, light and

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shadow. Think Georgia O'Keefe. The Andreas creek winds throughout the area. This is the best spot for bird watching: a few inept amateur bird calls will quickly draw an avian crowd scene. Check out the bedrock mortars and metates used by the native Agua Caliente Indians for preparing food.

An easy hike south from Andreas is Murray Canyon, criss-crossed by equestrian and walking trails. Murray Canyon, less visited than the others, also gives you the best chance for a glimpse of the Peninsula Big Horn Sheep (endangered) and the wild mule deer. Also be on the lookout for the rare and endangered Least Bells Vireo bird, a small, grey, migratory songbird which inhabits the dense thickets of willow and the cottonwood trees along the stream.

### Lost Horizon

At the more strenuous end of the spectrum are the Tahquitz Canyon hikes, which are ranger guided only. If you are old enough, or if you are a Frank Capra aficionado, you will remember the stunning 100 ft. waterfall here from the 1937 LOST HORIZON with Ronald Colman & Jane Wyatt. Also remember that this was a movie about Shangri-la. They had to winch the horse to the top of the waterfall for that famous scene. The winch is still there, the horse, mercifully, is not.



Consider horse back riding with Smoke Tree Stables. Before you shake your head, Wrangler Paul Cusenza will tell you that the majority of his customers are novices or those who have never ridden before. What a blast! Grab a bunch of friends, head out on the trail, and finally put that dusty old Village People cowboy hat to some manly use. Telephone Casey Johnson, owner, at 760-327-1372.

With 35 gay hotels, the diversity and range of choice is remarkable. The hotel owners camaraderie and lack of competitive spirit is a godsend to all. Many owners live at their inns, and 99% are owner managed. As one pointed out, coming to stay in a Palm Springs Inn is like being invited into the owner's home. Owners will often interview a prospective guest on the phone and recommend another inn instead: the practice, unheard of in the industry, almost guarantees a good match between host and traveler, and in the long run has paid dividends in making this a repeat destination. Each Inn has a distinct personality, and it requires the wisdom of Solomon to narrow the list.

### Triangle Inn is Tops

My top personal choice is the Triangle Inn. Designed by renowned Palm Springs architect Hugh M. Kaptur and built in the 1950s as the Impala Lodge, it is the only gay inn with a historical preservation designation. It is perfectly scaled (9 beautifully appointed, spacious suites, all with kitchen amenities) with a lush garden setting, charming pool and Jacuzzi, spectacular mountain vistas and a stone patio where an extensive Continental breakfast is set up each morning.

Atlanta transplants Michael Green and Stephen Boyd are perfect southern hosts: warm, engaging, attentive, with a totally professional and unobtrusive style that makes you want to remain a guest in perpetuity. The Inn is a mid-century architectural treasure, with original wood and metal architectural details and whimsical folk art carved and painted totems on the façade. The interiors are stylish and roomy, without that "decorated", contrived look. The Suites range from a reasonable \$115 through \$165 in season and the Inn is clothing optional. A two bedroom suite, perfect for sharing, is \$195.

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## SSSSSSHHHH!

But the VERY BEST TRAVEL SECRET in all of Palm Springs, which I would confide only to my best buds, is the unique four bedroom house which directly adjoins the Inn.

The house comes with its own private spectacular pool, Jacuzzi, terrace, elegantly landscaped garden, and the very best view in all of Palm Springs. Two bathrooms, a fireplaced living room, and a large kitchen and dining room make it the perfectly appointed vacation home. At \$1695 a week in season, it is also the best value in town.



The house has one more unique feature: a private entrance opening directly to the street, while the gate into the main property is controlled from the house side.

Therefore, the house guest has complete access to the main property, while the house itself remains private, allowing you the best of both worlds, and an ideal situation for bringing along parents, children or families (oh hell, leave them at home and have a really good time!) These thoughtful subtleties are what make the Triangle Inn #1.

My next personal favorite is the Las Palmas Hotel, designed with a Moroccan inspired aesthetic. The Indonesian furniture of teak and mahogany is offset with sisal carpeting. Casual, laid-back, but very upscale, the hotel is built around a large pool, with a Tuscan garden setting: citrus trees, Queen Palms and bougainvillea create a feeling of California hip & cool. It is situated in Palm Springs Uptown Neighborhood and is blessed with hotel co-owner Tony Spleen's wit, intellect and easy charm.

Be prepared to fall in love with Las Palmas and with Tony. Co-owner Thom Thompson's humor and irony will immediately win you over. The 17 exquisitely appointed rooms and suites range from \$129 to \$239. Clothing optional, it should be at the top of your list. You could hear bit of traffic. The guests and the surroundings are equally sexy.

## East Canyon Hotel and Spa

Sharing top billing is the very distinctive East Canyon Hotel & Spa, the only gay hotel with an on-site Day Spa offering massage, facial and body treatments staffed with licensed professionals. It is luxe to the nth degree, an understated vision of elegance and comfort at the stylistic intersection of Ralph Lauren and the Ritz. Just stepping onto the property conveys an instantaneous sense of manly pampering. Sexy New York corporate veteran Richard Weiss, detail oriented host, runs a very tight ship. It is the only gay resort that is not, interestingly enough, clothing optional.

The clientele is 30s and 40s L.A. and New York, affluent, attractive and quite comfortable in their expensive swim trunks. When asked about the clothing issue, Richard wryly pointed out that "he liked his Christmas presents wrapped", a preference obviously shared by his guests.

Down the street from the Triangle Inn is Tortuga del Sol, with a strong Southwestern flavor and a turtle theme. Spectacular views, lush landscaping, and 12 charmingly appointed suites and studios make this a top choice. Here, as in each of my favorites, it is the personality of the owners that infuses the property and makes it a winner: Ricky and Rob set the stage for a wonderful stay the minute you arrive. A warm, relaxed, friendly and unpretentious resort, you are immediately made to feel as if you are at home (you should be so lucky!).

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## Chestnutz

In the PS spirit of something for everyone, there are 3 hotels that cater to more specialized tastes. The Desert Bear specializes in "Bears and their admirers". Chestnutz proudly boasts that they host an older crowd. The Black Palm, with very intense and elaborately equipped theme suites, caters to the man serious about his fetish.

The women luck out with Casitas Laquita, situated on one of the most stunningly beautiful properties in all of Palm Springs. Almost makes a guy jealous. Old Spanish Mission in style, cozy fireplaced casitas with full kitchens are furnished with a handcrafted décor and with Tribal Indian Artifacts. The Rustic Tranquility points towards a more profound sensibility: there is a spiritual sense of place here, a feeling of being in a special, nearly sacred spot that I am at a loss to further describe.

For loveable hosts and owners Joanna Funaro and Denise Roberson, this is a 24-hour job. They project an uncanny warmth and friendliness that makes you feel like an old friend. They are also heavily involved in the Gay Tourism Guild and in events that surround Dinah Shore Weekend. As Joanna describes it: "Dinah Shore is a right of passage for all lesbians. If you haven't been to Dinah you are just not out." Rates for Casitas and Suites are from \$135 to \$350

## Women's Bars

There is one lesbian bar in Palm Springs, [Delilah's](#). Women also go to Toucans, which according to Joanna is "a mixed bar more or less". Joanna, singer and drummer, performs in an all female band, "Sassy Sisters". They play for special events, in the intimate downstairs "Wine Cellar" at Casita Laquita, and across the street at The Reef Tiki Bar in Caliente Tropics.

A romantic wedding had taken place the night before at Casitas Laquita, which reminds me, Massachusetts boys and girls, Palm Springs is the ultimate gay honeymoon destination. In our upside down gay world, it is amusing to contemplate a honeymoon after 21 years -- my partner and I were married last Thanksgiving -- but also perhaps more appreciated because society has made us wait so long.

A wedding, a honeymoon, a romantic night out, or none of the above would be a perfect excuse to rent an exotic luxury vehicle from Vintage Vehicles & Props (760-318-6255, [psmoviecars@aol.com](mailto:psmoviecars@aol.com)).

What a blast! Let me tell you, driving around Palm Springs in a pink '56 Lincoln convertible gets you a lot of attention, even if you have to pretend that the guys are looking at you rather than the hot car.

It is worth renting one of the vehicles just to meet owners Roberta and Ken Marchant, two of the most brilliant and engaging Palm Spring "characters".



In the center of Palm Springs is the spot where the Cahuilla Indians first discovered "Se-khi" – boiling water – the hot mineral springs which give the town its name. These springs were considered to be sacred, as well as curative and restorative.

On this very spot the Indians have built a stupendous spa, with a regime of steam, sauna, and eucalyptus inhalation therapy, all in preparation for the traditional "Taking of the Waters" in a private mineral tub with whirlpool action, followed by a stay in the tranquility room.

\$35 buys you an all day pass, and you can return as many times as you want, a real deal. There is also a spacious and beautifully appointed gay-friendly resort and an adjacent Casino. The Casino architecture is stunning: think Monaco rather than Atlantic City .

When the temperature rises in the summer, hotel rates plummet. Cool mist systems around nearly every pool keep you comfortable, but visitors in those months usually plan to be out of the heat at midday.

Summer nights in the desert are magical. Easter means the White Party, a bacchanal of epic proportions peopled principally by the gum chewing set. The Dinah Shore Golf classic is nearly at the same time, and is a significant draw for the Lesbian community.

As might be expected, Palm Springs has an extraordinary range of exceptional food. For breakfast and lunch you can't top 'More Than a Mouthful Café', with everything entirely made from scratch.

Gay owned and run, with a 'neighborhood regulars' feeling, lunches and breakfasts come in at just under the \$ 10 mark. Box lunches from Aspen Mills are equally legendary, and come in at the same price point. With so many excellent choices for dinner, what is a guy to do? My two top favorites are ZIN – American Style Bistro – "Where Other Chefs Eat", and Wang's in the Desert.

## **ZIN**

At ZIN every choice on the menu is simple, but spectacular, American cuisine with friendly and relaxed service. The downtown location has an understated charm. It is refreshing to see a compact menu done superbly: I am so weary of book length lists. Owner and Executive Chef Nicolas Klontz ('Chef of the Year' twice in his native Belgium) along with Mindy Reed, General Manager/Partner, have owned and managed restaurants in the Coachella Valley for years, enabling them to develop connections with local artisans and boutique wineries.

The mainly domestic wine list with nearly a 100 choices is reasonably priced. The Creamy Roquefort Citrus Dressing was memorable, and the Buttermilk Fried Chicken with Mashed Yukon Gold was the best, ever.

## **Wangs in the Desert**

The food is equally superb at Wang's in the Desert. The cuisine is Chinese-California Fusion. Chinese is never my first choice, but it became so at Wang's. A wide range of inventive appetizers and main dishes were rendered with panache and a dazzling medley of flavors. The list of influences was impressively long and always subtly expressed, including Cantonese, Sichuan, Mandarin, Japanese, Thai and Korean.

The room is delightful, with a beautifully understated décor, and a whimsical and witty bridge over a koi pond. Table hopping and good-spirited friendliness were the order of the evening. Our group of 15 gay travel writers and hotel owners was seated at the best table in the house.

Inadvertently, or possibly by design, we became the floor show. Who knows if we will ever be invited back? Driving by the restaurant the next day, I almost expected to see our names up on a marquis. I don't know when I have had more fun, at least doing something I could write about.

Blame It on Midnight is a fun and campy restaurant with raised banquettes and a few raised hemlines. Going on Valentine's Eve guaranteed a full contingent of drag queens decked out in red, with more flying boas, feathers and sequins than I have ever seen in a single room. Good food, attentive service, witty décor.

Most architectural historians agree that mid-century modernism had its roots in the California desert. The Palm Springs collection of these masterpieces is as historically significant as Colonial Williamsburg or Deerfield, Massachusetts.

Whatever you do in Palm Springs, do not miss Robert Imber's Modern Architecture Tour ([psmodern tours@aol.com](mailto:psmodern tours@aol.com)). Intertwined with delightful anecdotes and local lore, you will begin to see this important movement through his eyes and in the course of three hours begin to love it.

### **Built for Ava Gardner**

Imber will explain the innovative importance of the famed Alexander houses, and the stark beauty of Frey and Neutra's work.

Twin Palms, Frank Sinatra's 1947 house, came about when on an April stroll, ice cream cone in hand, old blue eyes walked into architect Stewart Williams' office with only one requirement, that he be in by Christmas. He was. Society gossip has it that he built it for Ava Gardner. We should all have such generous boyfriends.

Shield your eyes when you pass Liberace's house and try to keep your lunch down, but open them wide to catch a glance at Cole Porter's cloistered digs, which, in case you might be interested, is up for sale. Trina Turk's Ship of the Desert, built in 1936 by Wilson & Webster and faithfully restored a second time after a devastating fire, is a stunning and important milestone.

The 1968 Arthur Elrod house, built by acclaimed architect John Lautner, looks familiar because it was the setting for the James Bond "Diamonds are Forever". Robert knows everyone in town, and casually pulls in and out of private driveways.

Imber charges \$55 a person, a real bargain, and ferries you around in his minivan. On a recent tour, one wag, an old friend of Robert's driving an exquisite vintage Bentley, pulled next to his minivan, rolled down his window, and asked "if he might have any Grey Poupon". Only in Palm Springs!

That moment is a metaphor for Palm Spring's diversities and co-existing contradictions. Imber sometimes will recruit you in the rescue of a stranded turtle in the road and will occasionally forget to forewarn the unwary tourist in his minivan about that reptilian rustling behind the back seat.

### **Palm Springs Weekend**

If you have time before you go, read or skim the bible of PS architecture, "Palm Springs Weekend" by Alan Hess & Andrew Danish, and if you are really ambitious, look through Adele Cygleman's "Palm Springs Modern" and Joseph Rosa's "Albert Frey, Architect".

Palm Springs is one of the few places on earth where Inns boast about being the setting for your favorite porn movie and proudly showcase them in their lobbies as sacred texts. In mixed company, and for the sake of the courts, they are now described as educational films.

To borrow a technical phrase from the adult movie industry, the real Palm Springs "money shot" (o.k., folks, use your imagination) does not involve the handsome men, but those extraordinary mountains that surround you in all directions, no matter where you look.



The Palm Springs Aerial Tram is mandatory. Rising two and a half miles in Mt. San Jacinto State Park, two 80 passenger cars revolve slowly from within, providing a 360 degree view.

The afternoon temperature at the bottom Valley Station was 71 degrees; by the time the tram reached the Mountain Station, a 6,000 foot climb, the temperature was 31 and there were 5 inches of snow on the ground.

Our fellow passengers were well-equipped with cross country skis, snowshoes and sleds, an image that gives you pause in the warm Valley Station below.

The tram passes through five life zones, from Sonoran Desert to Alpine Wilderness. The patterns of rock strata that you pass on the ride, seemingly close enough to touch (o.k., please do not try), are startling.

Geology 101, intricately veined and shaded cliff facades, dizzying vistas, and mountain mists and clouds that you pass directly through, cause a right brain/left brain struggle that leaves you weak-kneed and pleasantly numb. At the top, 54 miles of hiking trails and primitive campgrounds spread out before you.

If you are in town on a Thursday night, do not miss Villagefest. In the heart of the Village on Palm Canyon Drive, this outdoor street fair has vendors selling everything from Polish Sausage (o.k., boys, knock it off) to pastry, along with musicians, artisans, book signing events and pretty much anything else you can imagine.

### **The Follies**

At the top of your evening dance card pencil in FOLLIES. A PS tradition and legend, it is classic vaudeville, with a kick line of Long-Legged-Lovelies performing fan dances Sally Rand style. The "pretty girl" (the official name of the routine) costumes are (and there is no other word for it, though I shudder to use it) 'Fabulous': sequined, bejeweled, and feathered, with backbreaking wingspans (10 ft.) and neck snapping headdresses (10 ft. floor to top), weighing up to 35 lbs.

Think about those figures for a minute. It is a wonder that they can even stand up, much less dance, sing and strut around the stage. I would fall flat on my face. In your face, Busby Berkey.

Add one more startling fact: they are introduced on stage with their Broadway and Hollywood resumes, climaxing, in a drum roll, with their age.

All performers are in their 60s, 70s and 80s. Which translates for me as, 'God, maybe there is hope for us all!'

" Top banana" Impresario Riff Markowitz guides us through the series of "bits", from Leonardo's Ed Sullivan style plate spinning, set to the music of Katchaturian, to the sidesplitting ventriloquist routine of Sammy King and Franciso, the ill-tempered parrot with a Hispanic accent and an aversion to having his feet touched.

Guest star Kaye Ballard, veteran of the Perry Como, Doris Day, and Ed Sullivan shows, was superb.

Having grown up on tales of vaudeville from my Yiddish grandfather who worked the Palace Theatre in New York , the evening was simultaneously hilarious, nostalgic and bittersweet.

### Gay Bars

The town has its share of great gay bars. Streetbar is neighborhood style, warm, friendly, crowded and low-key. The gregarious owner, who greets nearly every patron personally, looked quite fetching a few nights later in full drag when he bear-hugged me on Valentine's Eve.

My other favorite was Hunter's, a sprawling, high energy club with a throbbing dance floor, pool tables, and men hot enough to make your personally insecure author want to pull a paper bag down over his head.

Walled in by those biblically majestic mountain ranges, the extravagantly lush oasis that is Palm Springs reminds you of nothing so much as our ancient images of Eden. This paradise proves the bible thumping religious right dead wrong: here Adam & Eve and Adam & Steve happily co-exist in near perfect harmony. Pack your bags (or not, if you are going clothing optional) and fly out for a visit, for in this 21st century world, Paradise is sometimes, if not always, lost.



**Victor Weinblatt** is a freelance writer and country antique dealer living in Massachusetts. He is passionate about travel, the fine arts, politics and social issues.