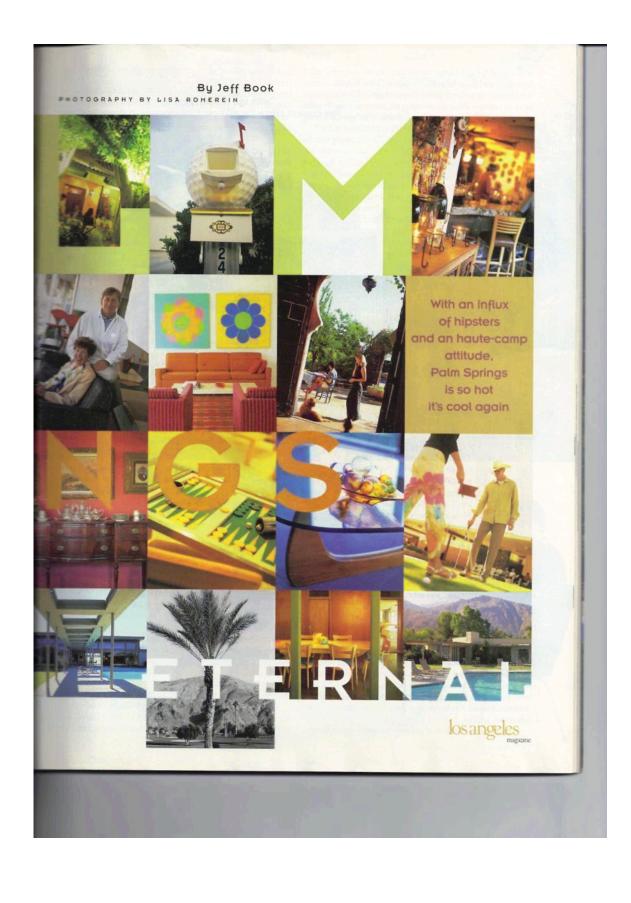
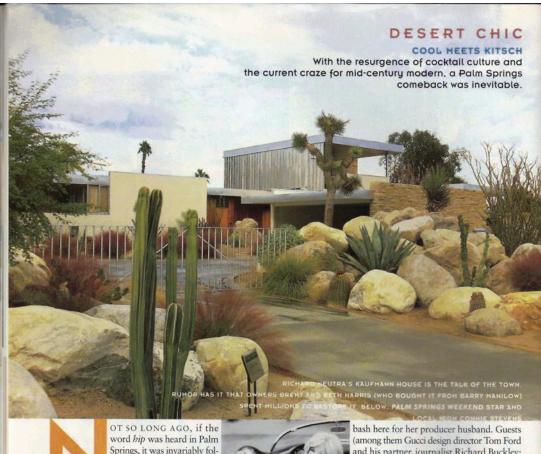


ARTY LOCALS, BETTER RESTAURANTS, EDGIER SHOPS AND QUAINT HOTELS ARE MAKING PALM SPRINGS.

GLAMOROUS ONCE MORE, BUT IT'S THE TOWN'S PRESERVED-IN-A-TIME-WARP RETRO CHIC THAT'S REALLY PUTTING IT
ON THE STYLE MAP. FOR PHOTO INFORMATION, SEE PAGE 79

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OT SO LONG AGO, if the word hip was heard in Palm Springs, it was invariably followed by replacement surgery. Now, a new generation is discovering the charms of this desert city long called God's Waiting Room. After years of tepid recession, Palm Springs' tourist business, nightlife and housing market are heating up like asphalt in July. But the operative word is cool, as artists, designers, fashionistas, photographers and other arbiters of style flock to this mecca of vintage modernism, carefree hedonism and unabashed kitsch.

The first signs that the Geritol set did not have an exclusive hold on the place became apparent a few years ago when New York creative types began buying up the town's modernist houses and Los Angeles hipsters started trekking out for weekend parties. Once those people (the ones who wore vintage Pucci and Halston before it was cool, the ones who know that Garbage isn't trash and fenix isn't a city in Arizona) deemed it as happening, Palm Springs became a bona fide status symbol.

Two years ago, an L.A. photographer-party queen threw a

bash here for her producer husband. Guests (among them Gucci design director Tom Ford and his partner, journalist Richard Buckley; L.A. club guru Sean MacPherson; photographer Dewey Nicks; and interior designer Brad Dunning) drove from house to modernist house in golf carts while sipping martinis. Entertainment included lounge singer Buddy Greco (flown in from Vegas) and the hostess jumping out of a giant cake. "It was a party that couldn't have happened anywhere else but in Palm Springs," says one attendee.

Later, at a Fourth of July barbecue at Korakia, a Moroccan-flavored hotel that attracts an arty international set (Ford, Bruce Weber,

Chris O'Donnell, Elisabeth Shue and the band Pink Martini), a Brazilian guitarist crooned bossa nova tunes for some magazine editors, artists, photographers and designers as they sipped caipirinhas under a starry sky. "It was a stylish group of people breaking bread together," recalls Cameron Silver, owner of Decades, the hipper-than-thou L.A. vintage shop.

Once, only the hardiest of desert rats would have braved the blistering heat in July. Now, Palm Canyon Drive, the city's main drag, is bustling year-round. Locals used to say that

you could fire a cannon down the street in midsummer and not hit anyone; these days you'd probably take out several European tourists and a fair number of Angelenos sipping iced cappuccinos between spa appointments. Even when the heat feels like a 400-pound angora sweater, people pack the sidewalk tables of cafés as overhead misters spray them like so many supermarket cucumbers.

Of course, with the resurgence of cocktail culture-Frank Sinatra, martinis, golf, cigars-and the current craze for midcentury modern, which is the town's signature style, a Palm Springs comeback was inevitable. (This was, after all, the Rat Pack's favorite retreat.) And what a difference a few decades make. In that inexplicable way low culture has of becoming high culture (like Campbell's soup cans in the hands of Andy Warhol), baby boomers now embrace the very stuff they once scorned: piano-shaped pools, mailboxes fashioned into

giant golf balls. Condominium complexes that resemble Forest Lawn are deemed "architecturally interesting"; local icons like Suzanne Somers, Barry Manilow, Connie Stevens and Bob Hope now seem, well, appealing-at least to those who consider themselves gatekeepers of haute camp.

"What used to be tacky is cool now," says L.A. retailer Diane Rosenstein, who goes to Palm Springs in search of modernist furnishings for her Melrose Avenue shop, Russell Simpson. "Our clients are buying second homes there. The biggest appeal is that there's nothing to do but relax. There's no noise, no pressure, no traffic-unless you call people driving really slowly in gold Sevilles traffic."

"What younger people like about Palm Springs is exactly all that geezer stuff," says Paris-based Richard Buckley. "It's not about wearing black. It's about loud shirts and listening to Frank and tacky restaurants with flocked-velvet wallpaper and real live cocktail waitresses. It's going to be ruined, of course, the minute Michele Lamy opens up a Palm Springs branch of Les Deux Cafés," he quips.

Where else could you meet realtors Ben and Beverly Bell, who drive matching white Caddies with RING A BELL license plates and dress in outfits coordinated with the homes they hawk on the real estate channel? Where else could you find a

putting green at the airport? A 5K run/walk sponsored by a plastic surgery clinic? A Walk of Fame with stars like Trini Lopez and Cheetah, the chimp from Tarzan?

"This is the kind of place where Robert Wagner and Jill St. John cut the ribbon at the opening of a thrift store," observes Los Angeles artist Jim Isermann, who in 1997 bought one of seven steel-frame houses that local architect

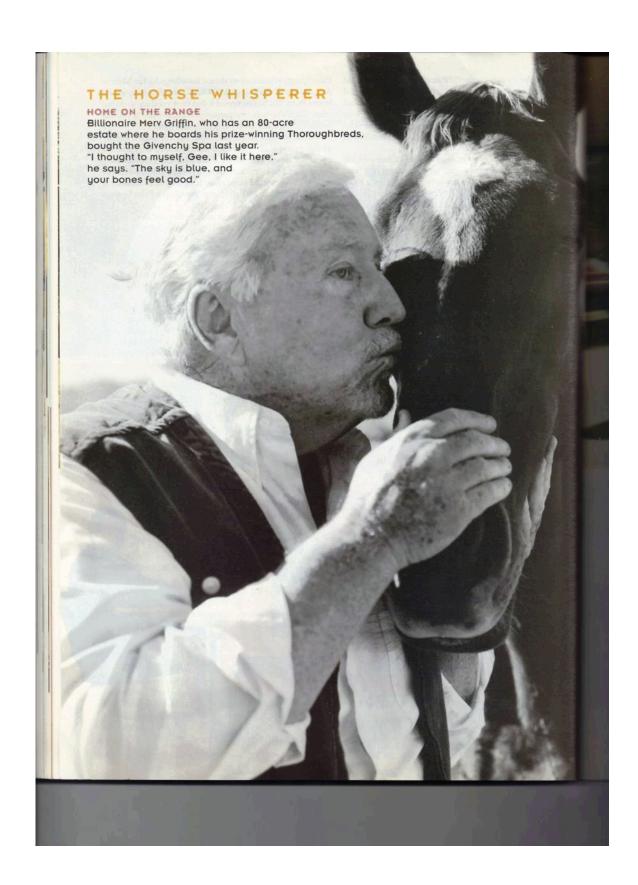
ARTISTS JIM ISERMANN AND DAVID SCHWARTZ AT THEIR KNOLL DINING ROOM TAB E. BEHIND THEM IS SELF PORTRAIT

A PHOTOGRAPH BY PAE WHITE, ABOVE: THEIR ALL-STEEL 1980 PROTOTYPE HOUSE BY DONALD WEXLER

ARTISTS IN RESIDENCE

Twenty- to fortysomethings are snapping up homes that are bargains by L.A. standards. age of the sellers."







Donald Wexler designed in the early '60s as prototypes for U.S. Steel. Isermann and his partner, artist David Schwartz, spend almost every weekend restoring their white, minimalst structure (Isermann calls it his "biggest work of art"), which they've filled with retro furniture by Knoll, Saarinen and Verner Panton, along with their own colorful artworks. Gesturing around the neighborhood—the house

next door is purple, a driveway across the street is the color of a swimming pool—Isermann continues his litany of local attractions. "We've got golf-cart Christmas parades, early-bird dinner specials...." As if on cue, a woman in a white jogging suit walks by with a chihuahua on a leash and waves. Isermann and Schwartz wave back. "We love all that kind of stuff about Palm Springs."

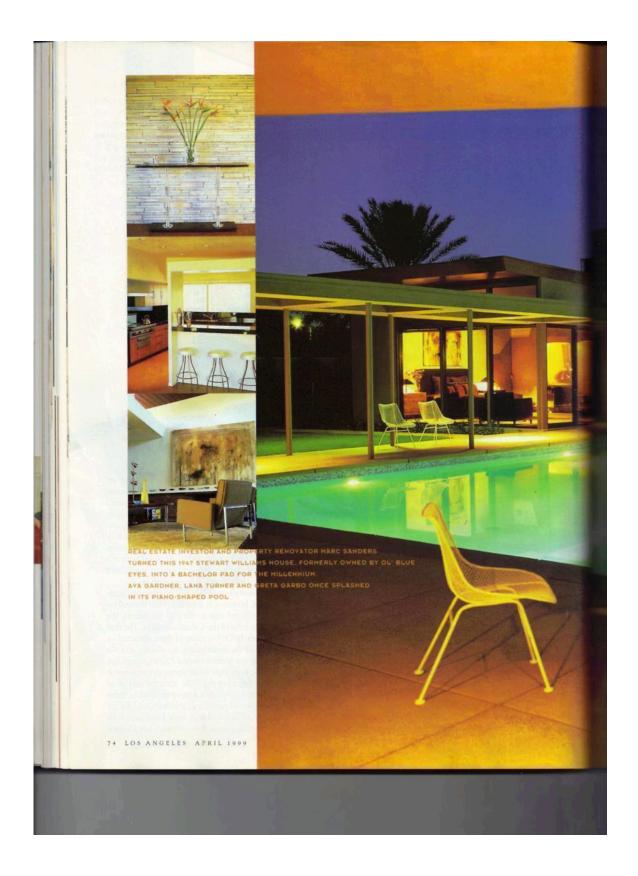
Douglas Coupland set his catchphrase-spawning novel Generation X in Palm Springs and lived there while writing it, from 1989 to 1990. "I chose Palm Springs specifically because it was scientifically, measurably the unhippest place in North America," he says. "There were a few brave souls in black who studied at College of the Desert, but the heat killed them quickly. It had a sci-fi quality of having pretty well no citizens between the ages of 20 and 40—precisely the age group

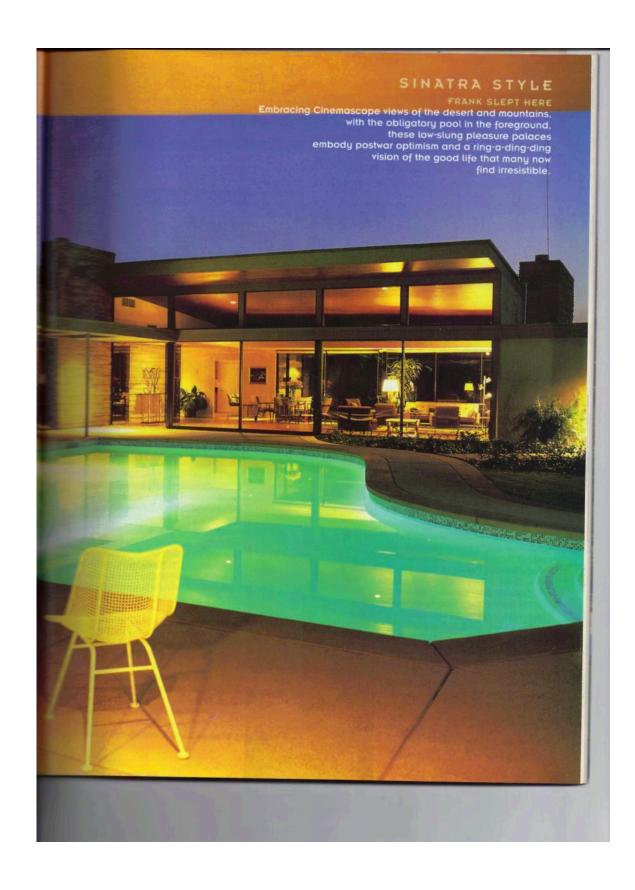
now becoming enchanted with the place." (In fact, 25- to 44-year-olds currently represent a surprising 27 percent of the population; those over 65 account for only 26 percent.)

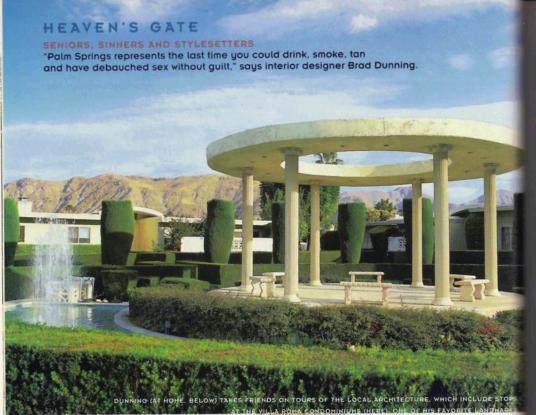
It's this younger group that is snapping up homes that, by L.A. standards, are bargains. "A lot of buyers are half the age of the sellers," notes Allen Miller of Realty Executives. Fixer-uppers priced below \$100,000 can still

be found, especially in the windy north end of town, and \$300,000 could fetch a nice three-bedroom with pool.

That Vince Vaughn–style swingers will be majority landowners any time soon, however, is doubtful. Half the real estate in Palm Springs still belongs to the true old-timers, the
wealthy Agua Caliente tribe of the Cahuilla Indians. The first
Anglos arrived in the early 1900s, many of them attracted by
the therapeutic effects of the area's sunny, dry climate and hot
springs (still on tap at the Indian-owned Palm Springs Spa
Hotel & Casino). The transition from sleepy desert outpost
to glittering getaway began in the '30s, with the arrival of
Hollywood players escaping the stern gaze of the studios. Palm
Springs soon became world famous as a playground for tycoons and movie stars: Clark Gable, Carole Lombard, Kirk
Douglas, Bette Davis, Cary Grant, Errol Flynn, Gary Cooper,







Lucille Ball and Elvis Presley are among those who came to frolic in a place known as much for privacy as for hedonism.

In those days, the season kicked off in late October with a party at the Racquet Club, owned by actors Ralph Bellamy and Charles Farrell. Veterans remember impromptu soirees when Frank Sinatra, "Honorary Mayor" Bob Hope and Bing Crosby performed for their peers in the club's bar. During the day, you could see Elizabeth Taylor lunching with then husband Mike Todd, Gene Kelly pounding the tennis courts, Rock Hudson cavorting in the pool and Jayne Mansfield demonstrating

how to stuff a wild bikini. "A group of us-Eva Gabor, Dinah Shore, Mousie Powell [wife of William], Barbara Sinatra, when she was married to Harpo Marx-would meet once a week at the Racquet Club for tennis and hamburgers," recalls realtor Nelda Linsk, a Palm Springs archetype with her blond coif and shiny Cadillac. "It was great fun, very relaxed-sometimes we'd end up dancing in our tennis skirts next to people who'd just come from a black-tie party."

But by the '70s and '80s, the sleek glass houses and poolparty weekends were giving way to climate-controlled lifestyles in golf-course villas. As the Coachella Valle developed, newer resorts and communitiesan add-water-and-grow patchwork of gated enclaves and country clubs-overshadowed Palm Springs proper.

Palm Desert, Indian Wells, Rancho Mirage and La Quinta became havens for the senior moneyed set, people like the Walter Annenbergs, the Gerald Fords and Bill Gates Sr. (billionaire Bill Jr. is building a grand manse in the Refuge area of Palm Desert). Many of the old show-biz crowd also moved "down valley," and the younger generation didn't ex actly rush to take their place. Until recently

an under-60 star who came to the area was more likely to check into the Betty Ford Clinic than to check out the scene

A side effect of the Palm Springs doldrums was that exist ing buildings were largely left alone-a prime reason for the town's popularity among modernist enthusiasts nostalgic for yesterday's future. Albert Frey, Richard Neutra, John Lautner William Cody and others endowed Palm Springs with one the largest concentrations of modern architecture in the world. a legacy preserved by benign neglect-developers simply moved eastward, filling neighboring communities with market-driven Mediterranean-style houses, acres of beige stucco and red tile roofs. The clean-lined structures built from the '40s through the '60s-when plentiful land, freedom from tradition and cosmopolitan denizens helped make Palm Springs a hotbed of modernism-seemed stuck in a time warp.

"Palm Springs was a blank slate for modernist architects, says former Architectural Digest senior editor Adele Cygelman, whose Palm Springs Modern will be published in May by Rizzoli. "They interpreted the modernism of the time in ways that were appropriate for the desert-big overhangs, sun-resistant metal and rock pools that had a cooling effect. It looks as right today as it did when it was built." As eminent Palm Springs architect Albert Frey, who died last November at the age of 95, wrote in a 1935 letter to his former employer Le Corbusier: "The sun, the pure air and the simple forms of the desert create perfect conditions for architecture."

Today, neighborhoods like Las Palmas (dubbed the Bel-Air of Palm Springs, its residents have included Dean Martin, Jack Benny, Elvis Presley and Beach Boy Carl Wilson) are still filled with vintage modern houses undimmed by the added flourish of Grecian statuary or New Orleans wrought iron. Embracing Cinemascope views of desert and mountains (with the obligatory pool and barbecue in the foreground), these low-slung pleasure palaces embody postwar optimism and a ring-a-dingding vision of the good life that many are now finding irresistible.

Like Isermann, Doug Keeve, director of Unzipped, the documentary about designer Isaac Mizrahi, was attracted to Wexler's allsteel houses and bought one two doors down from the L.A. artist. "I live mostly in New York, sometimes in L.A., and more and more I want to go somewhere unfabulous," Keeve says, relaxing on a crisp white leather sofa in his pristine, window-walled living room. "You can't put too much in these houses," he notes, "which forces me to be less of a slob." Outside, large agaves cast spiky shadows on a whitewashed cinder-block wall. "Palm Springs is a dream place because there's nothing to do, which is good for creativity. Sometimes I drive around just to people watch-you see aging playboys wearing gold chains and blue-haired ladies with amazing style. I call it Jacqueline Susann meets Halston.'

Keeve's pad is catercorner to that of GQ creative director Jim Moore, who in 1993 was the first of the new influx to buy a Wexler. "Back then, every other house in Palm Springs had a FOR SALE sign," he recalls. "This one had worn-out carpeting, dead grass around the pool and purple Mylar and miniblinds on the windows." After Moore cleaned it up, the airy pavilion was almost unrecognizable; it now seems oddly familiar to those who've glimpsed it in fashion spreads and ad campaigns for Gucci, Allure magazine and Patek Philippe.

"I find a tremendous similarity between the ocean and the desert," remarks another Palm Springs fan, Seattle-based artist Dale Chihuly. "Whatever it is that draws us to the ocean-a sense of mystery, the vast horizon, a certain peacefulnessalso exists in the desert." This may explain why Chihuly's glass art, which evokes multi-hued marine life, is found in the Palm Springs Desert Museum and in many local private collections-and why he bought a glass-walled modernist house in Palm Springs designed by local architect Stewart Williams.

Like Chihuly, many who've trooped in from L.A., New York and elsewhere on business have returned to soak up the sunshine and the mellow vibe.

"What I love about Palm Springs is that you can see 10 movies in a weekend and not wait in line," says Tom Ford, who visits about six times a year.

L.A. fashion designer Trina Turk and her husband, wardrobe stylist Jonathan Skow, are restoring a 1935 streamline moderne house known as the Ship of the Desert, anchored high on a hill overlooking the Valley. Though it was damaged by fire last November, the two are undeterred in their quest to re-create an airy desert hideaway. "Everyone in fashion is bombarded by visual ideas and details," observes Turk. "It's refreshing to be in a place where what you see is simpler and more elemental." Modernist houses, she adds, are "the architectural equivalent of a sheath dress-pared down, chic and timeless."





Many buying these houses are filling them with furniture from local shops like John's Midcentury Modern, Lunacy, the Village Attic and the thrift and consignment stores that dot Highway 111. Heavily mined by dealers and designers from L.A. and beyond, this modernist mother lode is constantly replenished as older residents redecorate or die off. Shoppers comb through the castoffs at the area's more than two dozen resale outlets and time-trip through the decades at the Estate Sale Company, which occupies an entire block. Next door at Patsy's-a resale shop where Tammy Faye Bakker has been spotted checking out designer gowns-feather boas and glittery gold pumps get a second chance.

"It's a treasure trove," says interior designer Brad Dunning. "Because many of the houses were vacation homes, you find more flamboyant designs, more custom furnishings."

Ahead of the curve, Dunning bought a house in Palm Springs five years ago and has been active in efforts to preserve modernist landmarks. "Modernism was the last great architectural movement to try to change the way people lived," he declares. "The city government doesn't appreciate modernist design; they'd like to replace it with Santa Fe style." In 1997, meeting in the city hall designed by Albert Frey, the city council finally granted protected status to Frey's 1965 Tramway gas station, which marks the northern approach to the city with its soaring flying-wedge roof. Later they rescinded it under pressure from the owner and from citizens who called the building an eyesore. The structure is being preserved by its new owner, a San Francisco company that is converting it into a sculpture gallery.

"Right now, Palm Springs is at a crossroads," Dunning continues. "It's like Miami Beach before they saved their art deco buildings. The city needs to understand that preservation may not please everyone in the short run, but in the long run, the whole town will benefit."

Private homeowners are leading the way. Ralphs/Food 4

Less magnate Ron Burkle has restored a 1968 John Lautner concrete and glass showplace built for Arthur Elrod that appeared in Diamonds Are Forever. Metalware manufacturer Jim Gaudineer is restoring Frey's Loewy House, with its amoeba-shaped indoor-outdoor pool, that was built in 1947 for industrial designer Raymond Loewy. And real estate investor and property renovator Marc Sanders has transformed a 1947 Stewart Williams into a bachelor pad for the millennium. While it was in escrow, Sanders discovered that the house had been built for Frank Sinatra. Though his refurbishment includes changes some purists disapprove of (rather than restoring the house's original wood siding, for instance, he ripped it off), Sanders believes they harmonize with Sinatra's style.

But the project everyone's talking about is the museum-quality restoration of Richard Neutra's exquisite Kaufmann House (designed for the same family that commissioned Frank Lloyd Wright's Fallingwater). Fanatical in their devotion to Neutra's design, financial executive Brent Harris and his wife Beth, an architectural historian, put the new air-conditioning compressor below ground to keep the roofline intact, quarry-matched the original stonework and even recast the original toileteat hinges. The house is a highlight on the increasingly popular (but unofficial) architectural tour of the city.

Rabid mid-century buffs who make the pilgrimage (some from as far away as Japan) to savor desert modernism like to complete their experience by staying at vintage motels like L'Horizon or the San Marino, both designed by local architect William Cody. Others are drawn to lodgings like the Willows, a 1920s Mediterranean mansion-turned-bed and breakfast that has a charm lacking in the big down-valley resorts. (A bonus of staying at the Willows is the atmospheric Provençal-

style restaurant Le Vallauris just across the street.) For skinnydippers, La Mancha, where John Travolta, Jennifer Aniston and Ice Cube have holed up, offers private villas with their own pools.

True hedonists stay at the Givenchy Spa. Merv Griffin (whose 80-acre Moroccan-style estate in La Quinta boasts a lake and a racetrack for his stable of prizewinning Thoroughbreds) purchased the deluxe French chateau-cum-spa last year. "It's a pamper palace," he says, "a hideaway for Top 10 grossers." (He won't name names, but Eastwood, Stallone, Streisand and Merv's pal Nancy Reagan have all been spotted.) In the '80s, long after the blithe soirees he recalls from his first fun-filled postwar visits, Griffin came out for a tennis tournament and was smitten again: "I thought to myself, Gee, I like it here. The sky is blue, and your bones feel good." Palm Springs had grown "sort of dilapidated," he admits, "but it's

well on its way back."

Of course, its patina accounts for at least part of the town's character. The Ingleside Inn, for example, a Spanish-style estate converted into a hotel in the '30s, is a slightly dotty grande dame with retro appeal. Set among palm trees, it has dim lighting, photos of celebrities on the walls and a guest book signed by Salvador Dali and Marlon Brando. New Yorker Melvyn Haber, who bought the inn in 1975, can usually be found kibbitzing with the patrons at Melvyn's Restaurant & Lounge. The piano bar is the kind of place, notes Dunning, where

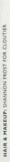


"if you walked in and Peggy Lee was singing 'Is That All There Is,' you wouldn't blink twice." (A few years ago, Liza Minnelli actually did get up and sing a tune.)

Joints like Melvyn's (there's also Banducci's and Club 340) never went out of style in a town where the oldsters who take a turn at the mike may well be former lounge singers. And some of the old-school restaurants are in keeping with that "one more for the road" feel. The beef-and-martinis crowd goes to L.G.'s Steakhouse or Bob Hope's favorite, Lyons. The latter's charms include "a gruff bartender, bad piano player and steaks soaked in butter," says Dunning, who adds that it's perfect for Palm Springs, which "represents the last time you could drink, smoke, tan and have debauched sex without guilt." There are those who also remember when you could gamble in the back room at the Doll House (now Sorrentino's), where the bar stools were equipped with seat belts, or hear the likes of Lena Horne and Sammy Davis Jr. croon at the old Chi Chi Club.

But Palm Springs has always been more about private parties than public scenes. "Why would you leave a party where Frank







Sinatra was singing to go to a nightclub?" asks Anne (Mrs. Kirk) Douglas, who recently put her Palm Springs home up for sale after 42 years. She fondly recalls get-togethers with the Sinatras, the William Powells, Moss Hart and Kitty Carlisle. "We're on the same street as Sidney Sheldon, not far from Larry Gelbart, Steve Shagan and houses where Harold Robbins and Truman Capote lived,"

she says. "We've had some interesting block parties."

"Palm Springs is like finding a small town at the turn of the century," says her neighbor, novelist Sheldon. "You can walk down the street and not worry. It lowers your blood pressure."

Perhaps not for much longer. The figures for year-round residents and off-season tourists are rising (the Coachella Valley's permanent population, currently 273,500, is expected to reach half a million by 2015), and locals fear that growth will undermine Palm Springs' small-town spirit. Already, the airport is being upgraded for jumbo jets, and the city is trying to attract high-tech businesses while lobbying for an extension of the L.A.-to-Riverside Metro Link line.

"The visitors who used to come to town with a \$10 bill and a T-shirt and not change either are gone," says Stewart Weiner, editor of the local glossy Palm Springs Life. "We'd like the younger people to do what the old movie stars did—contribute something to the community." But it remains to be seen whether the next generation will jump into the Sagebrush Society whirl, taking the place of pillars like Jane Wyman, Rosalie (widow of George) Hearst and Patty and Arthur (brother of Paul) Newman. Or if they'll fulfill the vi-

sion of civic leaders to have a well-educated, affluent citizenry of tanned telecommuters and entrepreneurs.

Still, optimism reigns, and no one's changing the welcome mat to read GO AWAY—like the one Ol' Blue Eyes hād on his patio. Instead, old-timers and newcomers alike are humming a different Sinatra standard: "The Best Is Yet to Come." LA

PHOTOGRAPHS (PAGES 66-69): TOP ROW FROM LETT Fountain at Korakia; Jim Isermann painting; city's namesake tree; Tina Turk and Jonathan Skow at all port putting green; Le Vallauris; golf-ball mailbox; St. James at the Vineyard, SCOND ROW ROOM at the Willows; Turk and Skow; Las Casuelas Terrazzo; drinks at the Willows; John and Dorris Hall of John's Hidcentury Hodern; interior of Jim Isermann's house; Korakia. **Hall Row Jim Isermann's bedroom; City Hall; local flora (2); Estate Sale Company; backgammon at Sidney Sheldon's; Marc Sanders's Sinatra House; Turk and Skow. **Outer Bow City Hall; saxophonist Pat Rizzo at Club 340; Loewy House; Sorrentino's; Sinatra House; Canyon Ranch Golf Course; Dale Chilhuly's dining room; L'Horizon