

Palm Springs transitions from desert retreat to hipster haven

By Jimmy Im

October 28, 2014 | 6:45 am



Splash House Music Festival

Photo: Oliver Walker/Splash House Music Festival

Baby boomers have been flocking to Palm Springs for its racket- and club-swinging recreations, its warm, dry weather, its trademark mid-century modern architecture and design. The slow and easy lifestyle prompted many to buy second homes and retire here.

But that community is witnessing a significant change in their desert oasis bubble. New restaurants are serving craft beer and flaunting edgy design. Golden Era hotels are going under the knife with dramatically modern face-lifts. And canyon hiking trails are trodden by bearded urbanites in designer sunglasses and neckerchiefs.

A new Palm Springs is taking shape, one where a feverish, youthful energy is almost palpable in the desert heat as millennials swarm to festivals like Coachella, Joshua Tree Music Festival and the more recent Splash House, and to frequent the spate of cool new boutique hotels and bars

Here's a look at the future Palm Springs.

Nightlife



A DJ holds court at Splash House Music Festival.

Photo: Oliver Walker, Splash House Music Festival

“Five years ago, the Ace Hotel was the only option I considered when meeting with friends,” says 30-year-old Donovan Funkey, who grew up in Palm Springs. But now friends come to him. In February 2013, Donovan opened Bar, a cocktail lounge with an indoor/outdoor performance space for DJs and live bands. It filled a void between staid hotel bars and not-so-glam watering holes for the swelling hipster scene.

The resurgence of the town has attracted Splash House Music Festival, an annual weekend pool party that happens in August and spans multiple locations, including the new Hard Rock Hotel Palm Springs and The Saguaro hotel, as well as Hacienda Cantina & Beach Club, an 8,000-square-foot outdoor venue with pool, cabanas, three bars and a sprawling lawn.

Thanks to its partnership with Goldenvoice — a division of AEG that has produced the world’s most famous music festival, Coachella — Splash House features top acts like Moby, Cut Copy and Chromeo. All Splash House venues are still party houses throughout the year, joining the ranks of notoriously trendy, DJ-fronted weekend-resort pool scenes like Ace Hotel, Riviera Palm Springs and Skylark.

Hotels

There's a slew of trendy hotels touting cool pools to woo the young jet-set. The hotel-of-the-moment, Sparrows Lodge (from \$139), opened last winter, attracting starlets like Clea DuVall, of "Argo" and "American Horror Story," and Lena Headey of "Game of Thrones." Tucked away on East Palm Canyon Drive, the "board and batten" architectural style of the 20-room hotel feels more like a reimagined, rustic-chic farm than a desert-themed getaway: The main lodge is an al fresco barn that doubles up as the bar and front desk. All ground-floor rooms sport vaulted ceilings, stone floors and floor-to-ceiling windows with shutters.

Guests are provided with keys to the front gate (staff leave at 9 p.m.), while the communal, saltwater pool becomes night-cap territory for fashion designers, musicians and artists. While there's not a proper restaurant, one of the hotel's investors, Thomas Keller (yes, the Thomas Keller), has, according to staff, shown promising interest in creating some bites.

And storied hotels are getting modern makeovers to lure design- and style-savvy travelers. La Quinta Resort & Club, a Waldorf Astoria resort (from \$169), opened in 1926; it's debuting a multimillion-dollar restoration next month with spruced-up guest casitas and a complete redesign to public spaces.

Also jumping onto the millennial train is Renaissance Indian Wells Resort and Spa (from \$184), which is introducing 10 new suites this fall. Each suite will flaunt original artwork commissioned by emerging Chicago-based artist Patrick Skoff.



Enjoy laps of luxury at the Ritz-Carlton Rancho Mirage's pool.

Photo: The Ritz-Carlton

Reopened this past spring after being closed for eight years, Ritz-Carlton Rancho Mirage (from \$279) sits on a 650-foot bluff overlooking the valley and offers a quiet sanctuary for young families and honeymooners alike.

Food

Dining in Palm Springs deserves attention thanks to more stylish restaurants with notable eats to boot. Over in Indian Wells, Eureka Restaurant opened its ninth restaurant last summer, dishing out American comfort food to the country club set. (All staff are required to take a craft beer exam, if that's any indication of who's coming for dinner.)

Purple Palm at Colony Palms Hotel introduced in June a new young chef, Greg Stillman, who's serving up globally inspired cuisine, and the resto recently underwent a complete redesign (wallpapered ceilings, Moroccan-themed chandeliers) by celebrity interior designer Martyn Lawrence Bullard.

Just this month, young, Michelin-starred Patrice Martineau packed his knives for Viceroy Palm Springs, while celebrity chef Kerry Simon opened Simon Kitchen + Bar at the Hard Rock.

And Patrick Service, who worked for Danny Meyer at Union Square Cafe and Gramercy Park Hotel, ditched the Big Apple to open Appetito with consulting chef Chad Shadner. The Cal-Italian counter-service restaurant with house-made pastas and seasonally inspired plates has already won over the hipsterati with its retro-modern interiors, groovy staff and inexpensive eats.