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The colorful facade of The Saguaro, bowing in February, initially raised red flags with locals.



THE HOT SPOTS OF PALM SPRINGS

On the eve of the town's film festival, a look at the sexiest places to sleep and eat in the desert oasis (with a few secrets from industry fans)

By Leslie Bruce



Norma's dinner menu offers elevated comfort fare, including a short-rib patty melt.

WITH THE PALM SPRINGS International Film Festival set to run Jan. 5 to 16 — and with the annual Coachella music and arts fest coming in April — it's high season for visiting the desert city 116 miles outside L.A., which is growing in popularity every year. Virgin America recently launched direct service from San Francisco and same-plane flights from JFK. (United Airlines long has run a costly L.A.-to-Palm Springs flight, but producer **Jerry Weintraub** — who winters at his estate in the posh Bighorn community in nearby Palm Desert — says he travels by private jet.) The area also is heating up with a slew of new or soon-to-open hotels, from design-centric boutiques to a long-awaited luxury resort.

Set to bow in February is **THE SAGUARO** (rooms from \$169, 1800 E. Palm Canyon Drive), from the developers who opened Palm Springs' hipster-heavy **ACE HOTEL & SWIM CLUB** in 2009. A former Holiday Inn, the 249-room property boasts 14 vibrant exterior colors inspired by the area's flowers, a scheme

that initially set off alarms with city planners as being too flashy. (They have since approved the plan.) The Southwest-inspired resort will be home to the first California outpost for Food Network's *The Next Iron Chef* winner **Jose Garces**, owner of the Philadelphia destination restaurant Amada.

Eleven miles away in Desert Hot Springs, interior designer **Tracy Beckmann** and furniture designer **Ryan Trowbridge** have transformed the Desert Hot Springs Motel, built in 1947, into **HOTEL LAUTNER** (from \$200, 67710 San Antonio St.) after a 3½-year renovation. Originally meant to anchor a community designed by **John Lautner**, the four-unit hotel allows architecture buffs to spend the night in a miniature version of the futuristic concrete spaces the master is known for, such as the privately owned Elrod House nearby, famous for its cameo in the film *Diamonds Are Forever*.

After a four-year delay, **THE RITZ-CARLTON RANCHO MIRAGE** (68900 Frank Sinatra Drive), about 10 miles southeast of downtown Palm Springs, will open in fourth-quarter 2012.



Hathaway

Formerly The Lodge (site of the 2003 ABC miniseries *Trista & Ryan's Wedding*), the luxury resort will feature a restaurant from chef **Joachim Splichal** (who owns the L.A.-based Patina Restaurant Group, which includes popular LACMA hangout Ray's and Stark Bar), a La Prairie spa and will even offer guests a stargazing constellation concierge and hiking butler. Veteran film publicist **Jeff Hill** recommends "hiking in Indian Canyon above the town. The trails are spectacular because they're untouched and have breathtaking views. The best ones are Palm, Murray and the Andreas Canyon trails."

Still to come: **THE MONDRIAN** at the corner of Calle Alvarado and Amado Road. The Palm Springs City Council approved the development in 2007, but the project was put on hold during the economic downturn. In December, the council approved the land sale with the stipulation that construction begin by January 2013.

Look for three newly erected poolside cabanas at downtown Palm Springs' **COLONY PALMS HOTEL** (from \$159, 572 N. Indian Canyon Drive), part



Weintraub



1. The Colony Palms' pool area is undergoing a major facelift and soon will offer sunbathers two queen-sized canopy beds with curtains for added privacy. 2. The kid-friendly Splashtopia mini-water park, complete with sandy beaches, at the recently renovated Rancho Las Palmas Resort has been popular with celebrity moms like Tori Spelling. 3. The master bedroom at Sinatra's midcentury Twin Palms estate, which he owned with then-wife Ava Gardner, boasts a view of the singer's famous piano-shaped swimming pool. It rents for \$2,600 a night.

of an update of the pool area overseen by *Million Dollar Decorators* star **Martyn Lawrence-Bullard**. The designer also crafted its new *Palme d'Or* suite, named after the Cannes Film Festival prize and boasting a baby-grand piano and private second-story balcony. **Anne Hathaway** is a fan of executive chef **Brian Kiepler's** onsite Purple Palm restaurant. Meanwhile, changes might be in store for **THE VICEROY** (from \$200, 415 S. Belardo Road), given a chic renovation in 2001; its owner, Kor Hotel Group, has put it up for sale.

Desertgoers traveling with their families look to **RANCHO LAS PALMAS RESORT** (from \$230, 41-000 Bob Hope Drive) in Rancho Mirage for kid-friendly accommodations (recent guests include **Victoria Beckham** and family). After a \$35 million redo, completed in 2011, that included all 444 sandy-hued luxury guestrooms, the resort now offers the mini-water park Splashtopia (boasting water slides and a lazy river) and a 27-hole Ted Robinson-designed golf course.

The Jonathan Adler-created **PARKER PALM SPRINGS** (from \$285, 4200 E. Palm Canyon Drive), subject of the Bravo series *Welcome to the Parker*, is a mainstay for the entertainment elite, having hosted the likes of **Jessica Simpson**, **Mark Wahlberg**, **Chelsea Handler** and **Jason Reitman**. "Palm Springs has been very good to me. I wrote most of *Up in the Air* at the Starbucks downtown," says Reitman. Guests rarely venture off property — especially since the hotel's popular diner, **Norma's**, debuted its dinner menu in 2011 — but the filmmaker admits he likes to sneak away to teppanyaki steakhouse **Kobe** in Rancho Mirage. "Everyone is at 10-person tables. I'm the only one there alone," he says. Last Coachella, **Beyonce** and **Jay-Z** stayed in the Parker's two-bedroom **Gene Autry** residence, which offers concealed vehicle access for additional privacy.

Those hoping to disappear altogether rent a luxury home. **BEAU MONDE VILLAS** is one of

the desert's go-to brokerage firms for properties like **Frank Sinatra's** \$2,600-a-night Twin Palms estate, which features the singer's original recording studio, or architect **Albert Frey's** Russell House, which sits 200 feet above the city, offers a private driveway and rents for \$1,925 a night.

But festivalgoers often gravitate to the Old Las Palmas neighborhood for its proximity to fest events. "It's less than five minutes from downtown," says **Rob Kincaid** of rental agency Vacation Palm Springs, which can arrange concierge service, chefs and domestic help. "Old Las Palmas is to Palm Springs what Beverly Hills is to Los Angeles." Among the 12 gated rental



Reitman

properties available, Kincaid suggests **Katharine Hepburn's** Spanish hacienda (\$500 a night) and **Lucille Ball** and **Desi Arnaz's** vacation home (\$750 a night), which has an outdoor bar.

Two popular new eateries have opened on downtown's main drag. The 5-month-old **LULU CALIFORNIA BISTRO** (200 S. Palm Canyon Drive) — where director **Oliver Stone** often takes his mother, a Palm Springs resident — boasts a 12-hour happy hour and a menu of seafood, burgers and pasta. And the owners of beloved breakfast place **Cheeky's** recently opened **BIRBA** (622 N. Palm Canyon Drive), a pizza and cocktail spot offering fare like potato-and-gorgonzola pies. Due soon is the farmers market-driven **WORKSHOP KITCHEN & BAR** (800 N. Palm Canyon Drive) inside downtown's El Paseo Plaza led by chef **Michael Beckman**, who apprenticed at Michelin three-star restaurant **Lameloise** in France.

For those seeking a cultural outing, the **PALM SPRINGS ART MUSEUM's** *Backyard Oasis* exhibit opens Jan. 21 and features photos from 1945 to 1982 of that quintessential Palm Springs amenity: the swimming pool. **177A**



FOR SALE! CLASSIC
SHOWBIZ ESCAPES

Some of Hollywood's most historic desert getaways are popping up on the settled Palm Springs market

LIKE MANY VACATION COMMUNITIES, PALM SPRINGS AND its real estate market have taken a beating since the 2008 economic meltdown. But showing little fluctuation since 2010 — data show a 0.08 percent year-over-year decrease in the area's median home price, from \$249,000 to \$248,800 — the Coachella Valley market seemingly has weathered the worst as prices have stabilized (though records show a 31 percent increase within the 92263 ZIP code). So is now the time to buy? Here's a sampling of historic Hollywood real estate available in the desert town.

- **Cary Grant's** residence for 20 years, a 6,000-square-foot farmhouse (928 N. Avenida Palmas, Jeffrey Hyland at Hilton & Hyland) in the Movie Colony neighborhood, has been on the market for a year. Boasting a terra-cotta roof and **Wallace Neff**-designed guest wing, the house is listed at \$2.9 million.
- Down the road from the famed **Bob Hope** home, the newly renovated **Steve McQueen** mansion (2203 Southridge Drive, Expont Realty) is available for \$3.4 million, featuring panoramic city views and a cantilevered balcony.
- Producer **Sydney Banks' five-bedroom** Vista Morocco estate (330 W. Yorba Road, Keller Williams) in Racquet Club West hit the market in December with a \$1.2 million price tag.
- Too late! **William Holden's** four-bedroom midcentury home (1323 S. Driftwood Drive, Sean and Lisa Casey of The Casey Group) sold in July at its \$1.349 million asking price. — L.S.



Grant's house

FOR SALE