

PURSUIITS

In Palm Springs, to Pool Hop Is to Time Travel

Swimming in this sun-baked desert oasis is to tour midcentury modernism as seen through its famously fabulous pools. An astonishing 40,000 pools are within the city limits.



The rainbow-hued Saguaro in Palm Springs is a former Holiday Inn.
Beth Collier for The New York Times

By **Bonnie Tsui** Dec. 27, 2017

When you fly into Palm Springs, the geometry of pool-centric living is clearly laid out below, in the repeating grid of aquamarine rectangles, ovals and odd little squiggles. What is it about the swimming pool that grabs us by the hand and

pulls us in? Nowhere is it more entwined with the history and culture of a place than the bright, sun-baked desert oasis of Palm Springs.

I'd always wanted to pool-hop through this place, touring midcentury modernism through its fabled and fabulous hotel and private swimming pools.

By 1955, Palm Springs already had 900 swimming pools within its city limits, and Esther Williams was the pool cover girl of the era, swimming it up at El Mirador Hotel, with its Olympic-sized pool with five diving boards and an underwater observation window (<http://www.thewillowspalmsprings.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/March-2013.pdf>). (She once guessed that she'd swum, oh, about 1,250 (<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/07/movies/esther-williams-who-swam-to-movie-fame-dies-at-91.html>) miles for all of her films.)

“So many midcentury modern homes are built around the pool,” Sidney Williams, a retired curator of architecture and design at the Palm Springs Art Museum, (<https://www.psmuseum.org/>) told me.



Sparrows Lodge, a rustic property built in 1952. Beth Collier for The New York Times

Today, there are some 40,000 (<http://www.psusd.us/Communities>) pools within the city limits, which, astoundingly, amounts to about one pool for every year-round resident (<http://www.visitpalmsprings.com/page/about-palm-springs/6375>) (in the winter, the population doubles as snowbirds fly in for the season).

Recently, I came to Palm Springs for a refresher course in where pool-hopping can take you — a kind of old-and-new look at the sensory romance around the American swimming pool.

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I'm in the water most mornings. While I like the wildness of the ocean, I love the comfort of a pool. This comes from an adolescence spent swimming with a local team, and as a lifeguard when I was a teenager. As an adult, I've begun to appreciate the pool as a mode of transport. Pools can be anywhere, and are especially necessary in a landlocked locale. Enter and you may go anywhere in your thoughts; enter in the specific geographic environment of Southern California and you gain insight into the American optimism of the post-World War II era.





The Frey House II in Palm Springs is perched on the side of San Jacinto Mountain.
Beth Collier for The New York Times

The pools of Southern California have stood in for so many American ideals — optimism, yes, but also “wealth, consumerism, escape, physical beauty, and the triumph of people over nature.” So begins the expansive exhibition catalog for “Backyard Oasis,” a show organized by the Palm Springs Art Museum in 2012 that explored the swimming pool in Southern California photography between 1945 and 1982.

The pool is both entertainment and escape. Under the palm trees in a desert town built over an aquifer, the symbolism of the pool as oasis is particularly resonant. It is refuge and relief — from the heat, from daily difficulties, from the 24-hour glare of nearby Los Angeles.

Screen idols had been fleeing the pressure cooker of Hollywood for the poolside pleasures of Palm Springs’ resorts since the 1930s. You could alternately seek entertainment and silo yourself away.

1950s Palm Springs Tourism Video



Classic hotel pools still in existence include the one at the Riviera (<http://rivierapalmsprings.com/>), a hangout for Sinatra, Elvis, and Sammy Davis Jr. Opened in 1959, the resort showcased the iconic Palm Springs pool through the decade that followed.

Part of the allure, of course, is pure nostalgia for the panache with which these film stars pulled off this lifestyle. When I visited, the mirrored glitz of the Riviera's lobby and the vintage pinups in the poolside cabanas made clear the two rather opposing faces of pool life in 2017: party and retreat. One must choose carefully. The size of the Riviera, with 400 rooms and 24 acres, is more conducive to the party side of things. This and other latter-day playgrounds, many fashionably reincarnated from old roadside motels — the Ace Hotel and Swim Club (<https://www.acehotel.com/palmsprings>), once a desert modern Westward Ho motel with a Denny's attached to it; the rainbow-hued Saguaro (<https://thesaguaro.com/palm-springs/>), a former Holiday Inn — are popular with weekenders from Los Angeles and with the Coachella music festival crowd.





The Ace Hotel, once a midcentury desert modern Westward Ho motel.
Beth Collier for The New York Times

Maybe I'm old-fashioned, or maybe just old, but to me the lavish pool-party side of things is secondary to the spirit of the swimming pool as a simple extension of daily living. By this I don't mean vast pools to do laps in, but diminutive gems with which to enjoy the languid, liquid lifestyle of an afternoon drink outside, countering the heat with the sensory pleasures of submersion, so necessary in a place where daytime temperatures soar to 110 degrees in the summer.

Coming closer to my ideal is the 17-room Del Marcos (<http://delmarcoshotel.com/>), a groundbreaking example of desert modernism when it was designed by the architect William F. Cody in 1947; the heated saltwater pool is situated squarely in the midst of a U-shaped building constructed from local stone, redwood and glass. The saltwater in the pool makes a difference, I think. It feels a little like a secret — like smuggling in an imaginary vial of ocean all your own, here in the middle of the desert.

I ended up making my poolside home at the tranquil, rustic Sparrows Lodge (<http://sparrowslodge.com/>), built in 1952. Two little birds beckon from the roadside sign. There's a cheerful summer-camp-for-grown-ups vibe to the airy, high-ceilinged barn and rectangular pool, lined with 20 intimate, dark-wood bungalows tucked under the shady canopy of desert foliage.





The classic hotel pool at the Riviera resort in Palm Springs, a hangout for Sinatra, Elvis and Sammy Davis Jr. Beth Collier for The New York Times

I spent three happy days hopping from pool to hot tub and back again, novel in hand. Rinse, repeat. Keeping me company were a group of young women on a writing retreat, a canoodling newlywed couple from France, and a solo male traveler in his 40s from New York, slipped loose for a time, he said, from his everyday urban responsibilities. “I just want to float in the pool and forget everything,” he said with a deep, world-weary sigh.

The lodge’s lofty barn houses a bar, a tall communal table and a cozy book-strewn sitting area. One afternoon, I spotted the perfect distillation of poolside Palm Springs then-and-now in a framed, postcard-size photo of the Sparrows’ original, circa 1950s property.

Though the barn and bungalows were painted white, the scene around the pool was familiar: couples on lounge chairs, guests swimming in the pool, a young woman in a red bikini in the foreground with one toe dipped in the water and dreamy eyes looking off into the middle distance. Maybe she’s waiting for a drink. Maybe she’s contemplating the possibilities of some other life. Maybe she’s doing both. After all, Palm Springs is a place where you can escape by diving in. And when you’re ready to emerge, the bartender will ask if you want your drink by the pool. Out on a patio strung with lights, the evening water shelled with pink, the only answer is yes.



A cabana amenities package at the Riviera. Beth Collier for The New York Times

I discovered perhaps the best iteration of pool life one morning while overlooking the whole of Palm Springs at the Frey House II (<http://www.psmuseum.org/palm-springs-art-collection/special-collections/special-collection-albert-frey-house-ii-and-archives/>), perched on the side of the city's striking San Jacinto Mountain. Designed and built into the slope by the Swiss-born modernist architect Albert Frey in 1963, the house is only 1,200 square feet, including a guest room addition the architect made years later. But the effortless flow from indoors to out and back again is the aesthetic that governs the living space, and it makes the house seem less a house than some extension of this environment, with a tiny bean-shaped pool fed by a secret spring.

Turquoise, cholla cactus green, the yellow of a brittlebush flower: the colors of the simple, elegant house, constructed of inexpensive materials and needing little maintenance — just concrete block, steel columns, glass and corrugated aluminum — mirror the particulars of the desert. As the rippling light from the pool at the front of the house echoed on the blue-green aluminum ceiling of the interior space, I thought that being here was like sitting inside a sunlit desert aquarium, if there could be such a thing.

“It’s about enjoying life, but paired with a thoughtful consideration of scale, function, and environmental soundness,” Ms. Williams, of the Palm Springs Art Museum, said.



The heated saltwater pool at the Del Marcos. Beth Coller for The New York Times

I came here for a tour with her because, well, private homes have some of the best pools. I couldn’t resist dipping a hand into the cold, clear water; I imagined myself as Mr. Frey, still in his swimsuit, sitting at his drafting table after a mind-cleansing swim in the pool, that glorious view of the desert floor laid out before him. At the time it was built, his was the highest house in the Coachella Valley.

Ms. Williams told me that the museum’s sunset-hour tour of the house is particularly special. It includes wine and cheese, yes, but also a metaphysical luxury: that of expanded time, to lounge poolside on those built-in stone benches, to take in that magical view. It was then that I came to appreciate that in Palm Springs, pool-hopping is akin to time-traveling, each expanse of water reflecting the past and present; the possibilities of multiple slices of life; the intense blue stillness of the sky, so glassy above and below, a forever mirror of the other.

A version of this article appears in print on December 30, 2017, on Page TR1 of the New York edition with the headline: Please, Take a Dip in Our Time Machines. Order Reprints (<http://www.nytreprints.com/>) | Today's Paper (<http://www.nytimes.com/pages/todaypaper/index.html>) | Subscribe (<https://www.nytimes.com/subscriptions/Multiproduct/lp8HYKU.html?campaignId=48JQY>)

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