

# RAT PACK ESCAPE TO PALMS SPRINGS, CALIFORNIA

by CAROLYNE KAUSER-ABBOTT

Without water, Palm Springs would not exist. Attracted by this life-sustaining resource, the Agua Caliente band of Cahuilla Indians settled in the Coachella Valley roughly 2,000 years ago. There is archaeological evidence that humans may have even inhabited the hostile southern California desert over 10,000 years ago. Non-natives exploring the untamed west began arriving in the latter part of the 1800s. A village followed, then a railway and much more.



Colony Palms Hotel

Incorporated 75 years ago, in 1938, this sun-baked community is nestled against the jagged, soaring San Jacinto peaks. Palm Springs has long attracted visitors and converted many of those into homeowners. In the 1920s, movie stars and many acting-hopefuls flocked to this desert resort from Hollywood. Rapidly the reputation grew among the theatrical community that this was the place to work and play. Actors' contracts during that era included a stipulation that they had to be within two hours of Hollywood studios, thus Palm Springs became a natural getaway for the 'Rat Pack'.

Devastating economic fluctuations and fierce competition from other sun-belt cities may have changed the face of Palm Springs over the years, but this destination remains highly desirable for an escape to the sun. Easily accessible from most major U.S. cities, the Palm Springs International

Airport was rated one of the Top 10 U.S. Most Stress-Free Airports, by *Smarter Travel* (April 2011).

Our plane taxied to one of the airport's 16 open-air gates. We slipped on our coolest shades and sauntered off the plane, embracing the impeccable, crystal-blue sky and California sunshine. Our weekend in the desert was about to begin.

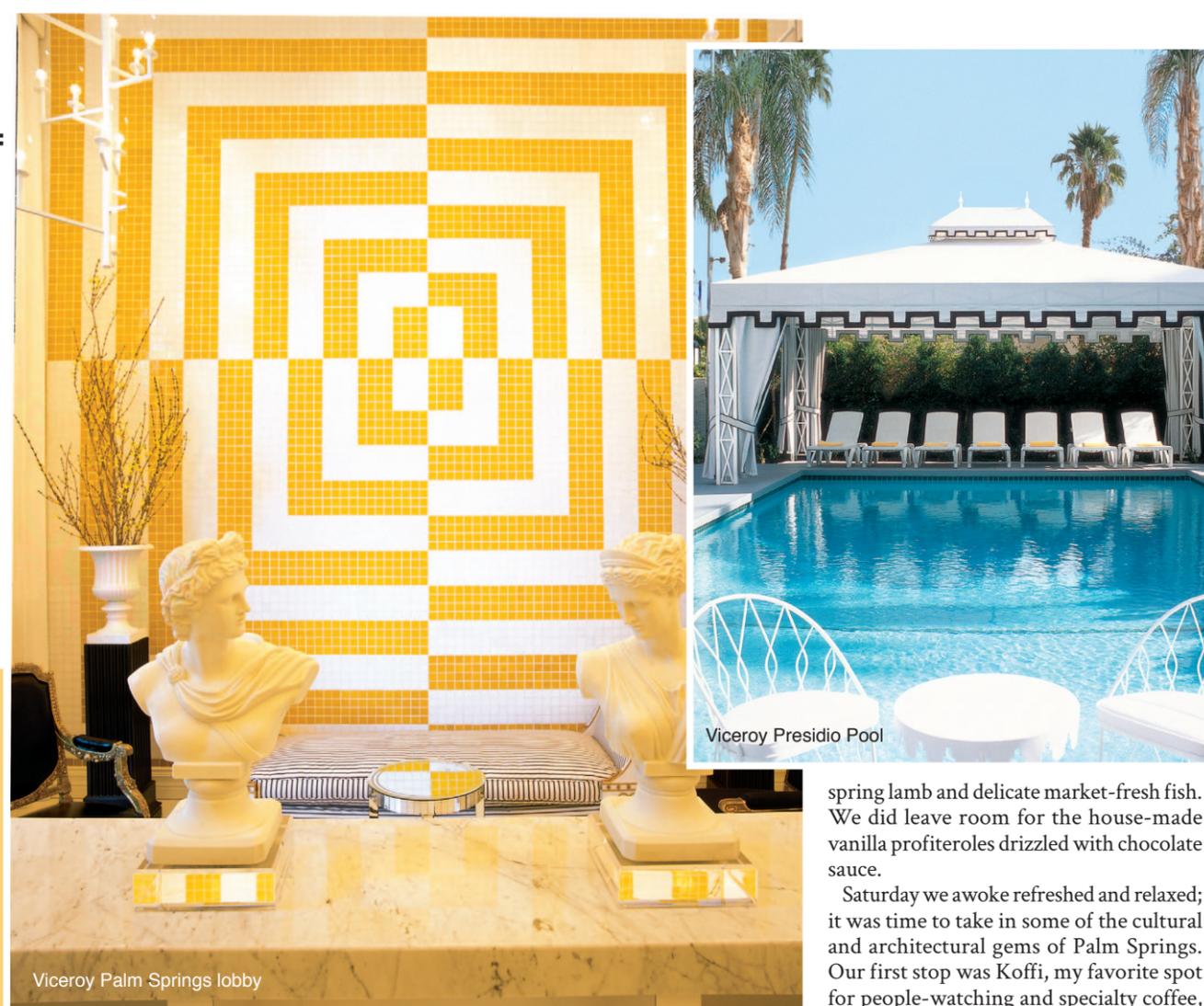
After the highly manageable size of the airport, the next best thing is its proximity to downtown Palm Springs. A quick 15-minute drive and we were checking into the Colony Palms Hotel ([www.colonypalms.com](http://www.colonypalms.com)). There is a vast array of accommodation in the Coachella Valley, from shiny mega-resorts surrounding golf courses and with casinos and spas, to slightly ragged motels boasting a fresh coat of paint – an alphabet of options. The room category that is almost entirely missing is the high-end boutique hotel, which is why the Colony

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Palms Hotel is a treasure, with only 57 rooms.

This Spanish colonial-style inn was built in 1936 by Al Wertheimer, a Las Vegas casino owner and reputedly a bit of a gangster. Since that era of brothels and speakeasies, the property has changed hands and even names several times. Once frequented by Hollywood stars, including Frank Sinatra and Elizabeth Taylor, the well-loved hotel needed a facelift.

In 2007, with the creative design talent of Martyn Lawrence Bullard and \$17 million, the hotel was re-imaged and completely renovated. The design theme is a blend of southern California desert meets Morocco, where full-height windows capture the stunning mountain views, and dark wood and custom ceramic tile mosaics complement bright luxurious fabrics. In signature Colony Palms Hotel style, the bedrooms feature crisp, white bedding, enlivened by Moroccan-inspired headboards and bright-colored throw cushions. All the rooms offer discrete privacy.



Viceroy Palm Springs lobby

Viceroy Presidio Pool

In keeping with the Hollywood theme, our room for this weekend was the luxurious 1,800-square-foot Palme D'Or Residence, appropriately named after the Cannes Film Festival's most distinguished annual award. This secluded villa includes a private terrace, second floor balcony and even a personal spa pool.

We had just enough time before lunch to wash away the realities of modern-day commercial air travel with a dip in the aqua pool. The Purple Palm restaurant overlooks the pool and well-tended gardens. During the day, dining is casual alfresco on the palm-shaded terrace with views of the San Jacinto Mountains. We shared some local Medjool dates while we waited for the chef's mouth-watering, crispy fish tacos served with fresh pico-de-gallo.

Right on schedule the air-conditioned SUV arrived for our private Celebrity Grand Tour ([www.thecelebritytour.com](http://www.thecelebritytour.com)). This tour, although utterly customizable, typically covers the Palm Springs' neighborhoods where the stars bought their homes. Notorious areas such as the Old Movie Colony, Las Palmas and Twin Palms are

almost as famous as those celebrities who once lived there.

After a couple hours engrossed in the previous lifestyles of the Hollywood set, it was time to return to the hotel and get dressed for cocktail hour. We chose the vibrant Viceroy Palm Springs ([www.viceroyhotelsandresorts.com](http://www.viceroyhotelsandresorts.com)) for a drink. The hotel's restaurant and bar are both named Citron, a word play on the California citrus groves. The bar is a striking design canvas of white marble and black lacquer highlighted with punches of lemon yellow. Perched on white bar stools, we sipped their signature Citron Blue martinis and toasted our day.

Our Friday night dinner was on the romantic patio at Le Vallauris ([www.levallauris.com](http://www.levallauris.com)). Subtle elegance best describes tables adorned with white linens and delicate china, set under a refreshing leafy canopy of ficus trees. The menu and tasty creations by Executive Chef Jean Paul Lair had us believing for the evening that we had left Palm Springs for the European continent. His French-inspired cuisine includes choices such as expertly prepared

spring lamb and delicate market-fresh fish. We did leave room for the house-made vanilla profiteroles drizzled with chocolate sauce.

Saturday we awoke refreshed and relaxed; it was time to take in some of the cultural and architectural gems of Palm Springs. Our first stop was Koffi, my favorite spot for people-watching and specialty coffee, in that order.

With our lattes in hand, it was art time. At 150,000 square feet, the Palm Springs Art Museum ([www.psmuseum.org](http://www.psmuseum.org)) is highly manageable for those interested in multi-disciplined art. Contemporary-focused works include a striking glass collection, sculpture garden, photography and select pieces by world-renowned artists such as Picasso, Calder, Chagall, Gormley and many others.

The Palm Springs Desert Museum first



Palm Springs Art Museum

opened its doors in 1938 with a focus on the Coachella Valley and native artifacts from the region. The holdings have evolved from a natural science concentration towards a broad collection of contemporary art. The museum moved to the current location in 1976 and officially assumed its name in 2005. To best appreciate the treasures within the walls of this impressive facility, we arranged for private docent tour.

Choosing a lunch spot in Palm Springs is not as easy. The restaurant scene covers the entire range from casual poolside-noshing to popular mist-cooled terraces to more formal settings. We chose Spencer's Restaurant ([www.spencersrestaurant.com](http://www.spencersrestaurant.com)) at The Mountain, at the base of the San Jacinto peaks, for the view and the relaxed lunchtime service. Their menu features American classics with a modern twist. There is a wide selection of appetizers that are perfect for sharing, generous meal-sized salads, an impressive sandwich list and more. We enjoyed the seared ahi tuna niçoise salad and the Maine lobster club as we planned our afternoon.

One of the attractions of the Coachella Valley, besides the obviously fabulous weather, is the appeal to almost every potential interest. There is remarkable mid-century modern architecture, hundreds of manicured golf courses and just as many hiking trails. Road biking, mountain biking, desert jeep tours, farmers' markets, exclusive shopping and soothing spas are all readily available. Given that this was a quick holiday, we opted for massages on our secluded balcony at the hotel.

Before dinner, we strolled down South Palm Canyon Drive searching for a tempting location for a cocktail. The long bar at Lulu's California Bistro ([www.lulupalmsprings.com](http://www.lulupalmsprings.com)) has sightlines of the Palm Springs' strip and offers an extensive list of wines by the glass. According to my husband, they also serve a first-rate Cadillac margarita. Although tempting, we stayed away from the bar menu as we were headed uptown for dinner at the Workshop Kitchen & Bar.

The exterior structure of this historic 1940s city building was heavily influenced by Spanish design. The interior of the Workshop Kitchen & Bar ([www.workshoppalmsprings.com](http://www.workshoppalmsprings.com)) is a different story – a tribute to minimalist industrial planning where the creative team melded concrete and black leather in a most unusual way. A vaulted ceiling soaring 27 feet over a long communal table reaches toward the heavens, and intimate booths with black-leather banquets appear like church pews in a temple of dining. The

restaurant opened its doors in 2012 after extensive renovations.

Michael Beckman is one of the owners of Workshop Kitchen & Bar; he is also the chef. He brings to the restaurant a remarkable talent and an impressive resume: he apprenticed at the Michelin three-starred Maison Lameloise in Burgundy, and other equally sought-after dining rooms before returning to the United States. His menu was so tempting we wanted to order everything. Somewhat restrained, we sampled the quinoa and beet salad, an excellent counterpart to beef tenderloin

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cooked sous vide and served with shallot confit.

Our last day in the desert began with a leisurely stroll down Palm Canyon Drive following the Walk of the Stars ([www.palmspringstalkofstars.com](http://www.palmspringstalkofstars.com)). This tribute began in 1992, honoring those actors, writers, producers and artists who excelled in their trade and who lived at one time in the Palm Springs area. There is an audio tour guide available, describing the influence that these famous people had on the city.

Brunch is also popular in Palm Springs. We barely managed to get a table at Trio ([www.triopalmssprings.com](http://www.triopalmssprings.com)), a favorite with locals and visitors alike, where the hearty seafood omelet and burrito scramble filled the void. Before leaving town, we poked through the stores in what is considered the uptown district, featuring an eclectic mix of contemporary art, mid-century modern kitsch, and avant-garde clothing.

As we strolled through the airport and glanced back at the impressive mountains, we promised to be back soon to explore more of the Coachella Valley. ■



Palm Springs Art Museum



Le Vallauris patio



Workshop Kitchen



Workshop Kitchen

TOP TO BOTTOM:  
IMAGE COURTESY OF PALM SPRINGS ART MUSEUM;  
IMAGE COURTESY OF LE VALLAURIS RESTAURANT;  
IMAGE COURTESY OF WORKSHOP KITCHEN  
IMAGE COURTESY OF WORKSHOP KITCHEN

# ST. CROIX

## A TOUCH OF GLAMOR A DASH OF SPICE A SPLASH OF RUM

by APPLE GIDLEY

The Caribbean has always attracted the raffish, the regal and the wealthy. Think Ernest Hemingway, Princess Margaret, Richard Branson, Oprah Winfrey and, on St. Croix, the largest of the US Virgin Islands, Irish American screen star Maureen O'Hara and Agnes Nixon, creator of *All My Children* and considered the queen of the modern soap opera. Walt 'Clyde' Frazier of the N.Y. Knicks has had a home on St. Croix for 30 years, and Tim Duncan of the San Antonio Spurs is from the island. Each attracts a cadre of guests with equally illustrious names who add an intangible piquancy to the sugar and spice that make up the rich history of the Caribbean.

The paparazzi are not welcome, their abrasive ways at odds with respect given and received by those both *bahn ya*, or born here, and those lucky enough to alight. Polite greetings are the norm whether passing on the street or instigating high-powered meetings. It is a laid-back place where the rich and famous rub shoulders with the not-so-rich and famous. The

gentle purr of a car horn means "please, after you", rather than the aggressive "coming through" of the mainland – welcome indeed for the unwary traveler unused to driving a left-hand vehicle on the left of the road.

Dirt roads delineated by brilliant flamboyant trees, or bougainvillea cascading magenta and coral in reckless abandon, lead to multi-million dollar homes perched along ridges and tucked onto cliff faces, their terraces gazing out across shimmering azure bays. Their owners, some part-timers dipping in and out of the tranquillity, and some residents, are shielded by discreet walls and fences, hidden by lush hedges of pillar-box red ixora, and palm trees swaying sentinel as dazzling emerald hummingbirds and cheeky yellow-breasted bananaquits dart among the blooms.

St. Croix, set in the midst of the Caribbean Sea, is the lesser known of the US Virgins. St. Thomas, blousy and boisterous by comparison, is popular with both the package vacationers and

the cruise ships. St. John, synonymous with serenity, verdant forests and eco-camps, is a short ferry ride from its noisy neighbor. St. Croix is literally an island of calm, about 40 nautical miles from the others and, as such, eschewed by the charter boat companies. The yachts found moored in her pristine bays are privately owned, and only experienced sailors navigate the narrow breaks in the necklace of coral protecting the coastline.

Originally known as Ay Ay, the island has a long history, with evidence showing the possible presence of both the war-hungry Caribs and the peaceable Arawaks, though an element of certainty is felt that the matriarchal, though warlike, Taino Indians from Hispaniola were a part of the patchwork. Christopher Columbus was given a less than generous welcome in 1493 when he ordered his fleet to hove to at the mouth of what is now known as Salt River, and sent ashore a longboat "to make talk" with natives. The area now offers safe haven to yachts and motor launches, as well as a chance to experience twinkling bioluminescent tours of the reef in glass-bottom kayaks.

Colonized, captured, lost, recaptured and bought, St. Croix has flown under seven flags: Dutch, British, French, Spanish, the Knights of Malta and, finally in 1917, sold by the Danish government for 25 million dollars to the US, fearful of German expansion during the First World War. With the benefits of US laws and banking regulations, strong African roots from the days of slavery, a European heritage, and a lingering Caribbean charm, St. Croix has much to offer both residents and visitors alike.

The 84-square-mile island has two distinct climates, with rolling hills delineating them. The arid and cacti-strewn East End boasts Point Udall atop which, proudly reaching for the skies, is the Millennium Monument, a



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