

The Desert in Demand

Palm Springs Is in Demand, With Help From Coachella

By PETER HALDEMAN MAY 30, 2014

It was Dinah Shore Weekend in Palm Springs — or the Dinah, as it’s known — five days of Sapphic revelry that every April draws some 15,000 women from around the country to this sun-washed city 90 miles southeast of Los Angeles. On Saturday evening, however, the hottest ticket in town may not have been the L Word Pool Party, but a relatively low-key cocktail reception hosted by the Palm Springs Art Museum to benefit its new Architecture and Design Center.

The event was held at the Vista Las Palmas home of the television producer David Lee, and his partner, Mark Nichols, an interior designer. In the airy living room of the Brutalist-style residence, set at the foot of the San Jacinto Mountains, modishly turned-out guests circulated with the verve of the subjects in a Shag painting. The conversation, as it happened, swirled around Ms. Shore — not the Dinah, but the estate she owned here, a series of glassy pavilions designed by Donald Wexler, which several weeks earlier was sold to an entertainer at least as celebrated as Ms. Shore was in her day: Leonardo DiCaprio.

“There’s no question he’s going to generate a lot of young Hollywood energy,” said a partygoer in his 30s whose chin stubble suggested Dean Martin the morning after.

A man in flared orange slacks as vivid as safety cones added: “If someone as private as Leo is buys, it’s a good sign. It means more like him

can.”

Whatever it means, Mr. DiCaprio’s presence jibes with something of a Palm Springs renaissance. According to a recent article in *The Hollywood Reporter*, Anne Hathaway is rumored to be house hunting there, and Ryan Gosling and Eva Mendes were recently seen furniture shopping in the Uptown Design District.

New hotels, restaurants, clubs and galleries are shaking up droopy Palm Canyon Drive. And the sight of snowy-haired Cadillac drivers is giving way to that of millennials cruising the streets on vintage bikes. (The Coachella Valley Music and Arts Festival drew some 200,000 Gen Xers and Yers — including Mr. DiCaprio — to the area this year.)

The city has even gone bicoastal. In 2012, Virgin America began offering nonstop flights from Kennedy Airport to the two-runway Wexler-designed Palm Springs International Airport.

“Every few years, there’s a magazine article: ‘Palm Springs is back’; ‘It’s hot again,’ ha, ha,” said Brad Dunning, an interior designer who began visiting the resort from Los Angeles in the early 1990s and moved there full time last year. “But now it actually feels like it is.”

If Mr. DiCaprio’s move has many locals reading the runes, it’s probably because movie actors and moguls put Palm Springs on the map in the first place. In the late 1920s and early ’30s, resorts like El Mirador and the Racquet Club catered to Hollywood players attracted to the sublime weather and studio-handly seclusion. Cary Grant, Jack Warner and Darryl Zanuck were among those who built Spanish-style estates in neighborhoods like Las Palmas and the Movie Colony. After World War II, the pioneering modernist architects drawn to the area created sexy glass-walled residences for clients such as Ms. Shore, Frank Sinatra and Kirk Douglas.

In the 1970s, moneyed developers and vacationers migrated “down valley,” to communities like Rancho Mirage and Palm Desert, and Palm Springs faded like a matinee idol. The senescence of the remaining population earned the city the nickname “God’s waiting room.”

But in the '90s, the area enjoyed a boomlet of interest as creative directors, advertising photographers and interior designers discovered its space-age relics. "This was a very specific sector who appreciated the architecture and design," said Catherine Meyler, a Los Angeles location scout who bought Richard Neutra's glass-and-steel Miller house in 2000 and has been restoring it ever since. "Now the group has widened."

For years, the city's demographics have skewed "gay and gray," but the community is diversifying. "Coachella changed everything," said Keith Markovitz, a young real estate broker with TTK Represents/Christie's International. "They're coming out for the music, but guess where they're partying?"

For the last five years, a good number of the bearded and tattooed have been partying at the Ace Hotel and Swim Club, a former Howard Johnson motel that seems to thrive inside a pair of giant, invisible quotation marks. There is a diner with rock walls and brown leather booths, a cavelike dive bar and a decorative trailer out by the pool. On a recent evening, a D.J. spun electro-lounge anthems outside, where a party of glassy-eyed 20-somethings kicked off a treasure hunt (sample checklist item: "Anyone who knew Frank Sinatra or Bob Hope").

Other big-ticket events, like the Palm Springs International Film Festival and Modernism Week — a 10-day affair celebrating all things midcentury — have helped raise the city's profile. But the primary engine of the revival is the economy: drubbed by the recession, the local real estate market is on the rebound. "It's been a fantastic season," said Mr. Markovitz, climbing into his black Range Rover and cranking up the air-conditioning. "By the third week of February, we had 17 properties in escrow."

He pulled up in front of a low, angular, maize-colored compound: the Max Factor estate, recently purchased by the Australian singer and - songwriter Sia Furler. Other buzzworthy transactions include the Vince co-founder Rea Laccone's acquisition of Villa Serena — commissioned by the actor Laurence Harvey from the firm Buff & Hensman in 1969 — and

the sale of the Gerald and Betty Ford estate in nearby Rancho Mirage to the DreamWorks Animation chief creative officer, Bill Damaschke, and his partner, the talent manager John McIlwee. Just listed, at \$9.5 million: “The House of Tomorrow,” a circular showcase home better known as the honeymoon digs of Elvis and Priscilla Presley.

The options for visitors are also growing. Josie and Doug Smith recently opened Sparrows Hotel, a 20-room complex at the south end of town that looks like a Western set and functions like a Zen retreat. Just down the street from Sparrows, the two-year-old Saguaro, a former Holiday Inn done over in a psychedelic color scheme inspired by desert flowers, wraps around a pool that is reputed to be the largest in Palm Springs and that, during the Dinah Pool Party II, was thronged with female guests sipping tropical drinks.

Another south-end resort, the elegant William Cody-conceived Horizon, is being renovated by the designer Steve Hermann. And in the Uptown Design District, ground was recently broken for Arrive, a high-tech boutique hotel (guest rooms will open at the tap of a smartphone) bankrolled by Ezra Callahan, who made his riches as an early Facebook employee.

Sprouting up around the north end of Palm Canyon Drive, the Uptown Design District has matured into a sleek shopping zone with scarcely a T-shirt shop or frozen yogurt chain in sight. Home to some of the city’s best midcentury design stores (Modern Way, Flow Modern Design, A La Mod) and art galleries (Archangel Gallery, Jorge Mendez Gallery and Yares Art Projects, which is opening in October), it now has a number of equally worthy restaurants.

The brunch crowd dons its most eye-popping Trina Turk and Wil Stiles and lines up outside Cheeky’s for the restaurant’s fresh-pressed juices and bacon bar. Workshop Kitchen & Bar offers locally sourced New American fare in a monastic, vaulted-ceilinged space inside the historic El Paseo complex. And in the inky depths of Bar, bands and D.J.s play for the beer-cocktail set.

Bar also hosts “Art Bar,” a well-attended happy hour (or three) introducing underexposed local artists. “We’re finally getting the young creative class in Palm Springs,” said the event’s organizer, Eric Nash, a painter who moved to the desert from Los Angeles four years ago. “I wanted to provide a forum for fashion and art and music people to connect and cross-pollinate.”

While they appreciate the Palm Springs prevailing aesthetic, Mr. Nash and some of his colleagues said they didn’t want to see the city calcify into a kind of midcentury modern Williamsburg. “Palm Springs should be the laboratory for new and progressive architecture and design it always was,” said Phillip K. Smith III, an artist whose monumental light installation at Coachella in April, “Reflection Field,” was a magnet for selfie-takers. (Among the city’s more innovative architects, Lance O’Donnell makes steel prefab homes, and Sean Lockyer designs residential and commercial projects that update the desert modernist tradition without being slavish to it.)

A new shopping center going up in the middle of town, a slick mall anchored by a six-story Kimpton Hotel, represents a missed opportunity to residents who would prefer that the city support the “adaptive reuse” of historic buildings if it can’t get behind more dynamic projects. “Developers are working hard to demolish things that could add to the charm of the town, like the Town & Country Center,” said Ms. Meyler, referring to a retail complex that was designed in the International Style by Paul Williams and A. Quincy Jones in 1948 and is threatened with destruction.

More eagerly awaited, perhaps, is the architect and developer Chris Pardo’s Hacienda Cantina and Beach Club, a sprawling day club and nightspot set to open in south Palm Springs at the end of the year. (Galas and benefit parties may take place every weekend during “the season” here — October to May — but the city has long lacked a major social hub.) “I think the Hacienda might be like what the Racquet Club used to be,” said Stephen Collins, a style pundit from Britain who hosted a web series for Modernism Week. “Maybe not sitting in a clubhouse in flannel trousers,

but a kind of be-there experience.”

But even Mr. Collins, who believes Mr. DiCaprio has “made it permissible to be an A-list movie star in Palm Springs again,” suggested that the city’s rebirth might best be a quiet one. “Maybe it’s always going to be a lovely place to just come and chill out by your pool,” he said. “Because I do think one of the charming things about Palm Springs is that it really doesn’t matter what type of flip-flops you’re wearing. In the Hamptons I suppose they’d have to be Marc Jacobs.”

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