

# The Miami Herald

---

November 21, 2007

Palm Springs' mid-century-modern revival

**BYLINE:** GARY A. WARNER, The Orange County Register

**SECTION:** J; Pg. 999

**LENGTH:** 1108 words

Neglect can be a wonderful thing. Out behind the San Jacinto Mountains, in the blistering heat of the Coachella Valley, somebody forgot to swing the wrecking ball at the Eisenhower era.

Nowhere in the United States is the midcentury-modern look better preserved than in the desert resort that just a generation ago seemed the definition of uncool. Palm Springs was "heaven's waiting room," the comedians joked. "Average age: deceased."

The visitors who did go in that direction often headed to the big resorts farther down Highway 111. Rancho Mirage? Schedule my massage. Indian Wells? Bring the golf clubs. Palm Springs? ZZZZZZZ.

Then along came the 21st century, and a lot of people became interested in the middle of the 20th.

Small motels and homes built by master desert architects such as William Cody and Albert Frey were rescued from neglect, stripped of their icky 1970s makeovers and reborn as retro-cool party pads. Lots of glass, steel and sharp angles. Uncluttered and open, like the desert. The coffee table book industry rediscovered the place. The New York Times anointed the city as a place to buy property.

For summer vacationers, addition means subtraction. As the mercury goes up, prices go down. The "hot" motels that charge up to \$300 a night in February cut their prices as much as half by the middle of June. But be forewarned: If you can't stand the heat, get out of the kitchenette.

What's also gone in summer is a lot of the winter attitude. The trendy spots that attract urban snowbirds have to rely on locals coming in for a short stay and European tourists who inexplicably love it ultra-hot (ever been to Death Valley in August? Bring your German dictionary).

It also helps that unlike city scenes, where trendy can translate quickly into snotty, Palm Springs is a resort. A place people come to relax. You don't have to know Pei from pie to have fun at a small modern hotel with blaring orange curtains, amoeba-shaped coffee tables and clocks with numbers on a swirl of electrons.

The hottest of the hot spots is Orbit In, a nine-room motel with a wacky, Jetsons-cartoon-like space-age sign. Renovated in 2000 around an original 1957 motel, the Orbit In is renowned for its party-central poolside bar. It's also a favorite of architecture buffs for its views of Frey's former house, sitting on a rock-strewn hillside. There's a spa affiliated with Orbit In, making this a very plush motel experience. The owners also operate the nearby, nine-room Hideaway, a rebuilt 1947 motel, as well as 1970s-vintage "mod" condos.

The other modernist masterpiece in the district is the Del Marcos, built by Cody in 1947. After decades of decline, the 16-room motel just finished major renovation this fall.

The atomic-modern furnishings and the second-story balconies above the saltwater pool have a cool cachet at a more moderate price than the other modernist stars. Some rooms and suites have secluded patios. An added plus: It's just one block from downtown Palm Springs, meaning you can leave the car behind except during the high-heat middle of the day.

The newest addition is also one of my favorites. It's easy to drive right past the Horizon -- on a stretch of Palm Canyon Drive. It's the newest of the revamped modernist motels, with a stark white paint job that shimmers in the heat. Originally the playground of oilman Jack Wrather and his wife, the compound was designed in 1953 by Cody. Marilyn Monroe, Betty Grable and Rosalind Russell were among the couple's guests in its heyday. Later named L'Horizon, the motel went through years of decline before its recent resurrection.

The owners, unlike those of the Del Marcos, have gone decidedly nonretro in decor, with black lacquered wood furnishings and flat-screen televisions that look more like a W Hotel. The main drawback of the Horizon is the lack of shade -- you can see all the geometric lines of the buildings from all over the property, but there are few places to hide from the midday sun besides inside the air-conditioned rooms or shady, covered cabanas.

My favorite spot is different both in style and location. The Mojave is far removed from the rest of the cluster of modernist motels. It's well down Highway 111 in Palm Desert, best known for that commercial kissing-cousin of Rodeo Drive, El Paseo. But just a block up from all the Ann Taylor, Brooks Brothers and Coach shops is a little piece of the late 1940s.

While it shares a sleek style with the other motels, the 24-room Mojave has an orange and green color scheme that gives the place a fun feel, making it a bit warmer than the sometimes icy modernist icons. Another plus is plenty of palm and other shade trees to keep the grounds cool -- in the temperature sense, not just the usual Palm Springs version of cool.

-----

IF YOU GO:

HANG YOUR HAT: If you are looking to save money, summer is a great time to visit Palm Springs -- if you can put up with the 100-degree-plus dry heat. Prices fall sharply

compared with winter's, especially if you can go midweek. I like to snooze and read during the heat, then hit the pools in the late afternoon and the town at night.

Here are my four favorite motels that play off the midcentury modernism of Palm Springs:

**Mojave Resort**, 73721 Shadow Mountain Drive, 800-391-1104 or [www.resortmojave.com](http://www.resortmojave.com). Current rates start at \$139 weeknights and go up close to Christmas; summer rates start at \$75 per night.

**Horizon Hotel**, 1050 E. Palm Canyon Drive, 760-323-1858 or [www.thehorizonhotel.com](http://www.thehorizonhotel.com). Rooms from \$148; summer rates from \$127 per night.

**Orbit In**, 562 W. Arenas, 760-323-3585 or [www.orbitin.com](http://www.orbitin.com). Rooms from \$209 weeknights, \$259 weekends with a two-night minimum; summer rates start at \$169.

**Del Marcos Hotel**, 225 W. Baristo Road, 800-676-1214 or [www.delmarcoshotel.com](http://www.delmarcoshotel.com). From \$149 per night.

SHOPPING: Modern Way, 2755 N. Palm Canyon Drive, Palm Springs. 760-320-5455 or [www.psmmodernway.com](http://www.psmmodernway.com). A good spot to go for everything from serious architectural pieces to knock-off kitsch collectibles.

TIP: Pick up the Palm Springs Modern Committee's "A Map of Palm Spring Modern" at the Palm Springs Visitors Center, 2901 N. Palm Canyon Drive. It spotlights 52 works by the likes of Frey, Cody, Donald Wexler, John Porter Clark and E. Stewart Williams. The visitors center itself is on the map -- it's the onetime Tramway Gas Station designed in 1965. Cost: \$5. Also, check out [www.psmmodcom.com](http://www.psmmodcom.com)

READ IT: *Palm Springs Weekend*, by Andrew Danish and Alan Hess (Chronicle Books, \$40). Published in 2001, it fueled the boom in interest in Palm Springs modern architecture.