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Much more than an oasis with; California: Everything about this area was a revelation

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PALM SPRINGS, Calif. - I wasn't looking forward to coming here the first time, not with this city's reputation as God's waiting room. I thought it would be a desert with unnaturally green golf courses (120 in the region at last count), a perfect punctuation to a place in which the initials "p" and "s" might as well stand for plastic surgery.

I thought wrong. Certainly, the putting green at Palm Springs airport seemed to prove my point, as did all the people of indeterminate age, with skin stretched so tight their eyebrows were flirting with their hairlines.

But nearly everything else about this city of 50,000, located between two mountain ranges in the Coachella Valley about 170 kilometres east of Los Angeles, was a revelation. For the outdoor enthusiast, it's a running, hiking and mountain-biking mecca, with hundreds of trails of all grades of difficulty to choose from. OK, and there's golf, too. Satisfied?

For the more historically inclined, it features the world's largest showcase of mid-20th century "desert-modern" architecture. Front and centre is the former Tramway gas station designed in 1965 by Albert Frey and Robson C. Chambers, which has been designated a historic site and will serve as Palm Springs' official and fabulously retro visitors' centre.

Best of all, an influx of affluent and highly educated residents, many of them gays and lesbians, all of whom have a creative attitude toward business, are spearheading a major facelift of the city's seedy core, complete with good restaurants, better boutiques, new hotels and even two (count 'em!) bookstores, just up the street from the statue of Sonny Bono, the late mayor who first got things rolling.

It's about time, says the current mayor, Ron Oden, himself a gay grandfather who doesn't golf.

In an interview in his office at city hall (also designed by Frey), Oden notes that all the souvenir outlets, discount boutiques and chain restaurants that have popped up along Palm Canyon, the city's main drag, did little to fill the void left by long-shut department stores like Saks and I. Magnin's.

"We've been experiencing an identity crisis for longer than I've even been here," Oden said. "The question is, 'Are we a city or are we a village?' I mean, we're incorporated as a city, but it's a city with many village-like aspects -- and we're learning to work with that now."

According to a survey he commissioned when he first took office several years ago, he says, 60 per cent of the area's residents have lived here for 10 years or less.

His own move here 15 years ago is typical of many who discovered Palm Springs long after its heyday as the playground of Hollywood such American royalty as Frank Sinatra and Marilyn Monroe. At the time, he was doing a master's in counselling at Loma Linda University, about halfway between here and Los Angeles, all while his marriage was falling apart and he struggled with his sexuality.

"One day, my brother came to me and said, 'This is no good. I'm taking you away for a weekend of fun to Palm Springs,'" Oden recalls. "I said, 'Palm Springs? Fun?' But when we got into town, I saw the mountain, told him to pull over, literally jumped out of the car and started to run.

"My brother, when he caught up to me, asked if I was all right," he continued. "I turned to him and I said, 'I'm home.' It was an epiphany for me. In short, I came, I saw, I fell in love and got involved."

Among the facelift's more tangible results are a \$32.3-million glass-fronted, copper and stone addition to the convention centre that looks toward Mount San Jacinto, restaurants that reach beyond the ubiquitous burger, two bookstores where once there were none, quality art galleries and several funky boutiques.

A \$27-million makeover by New York City "It" designer Jonathan Adler has turned what was the dated Merv Griffin Givenchy Spa and Hotel, where actor Robert Downey partied in his wilder days, into the ultra-cool and luxurious Parker Palm Springs.

City council approved plans for a four-star, 250-room, \$145-million hotel to be built near the heart of downtown. Part of the small Hard Rock International, which also owns the eponymous loud cafes, the chain's hotels, including New York's upscale Paramount, are more sophisticated and expected to attract a younger demographic.

A 1,000-seat pavilion just behind Palm Canyon's long-shuttered Desert Fashion Plaza mall (once home to Saks) opened with a three-season show, inspired by Montreal's Cirque du Soleil, that can attract up to 8,000 people a week.

What does the future hold? Plans are under way for the construction near city hall of a business park combined with a four-star, 10-storey hotel, 18-hole golf course and a retail resort village that features the desert and American Indian culture.

And Oden dreams of the day when the city can buy back a long-term lease from a private golf course just behind the Palm Springs Desert Museum in order to turn it into a public park, complete with a walkway smack against the mountains.

"Right now, it's being discussed informally," he said. "I see it when I close my eyes, and it looks really good. Talks like this mean that Palm Springs is coming of age."

If you go

- Where to stay: There are about 150 places to choose from, ranging from the moderate Best Western, to the Parker Palm Springs, where room rates start at \$395, and even Frank Sinatra's former home, Twin Palms (get a virtual tour at timeandplace.com).

My favourites include:

- The Orbit In, which is really two properties a few doors away from each other. A perfectly restored 1950s gem, the Oasis property has nine rooms with names that evoke old Palm Springs -- the Leopard Lounge, Bossanovaville and the Eames Studio. The other property, the Hideaway, is for those who want to do just that. Details: www.orbitin.com.

[orbitin.com](http://www.orbitin.com).

- Viceroy Palm Springs, where you'll find guests lounging about with their pet poodles. There are 74 guestrooms, suites and private villas, a spa, three swimming pools, lots of statuary, a restaurant and fitness centre. Details: www.viceroypalmsprings.com.

- Korakia Pensione, which bills itself as a Moroccan villa hotel at the foot of the San Jacinto mountains. Details: www.korakia.com

- Also, check out the **Horizon Hotel**, the remake of L'Horizon hotel, at 1050 East Palm Canyon Dr. The original, designed by mid-20th century modernist architect William Cody, complete with citrus trees, casitas and suites, was a preferred haunt of Marilyn Monroe. For details, e-mail TheHorizonHotel@aol.com

- Hiking:

The hiking season runs from October through April. There are several hiking clubs, including Philip Ferranti's Coachella Valley Hiking Club, which welcomes drop-ins. Call (760) 345-6234.

- The Palm Springs Desert Museum also organizes hikes in the area.

- Indian Canyons information is available from the Agua Caliente tribal office, (760) 325-3400.

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WALK OF THE INNS

For the 12th year, Palm Springs' historic inns will be a part of a multi-block downtown open house.

Framed by the streets of Belardo and San Jacinto to the north and south and Tahquitz and Baristo to the east and west, the holiday-themed event is scheduled for Dec. 6 from 5:00 to 8:00 p.m.

At least one dozen inns are expected to participate. The tour is self-guided and participants can begin at any of the hotels or at the Palm Springs Art Museum or Spencer's Restaurant. Maps are distributed at each of the participating hotels and each will have a Toys for Tots drop-off box. It is recommended that participants begin the tour at the Art Museum for ease of parking. The museum will provide complimentary

admission. Thursday evenings in Palm Springs is also the night of VillageFest, where Palm Canyon Drive is closed to vehicular traffic and arts and crafts and food booths run the length of the street.

-- Special to The Province