

# The getaway guide

{ A DESIGN TOUR OF PALM SPRINGS }

## SO DARLING!

The 1950s utopia *Don't Worry Darling* hits cinemas this month, featuring a starry cast only outshone by the iconic Mid-century Modern locations that make Palm Springs a must-visit for design fanatics. Angeleno Andrew Barker heads to the desert, only a couple of hours from L.A., to discover the town's design classics

Photography: Kim Genevieve

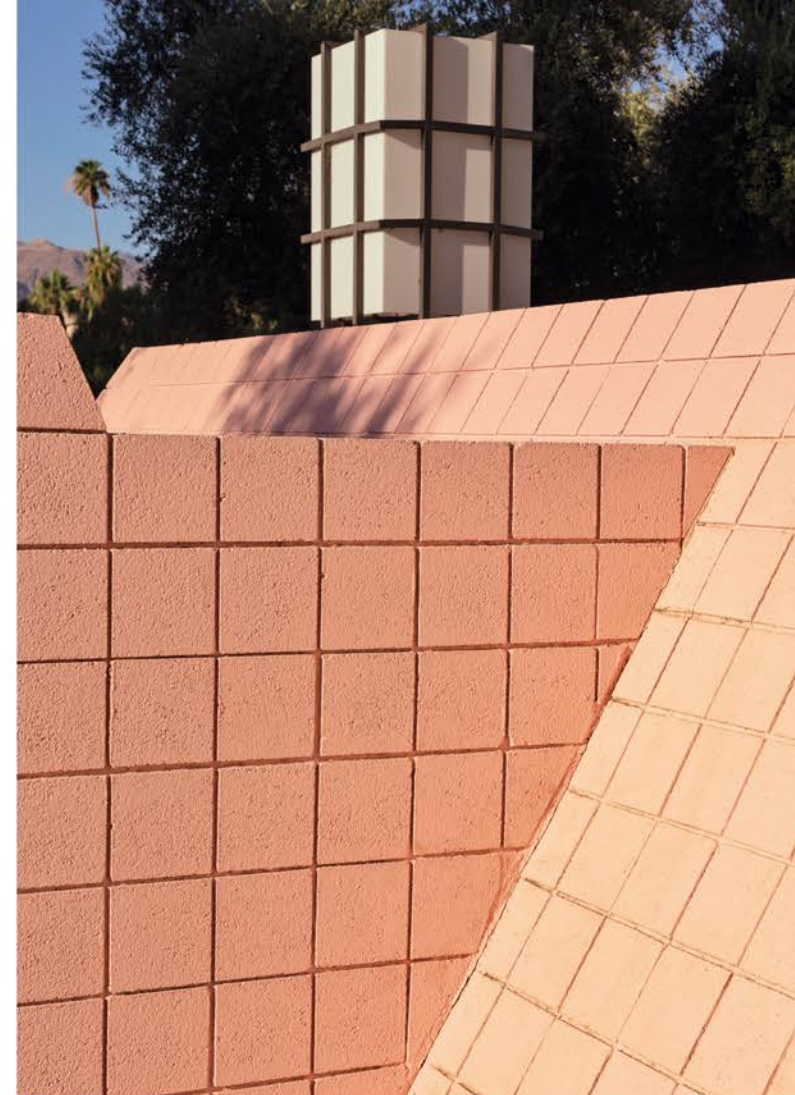
**LEVELLING UP**  
Canyon View Estates was designed in the early 1960s by Dan Palmer and William Krisel





Hollywood and Palm Springs go way back. One hundred years to be precise. Since the golden age of cinema, when studio contracts introduced a 100-mile rule requiring actors to stay close enough for reshoots, the likes of Marlon Brando, Elizabeth Taylor and Charlie Chaplin would motor down the highway in their drop-tops in search of off-season sunshine, roulette tables and rugged mountain views. Legend has it that Marilyn Monroe was scouted poolside at the Racquet Club. In recent years, design aficionados Diane Keaton and Tom Ford have been beguiled by the clean lines of Mid-century Modernism and pristine examples of Spanish revival architecture that dot the grid-like streets. Meanwhile, Oscar winner Gary Oldman has made the Coachella Valley's de facto capital his permanent home.

But it was Frank Sinatra who really put Palm Springs on the map from a design perspective. Or, rather, it was his architect. To satisfy his longing "to get away from it all, but not too far away", in 1947 Sinatra commissioned E Stewart Williams to build him a Georgian-style estate, but insisted the paint be dry in time for a star-studded holiday party. Sinatra threw his party in a venue of glass, wood and stone that was vastly different to what Ol' Blue Eyes had originally pictured. The architect had presented him with a 4,500sqft modern design, heavy on right angles and built around a piano-shaped pool – a home in harmony with, as opposed to fighting against, the elements. Sinatra took a punt on the prodigious young draughtsman and his Twin Palms Estate became the new social hub for his Hollywood friends.



With thanks to Locations 760

#### SPRINGS ETERNAL

Clockwise from here: wall by 7 Springs Inn & Suites; living area in the Dinah Shore Estate; Sinatra's Twin Palms Estate; Dinah Shore's pool; Sunnylands, which has hosted eight US presidents; Gonzalo Lebrija's *History of Suspended Time* at the Palm Springs Museum



That very same design aesthetic, which came to be known as 'Desert Modernism', caught the imagination of actor-director Olivia Wilde, who filmed the twisted thriller *Don't Worry Darling* in some of the city's best examples, including cross-shaped The Kaufmann Desert House (which Slim Aarons immortalised in his 1970 photograph, *Poolside Gossip*, and once belonged to Barry Manilow), and Canyon View Estates, a private community of condominiums designed by architects Dan Palmer and William Krisel. These single-storey communities, now numbering in the hundreds, have become synonymous with Palm Springs, with design tropes including a shared pool and gardens, geometric-patterned concrete blocks, sawtooth roofs and clerestory windows to allow for maximum light and mountain views, even in the gables.

In the film, Wilde conjures a period utopia faithful to that which attracted so many residents of LA to build or buy second homes in the desert Modernist style of 1950s and 1960s – when sunset cocktail hour was a daily ritual and wow-factor interiors in a bold palette of citrus shades and earth tones were de rigueur.

Today, design junkies visit the city to marvel at the restored and preserved homes, whose design was informed by this indoor/outdoor lifestyle and dictated by a climate that can reach 50°C in high summer (the low season) and drop to below 10°C at night. This creates two high seasons each year: from October to December and February to April. The city really comes alive at the end of February for Modernism Week, when many of the privately owned buildings (including some mentioned here) open their front doors to ticketed tours. ➔



After a pandemic hiatus in 2021, this year's 11-day event saw nearly 100,000 people attend 350 programmed events, many of which sold out.

"Over the last few years we have noticed our guests at Modernism Week have an insatiable appetite for entertainment blended with cultural opportunities, from retro-influenced dance performances in architecturally significant residential properties to the highly-social cocktail mixology sampling sessions at a local landmark restaurant," says Modernism Week's Lisa Vossler Smith. She grew up in the desert and has been involved in the event since its 2006 inception, rising to executive director in 2013 and now CEO.

A walking encyclopedia of the city's mid-century landmarks, she finds it tough to pick a favourite, but opts for Swiss architect and Le Corbusier protégé Albert Frey's home, Frey House II. It sits "like a tiny jewel box" at the foot of the mountain overlooking downtown. "At no more than about 900sqft, the main living area is built around a giant boulder, with the bed sitting right next to it."

To what does she attribute the ongoing fascination with Desert Modernism when there are so many architectural styles to geek out on these days? "One of the reasons the Mid-century Modern 'look' continues to resonate with people today is that it embodies minimal, but functional, design," Vossler says. "Realtors tell us that home buyers who seek out Mid-century Modern residences love the openness of their floor plans and the indoor/outdoor aspect of these vintage homes."

One such home buyer is LA-based Jonathon Burford, a creative director with a keen eye for design who has worked with Jimmy Choo and FarFetch and was a co-founder of Beautycon. During the pandemic, he and his property developer husband Jesse wanted a weekend getaway and, with Malibu beyond their budget, looked to Palm Springs, which Burford had got to know through photoshoots and attending Coachella festival. They landed on a sprawling three-bedroom Modernist bungalow with steps down to a pool in Little Tuscany, a neighbourhood boasting many architecturally significant homes, including the aforementioned Kaufmann Desert House, designed by Austrian immigrant Richard Neutra, Albert Frey's L-shaped Raymond Loewy House and E Stewart Williams' Edris House, something of an evolution of the Sinatra design.

"It's romantic to think about the rich history of celebrities and creatives who have lived here," says Burford, whose favourite house is the John Lautner-designed Elrod House, which "looks like a spaceship and has incredible views of the entire valley. The way the staircase wraps around the shape of the pool really gets me going." The house featured in the 1971 James Bond movie *Diamonds Are Forever*.

But it's not all about the private homes. Civic, commercial and cultural buildings mean there is never a dull moment as you bike or drive down evocatively named streets such as East Tahquitz Canyon Way where Palm Springs City Hall (also a star of *Don't Worry Darling*) stands proud, its main

## "IT'S ROMANTIC TO THINK ABOUT THE RICH HISTORY OF CELEBRITIES AND CREATIVES WHO HAVE LIVED HERE"



Albert Frey (American-born Swiss, 1903-1998), Frey House II, 1966-1967, addition 1970-1971, Collection Palm Springs Art Museum, Bequest of Albert Frey, 2003

### OL' BLUE POOL

E Stewart Williams' piano-shaped pool for Frank Sinatra. Right: interior of Frey House II; Albert Frey-designed Visitor Center in a former gas station





entrance overhang featuring a circular cut-out through which three impossibly tall palms reach for the skies. Built in 1952 by Frey, its shaded walkways offer an alternative to corridors and run the perimeter of the building. Two miles away, E Stewart Williams' The Palm Springs Art Museum, whose permanent collection of Louise Bourgeois, Henry Moore and Anish Kapoor works are as impressive as the 1976 building itself, is crowned by its 45' triangular overhangs and features a double entry staircase, a concrete sculpture garden, a movie theatre and a gaping three-storey atrium.

Arguably the city's most famous triangle sits atop the Frey-designed Palm Springs Visitors Center, which started life as an Esso gas station in 1965 (Wilde captured this one, too). Like one side of a pyramid rising on an invisible pulley, its cantilevered corner marks the entrance to the 'aerial tramway', aka the cable car. A ride to the top of the 2,600m mountain is quite spectacular,

**IT'S A MIRACLE**  
The Kaufmann  
Desert House  
once belonged to  
Barry Manilow





not just for the views of Coachella Valley in all its arid, primeval glory, but for the Alpine scenery at the top. The tall pines, snow-capped massifs and steep drop in temperature must have instantly transported Frey back to his native Switzerland on first sight. Up top there are hiking trails from anything between two and eight miles and the very daring can forego the cable car altogether and spend eight hours ascending there on foot.

The growing influx of design-savvy visitors and discerning residents is already on the radar for the Soho House group, which has purchased three properties in the Historic Tennis Club neighbourhood, including the 1925-built Spanish revival style Willows Historic Palm Springs Inn, a favourite of Albert Einstein and Shirley Temple. You can spot Soho House majority owner Ron Burkle's volcano-shaped home on a hike up the Araby trail. Known as the Bob Hope house, it overlooks the southern tip of Palm Springs in an exclusive area that also plays host to the Parker hotel with its Jonathan Adler interiors, two pools, maze-like gardens and a vibe you might call lux-louche or louche-lux, depending on the time of day.

Hope's architect, John Lautner, didn't approve of his interior décor, so Burkle has been working with the late architect's protégé Helena Arahuete to makeover the property with the kind of quartzite flooring, African mahogany and Brazilian granite that better reflects his original vision. Soho House has also purchased Le Vallauris, a French brasserie since the 1970s housed in a 1920s building with a discreet, circular patio, which will no doubt be the top table in town once Soho House's Nick Jones and co inject it with some trademark flair. ➡

### ALL MAKE BELIEVE

An 8m-tall statue of Marilyn Monroe (à la *Seven Year Itch*) by Palm Springs Art Museum

## Where to stay



### THE PARKER

With quirky-chic Jonathan Adler interiors which see a full suit of armour in the lobby and the geometric-print carpet from *The Shining* running the length of the hotel, The Parker has surprises around every corner, including a croquet lawn and a secret wine bar replete with a repurposed wooden confessional.

[parkerpalmsprings.com](http://parkerpalmsprings.com)

### COLONY PALMS

After a multimillion-dollar reboot by Steve Hermann (of nearby L'Horizon) this 1930s revival exudes old Hollywood glamour once again. The green-and-white theme runs through the hotel, from the poolside cabanas to the emerald wallpaper of the rooms, making for an instantly Instagrammable backdrop.

[colonypalmsshotel.com](http://colonypalmsshotel.com)

### ACE HOTEL

If it's poolside party vibes you're after this is the place. The converted motel has suites aplenty and quite possibly the largest number of loungers in Palm Springs. Restaurant King's Highway makes a fine burger and there's nowhere better for a sunset Jacuzzi as the sky turns pink over the San Jacinto range.

[acehotel.com](http://acehotel.com)

### SPARROWS LODGE

Artworks by Ed Ruscha, Ellsworth Kelly, Alex Katz and John Baldessari are reason enough to book this 20-room lodge from the co-owners of Bar Cecil. Built in the 1950s, it's been restored, renovated and redecorated, with exposed beams aplenty, concrete floors, luxurious Italian linens on the beds, and horse trough tubs and rain showers in the bathrooms.

[sparrowslodge.com](http://sparrowslodge.com)





**HOME STRAIGHT**

Condo at Canyon  
View Estates in  
South Palm Springs



Right now, the place to eat is Bar Cecil, where you can sometimes wait weeks to get a reservation just to sample its shrimp cocktail and pork chop signature dishes. Named after Cecil Beaton, the charmingly whimsical concept is the creation of partners in life and business Jeff Brock and Richard Crisman, who moved to Palm Springs 12 years ago and then took over a 1951 20-room hotel, now Sparrows Lodge, followed by the 28-room Holiday House in downtown. Bar Cecil opened at the height of the pandemic, serving negroni-fuelled dinners to a discerning mix of locals and new arrivals who had upped sticks from all over the USA in 2020 and made for the desert. During my visit, Cindy Crawford accepted a seat at the bar.

“Creative people tend to be leaving big cities for more open spaces and the pandemic only heightened desires for a simpler life. The high desert is a mecca for new, as well as long time, unknown and established creatives. It provides a blank canvas,” says Crisman.

With exceptional design, extraordinary nature, and exquisite hospitality all happily coexisting, what a work of art Palm Springs is.

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Mini Modernism Week is from 13-16 October 2022; Modernism Week runs from 16-26 February 2023 (tickets on sale from 1 November). [modernismweek.com](#) For more information on Greater Palm Springs, see [visitgreaterpalmsprings.com](#)