

Celebrating the mid-century modern flair of Palm Springs

Step back in time to the stylish excess of Hollywood's golden age.

By GRAHAM ERBACHER



A mid-century modern home in the Las Palmas neighborhood of Palm Springs, California. Picture: Getty Images

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5 MINUTE READ

There is something about a kidney-shaped pool that is so coolly mid-century. The organic curves, akin to an artist's palette, fit perfectly in an architectural setting designed for the idyllic indoor-outdoor lifestyle. And that is what the Californian city of Palm Springs, two hours east of Los Angeles in the Coachella Valley, has been all about.

On a crisp desert morning there can be no better guide to its life and times than architectural enthusiast and man-about-town Michael Stern, who conducts The Modern Tour. What the South Beach area of Miami has done for the preservation and revitalisation of Art Deco in the US, Palm Springs, legendary playground of the Hollywood stars, is doing for mid-century modern architecture, characterised by clean lines, open-plan interiors and walls of glass that marry in-here with out-there.

Relocate Mad Men to the sands, add exotic arid-climate vegetation and you have desert modern. The city champions its heritage in an 11-day Modernism "Week" in February and a little brother event in October.



Palm Springs thrived in Hollywood's golden years.

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Palm Springs thrived in the golden years of Hollywood because it was a relatively short drive to the studios if stars were recalled for filming, and there was a general agreement with the press that this was a resort away from prying eyes. A hedonistic spirit prevailed, a legacy that endures.

I visit on the eve of Pride Weekend, and with a large gay population it's clearly going to be a hot time in the old town tonight.

Stern, author of the Rizzoli publication *Hollywood Modern: Houses of the Stars*, reels off the residences we will pass and their one-time owners. He has keys to quite a few properties so we will check out swish interiors, fabulous gardens and those pools (kidney, circular, rectangular and in the case of Frank Sinatra's, piano-shaped, although this is not on our itinerary). Here are just a few names that crop up: Liz Taylor, Bob Hope, Dean Martin, Bing Crosby, Lucille Ball, Jerry Lewis, Carmen Miranda, Zsa Zsa and Eva Gabor, Dinah Shore, William Holden, Liberace, Marilyn Monroe and Elvis Presley. If it's sounding like the cast of a yesteryear epic (although not of the biblical kind), add Leonardo DiCaprio and Gary Oldman of contemporary renown. Among the architects who recur are John Lautner, Richard Neutra, A. Quincy Jones, Donald Wexler, Hugh Kapur, E. Stewart Williams and Albert Frey.

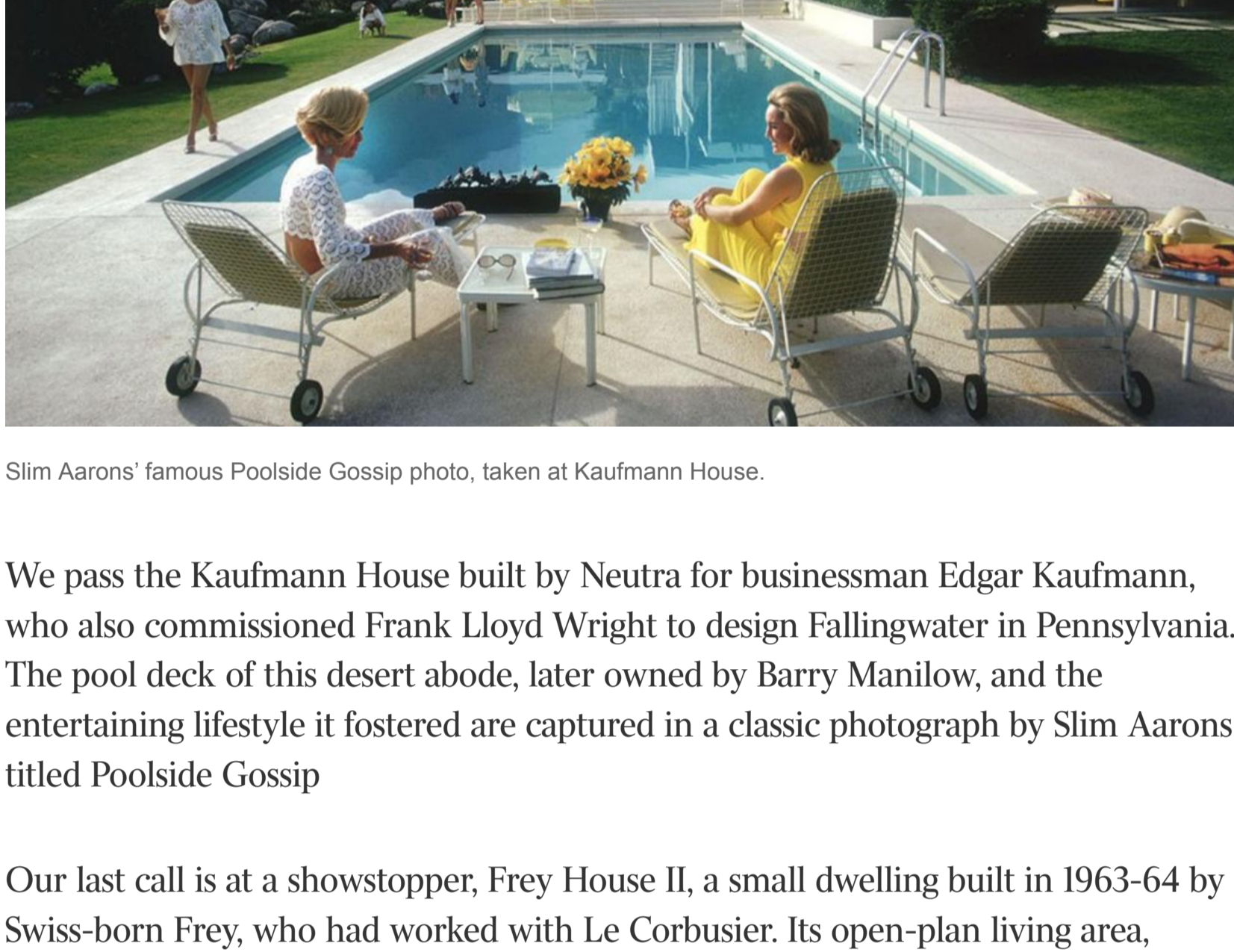


Marilyn Monroe immortalised in a statue at Palm Springs.

But Palm Springs wasn't all about catering to celebrity. Its uniformly styled buildings, preserved well in the desert climate, were often the product of "tract housing" (we'd call them housing estates) on modest-sized blocks. The Alexander Construction Co and architect William Krisel were masters of creating homes with standard footprints but customised by alternating facades and rooflines (including the sleek butterfly look). Breeze blocks (aka Besser bricks) provided a degree of privacy.

At a Twin Palms Estates address, the owner is driving off, leaving a covetable 1950s two-toned Nash Statesman second vehicle in the carport, as Stern ushers us inside to make friends with the dog and admire immaculately kept and vibrantly coloured "wow" decor. At least let me souvenir the snappy letter box.

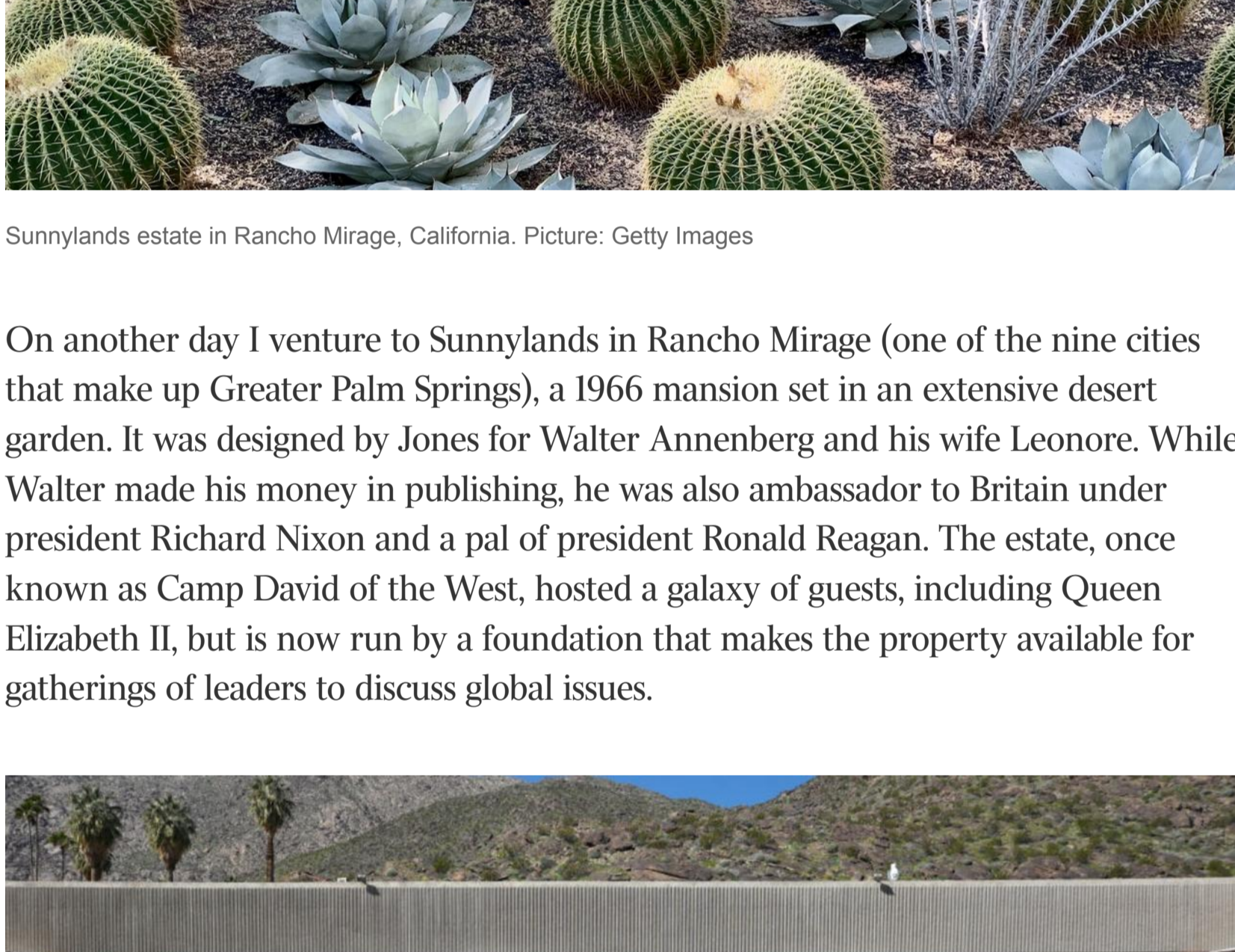
My favourite property is the former home of composer Frederick Loewe, who with lyricist Alan Jay Lerner gave theatregeers *My Fair Lady*, *Camelot* and *Brigadoon*. The stark San Jacinto Mountains loom large from the manicured gardens.



Slim Aarons' famous Poolside Gossip photo, taken at Kaufmann House.

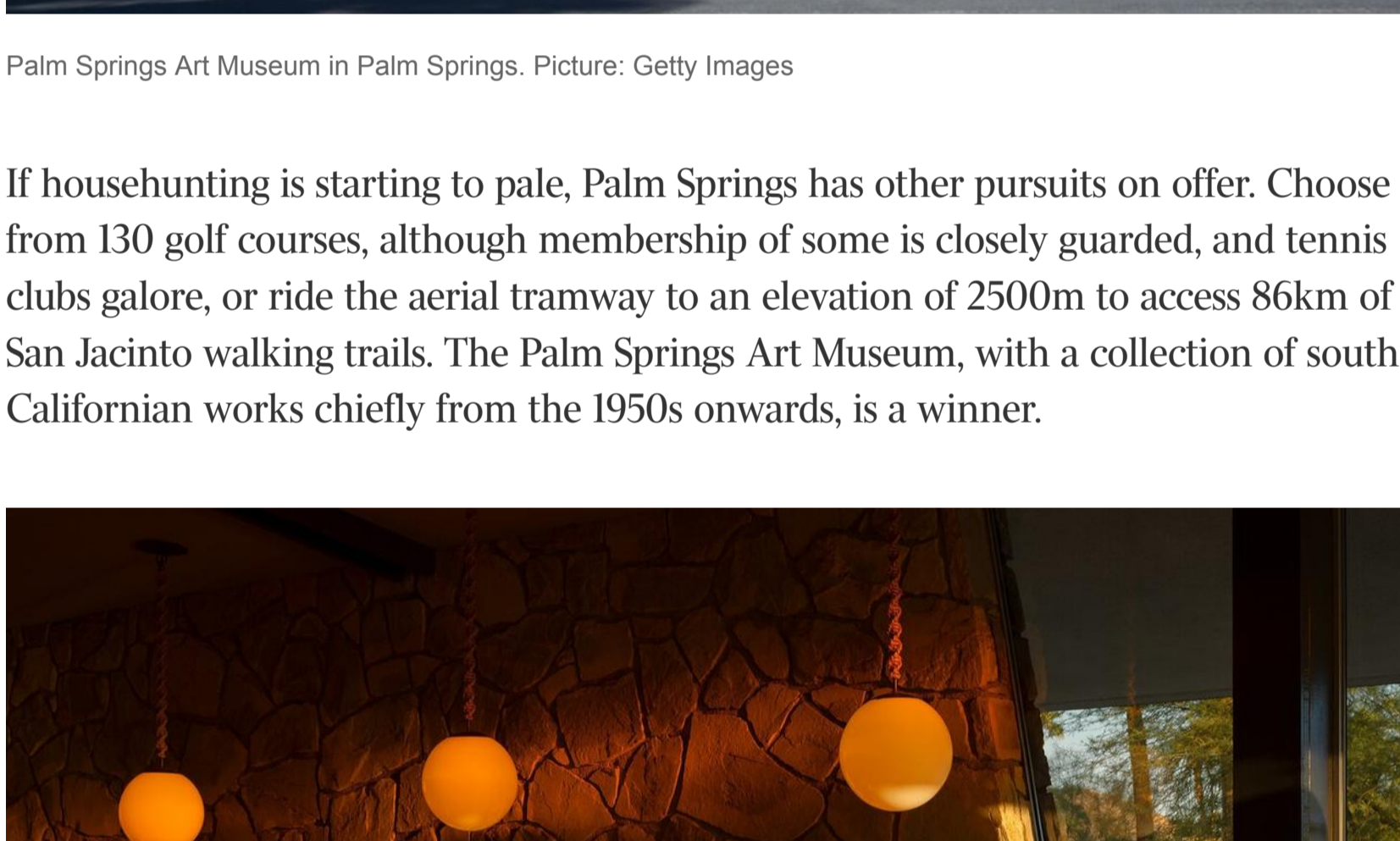
We pass the Kaufmann House built by Neutra for businessman Edgar Kaufmann, who also commissioned Frank Lloyd Wright to design Fallingwater in Pennsylvania. The pool deck of this desert abode, later owned by Barry Manilow, and the entertaining lifestyle it fostered are captured in a classic photograph by Slim Aarons titled *Poolside Gossip*.

Our last call is at a showstopper, Frey House II, a small dwelling built in 1963-64 by Swiss-born Frey, who had worked with Le Corbusier. Its open-plan living area, workspace and bedroom fit snugly around an oval-shaped rock, locking the home with nature. Everything about the place, down to the canary curtains, is as Frey left it.



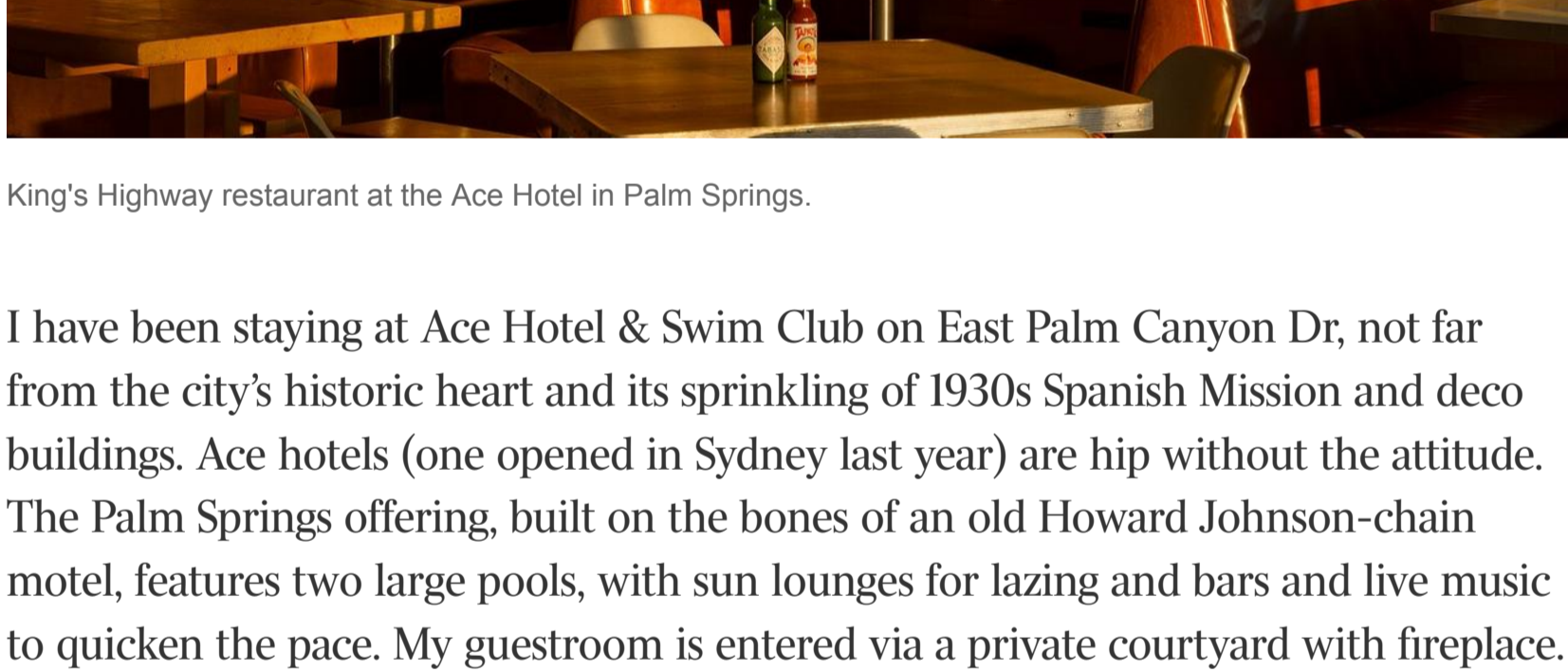
Sunnylands estate in Rancho Mirage, California. Picture: Getty Images

On another day I venture to Sunnylands in Rancho Mirage (one of the nine cities that make up Greater Palm Springs), a 1966 mansion set in an extensive desert garden. It was designed by Jones for Walter Annenberg and his wife Leonore. While Walter made his money in publishing, he was also ambassador to Britain under president Richard Nixon and a pal of president Ronald Reagan. The estate, once known as Camp David of the West, hosted a galaxy of guests, including Queen Elizabeth II, but is now run by a foundation that makes the property available for gatherings of leaders to discuss global issues.



Palm Springs Art Museum in Palm Springs. Picture: Getty Images

If househunting is starting to pale, Palm Springs has other pursuits on offer. Choose from 130 golf courses, although membership of some is closely guarded, and tennis clubs galore, or ride the aerial tramway to an elevation of 2500m to access 86km of San Jacinto walking trails. The Palm Springs Art Museum, with a collection of south Californian works chiefly from the 1950s onwards, is a winner.



King's Highway restaurant at the Ace Hotel in Palm Springs.

I have been staying at Ace Hotel & Swim Club on East Palm Canyon Dr, not far from the city's historic heart and its sprinkling of 1930s Spanish Mission and deco buildings. Ace hotels (one opened in Sydney last year) are hip without the attitude. The Palm Springs offering, built on the bones of an old Howard Johnson-chain motel, features two large pools, with sun lounges for lazing and bars and live music to quicken the pace. My guestroom is entered via a private courtyard with fireplace. Its walls are canvas-clad, giving the space a glamping feel, and the bed, with padded denim head, is a snoozy delight; the desired vibe is "romantic funky". The Ace's roadside diner, King's Highway, serves Cal-Mex cuisine.



Albert Einstein and his wife, Elsa, at Palm Springs' El Mirador Hotel in 1933. Picture: Getty Images

Downtown Palm Springs has a 8m-tall statue of actress Monroe, titled *Forever Marilyn*, with billowing skirt, recreating the famous pose from *The Seven Year Itch*. But on a stroll through Palm Desert, another of the Greater Palm Springs cities with a retail strip to rival Rodeo Drive in Beverly Hills, I encounter an unexpected figure looting on a street bench. It is a sculpture of Albert Einstein, who spent time in Palm Springs in 1933 after fleeing Germany, where Hitler was on the rise. A welcoming oasis then and now.

Where to dine like a local

Daniel's Table in Cathedral City is authentic Coachella Valley. Chef Daniel Villanueva, with a Hollywood hospitality background, partners with local farmers, creating a menu that accentuates seasonal and organic.

Grand Central in Palm Springs serves an unbeatable brunch, with extensive coffee offerings, in an impressive space once occupied by Desmond's department store.

Puerta Via in Palm Desert is laid-back California style with indoor-outdoor dining and a bistro menu combining classic with creative.

Spencer's Restaurant sits adjacent to the Palm Springs Tennis Club at the base of the San Jacinto Mountains. Classic American cuisine in super-stylish surrounds.

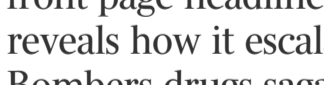
In the know

American Airlines flies daily from Sydney to Los Angeles, on-flights to Palm Springs or take a shuttle bus

or hire a car. Guestrooms at **Ace Hotel & Swim Club** from about \$US207 (\$300) plus taxes. **The Modern Tour** starts at \$US200 a person. **Modernism Week**, with a program of 350 events, runs from February 16-26 and October 19-22.

Graham Erbacher was a guest of American Airlines and Visit Greater Palm Springs.

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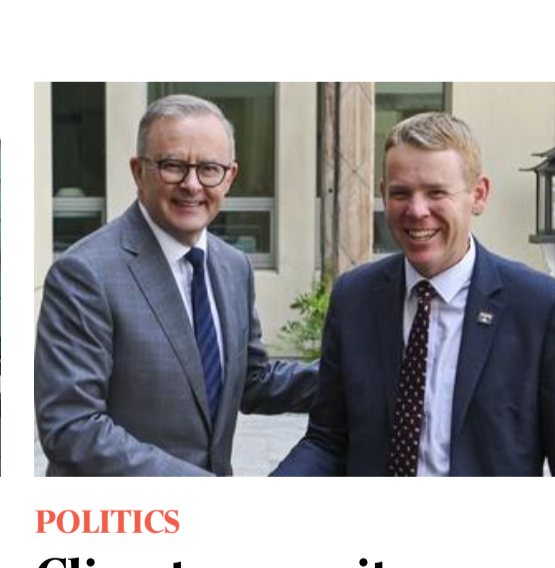
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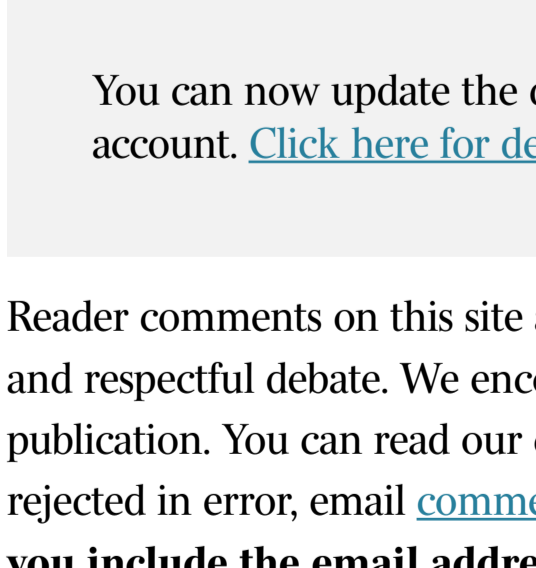
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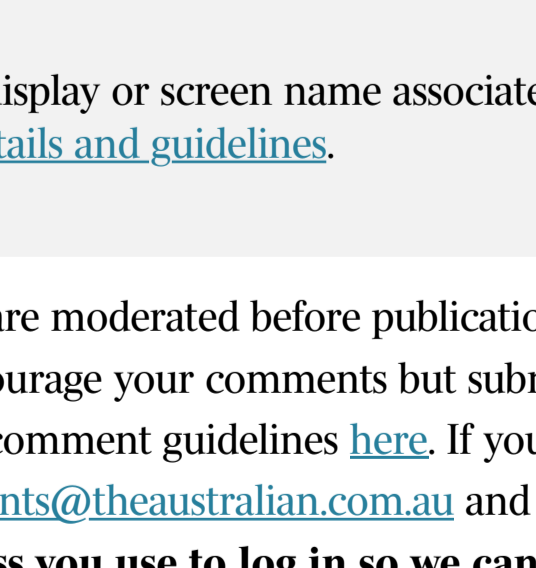
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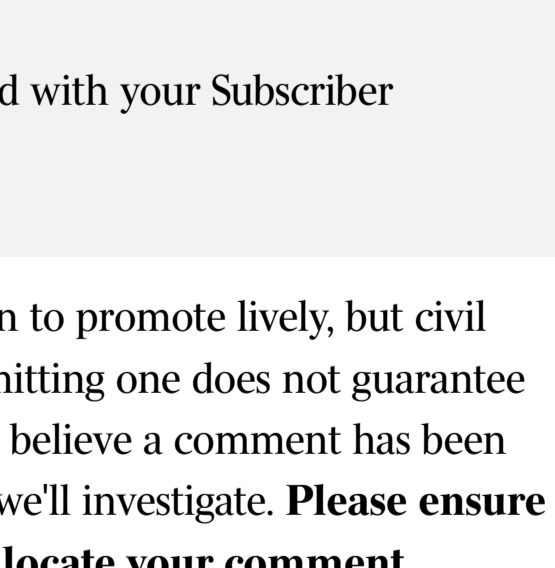
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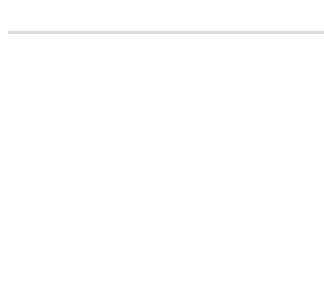
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