

## Palm Springs a warm, wonderful getaway

Former 'playground of the stars' is back in style for northern vacationers

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Special to The Sun

*Saturday, May 03, 2008*

When you walk out of the Palm Springs International Airport terminal on a mid-March afternoon, you know immediately that you're not in Kansas anymore, or British Columbia or anywhere else on Earth. The warm desert sun and fragrant breeze bring a smile to your face. You are surrounded by flowers, cactus, and palm trees. From somewhere comes the seductive crooning of Frank Sinatra. This is Palm Springs, Calif., legendary playground of the stars and one of North America's favourite winter vacation destinations.

We have come here to get away from the end of a too cold, too long northern B.C. winter. It's our first time here, and as we exit the airport to an azure sky, more flowers than any city has a right to, and a temperature in the mid- 80s, we know we have made the right choice for a winter getaway.



CREDIT:

Tanning by the pool at the Pepper Tree Inn in Palm Springs is an afternoon ritual.

For many years Palm Springs was in decline, with the adjacent communities of Rancho Mirage, Palm Desert, Indian Wells, La Quinta, and Indio seeing explosive growth and a host of luxury developments. Palm Springs was left to fray a little at the edges. Some credit former mayor Sonny Bono for beginning the resurgence that has now gripped the city.

Our destination is on Palm Canyon Drive, the heart and soul of Palm Springs. The Pepper Tree Inn has come recommended by friends who described it as a hidden gem in the desert. They were right. The Pepper Tree is a small boutique hotel originally built in the 1920s in the Spanish colonial revival style. With just over 30 rooms and suites, the "Tree," as it is locally known, is an intimate, peaceful, adult-oriented hotel that has been lovingly restored. Inside the adobe walls and behind two stunning ornamental wrought iron and coloured glass gates, is a true oasis in the desert.

While tanning by the pool is an afternoon ritual at the Pepper Tree, there is much to see and do just steps away on Palm Canyon Drive. This palm-lined boulevard, with sidewalks inlaid with stars commemorating famous residents like Bob Hope and Marilyn Monroe, is locally known as "the Village." The Village is home to twelve blocks of gift shops, high end boutiques, art galleries (many specializing in southwest art), coffee shops, clubs, and a wide selection of restaurants. Palm Springs boasts some of the finest eateries in California, and on Palm Canyon you can find five-star French, Italian, and Japanese places at which to indulge. But, if you are visiting the southwest why not eat southwest? Palm Springs has some of the finest Mexican restaurants north of the border. Three that stand out for quality, service, and value are: the Blue Coyote, Mariposas, and Las Casuelas Terraza. All are within walking distance from the Tree.

Thursday evening is when Palm Canyon Drive really comes to life. From 5 until 10 p.m. the street is closed to traffic and parking for "Village Fest," a weekly event that happens all year. The Drive is taken over by scores of street vendors under white awnings selling everything from fine art and hand crafts to fresh fruit and dates to oriental massages.

Golf and Palm Springs go together like tequila and limes, and with over one hundred courses to choose from, snowbirds in search of a game need not look far. But golf in the desert can

be very expensive. Most resort courses have fees ranging from \$100 to \$200 a round. That's out of reach for a lot of us.

We did find two exceptional bargains during our stay. Tommy Jacob's BelAir Greens is a challenging par thirty executive course only 10 minutes from the Pepper Tree. While small, it will rival many of your favourite home courses. Rates are \$20 for nine holes and \$30 for eighteen. Cimarron Golf Resort, also not far from the hotel, has two eighteen hole courses that you can play for \$44 per couple, including cart, after 1 p.m.

No trip to the Palm Springs area in March or April would be complete without a visit to Joshua Tree National Park. The strange Joshua trees cover the plains and you half expect to see John Wayne leading a troop of cavalry off to some battle. To the south the desert gives way to cactus, ocotillo bushes with their flame like red blooms, and a profusion of wildflowers that carpet the desert floor.

If you do visit the park, be prepared for extreme variations in temperature. In the north we endured 41 degrees Fahrenheit along with a howling, biting wind that would have been at home at Portage and Main in February. As we descended into the low desert the temperature rose to 76 in only a few miles.

As we entered the air terminal at four a.m. for our six a.m. flight home the desert sky was studded with stars. Somewhere behind us in the concourse "Old Blue Eyes" was singing "I'll be seeing you..." I smiled and thought "You can bet on that Frank."

Pepper Tree Inn, 622 N. Palm Canyon Drive, 1-800-887-8753, or visit [www.PepperTreePalmSprings.com](http://www.PepperTreePalmSprings.com). Rates in high season start at \$129. Weekly and mid week specials are available.

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