



DESERTS

Recreational playground in the sun

BY CHRISTOPHER P. BAKER

TOP CITIES

Palm Springs, Palm Desert, La Quinta, Rancho Mirage, Barstow, Indian Wells, Needles, Salton Sea, Mojave, Indio

INTERNATIONAL GATEWAY

Palm Springs International Airport (PSP), 10 minutes from downtown Palm Springs, 44 miles (71 km) from Anza-Borrego State Park

TOURISM WEBSITES

- visitpalm Springs.com
- visitgreaterpalm Springs.com
- palm-desert.org
- la-quinta.gov
- ranchomirageca.gov
- barstowca.org/visitors
- indio.org/visit_us
- Anza-Borrego SP: www.parks.ca.gov/?page_id=638
- Death Valley NP: nps.gov/deva
- Joshua Tree NP: nps.gov/jotr

POPULATION

750,000



There aren't many places where you can golf while wearing shorts in the morning, snowshoe in the afternoon, and laze by the pool with a cocktail in the evening. Which explains why more than five million visitors a year descend on Palm Springs and the surrounding desert region.

Begin with lush palm oases, hot mineral springs and awesome landscapes. Add sublime winter weather plus a to-see-and-do wish list from biking and ballooning to casinos and spas. And top off with an eternally cool desert lifestyle that recalls the 1940-60s, when Hollywood stars turned the area into a world-famous winter retreat. Welcome to a region where the summer never dies, the Modernist architecture is retro-chic, and the reinvigorated youthful spirit feels as refreshing as a chilled martini.

An easy 90-minute drive from Los Angeles, "Palm Springs" is understood as the entire Coachella Valley, comprising eight "desert resort communities" clustered at the foot of the San Jacinto Mountains. They merge into one another along Highway 111—one of California's great urban drives. The physical setting is out of this world. Majestic mountains soar on three sides, glistening with snow in the winter sunshine. There's no shortage of activities and attractions. The dining is fabulous. The spas are among California's best. And the region boasts several ritzy casinos. Museums cater to WWII aviation buffs, art fans and nature lovers keen to experience desert ecology. El Paseo gives Beverly Hills' Rodeo Drive a run for its money in its quality and range of boutiques. Palm Springs' music,

JPHOTOGOLFER/SHUTTERSTOCK

PLAYING GOLF AT MISSION HILLS COUNTRY CLUB,
Rancho Mirage, opposite.



SPECIAL » EVENTS 2018

PALM SPRINGS INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL Jan. 3-14, Palm Springs psfilmfest.org

PALM SPRINGS MODERNISM WEEK Feb. 14-24, Greater Palm Springs, modernismweek.com

RIVERSIDE COUNTY FAIR AND NATIONAL DATE FESTIVAL Feb. 15-24, Indio datefest.org

BNP PARIBAS OPEN March 4-17, Indian Wells bnpparibasopen.com

FASHION WEEK March 16-23, Palm Desert fashionweekelpaseo.com

COACHELLA MUSIC FESTIVAL April 12-14, 19-21, Indio coachella.com

WHITE PARTY. April 26-29, Palm Springs jeffreysanker.com

STAGECOACH COUNTRY MUSIC FESTIVAL April 26-28, Indio stagecoachfestival.com

JOSHUA TREE MUSIC FESTIVAL May 16-19, Oct. 10-13, Joshua Tree joshuatreemusicfestival.com

54TH ANNUAL BORREGO DAYS DESERT FESTIVAL Oct. 18-20, Borrego Springs borregodays.com

GREATER PALM SPRINGS PRIDE Nov. 2-3, Palm Springs pspride.org

FESTIVAL OF LIGHTS PARADE Dec. 7, Palm Springs psfestivaloflights.com

film and arts festivals are world-renowned, as is the city's hip trademark mid-century architecture.

Sports and Active Adventures

You might be forgiven for thinking that a desert offers little to do and that it's just too darn hot to do it in any event. Wrong on both counts! The region is replete with exciting recreational activities.

There's no more quintessential image of the Palm Springs region than an emerald greensward studded by palms and framed by boulder-strewn mountains gloriously snowcapped in winter. In fact, the Coachella Valley has earned the distinction of "Golf Capital of the World," with more golf courses than you can shake a 4-iron at. More than two million visitors come annually to play golf on more than one hundred courses. Almost as many arrive to explore the palm groves, alpine summits or spectacular

» **Palm Springs Aerial Tramway** Whisking you to another world as it revolves through 360 degrees, the tram climbs more than two miles to the mountain station at 8,516 feet elevation. Go for the sensational ride, or to escape the summer heat and hike the pleasantly cool pine forest. In winter the mountain is usually swathed in snow—perfect for exploring on cross-country skis or snowshoes. The mountain station's gourmet restaurant tempts you to linger for a candlelit dinner overlooking the sparkling lights of the valley far below.

> pstramway.com

» **Palm Springs Modern** The city claims one of the most important concentrations of mid-20th-century Modernist architecture in the world. For a fascinating insight into how Palm Springs became Modernism's place in the sun, explore with the Palm Springs Art Museum Architecture & Design Center. The curated tour will explain the inspiration for such icons as the Steel Houses and the Romchamp-inspired Bank of America building. Plus, you get to see inside several celebrity homes.

> moderntour.com

» **Palm Springs Art Museum** Acclaimed as one of California's top regional art venues, the museum houses a stunning collection spanning pre-Columbian and Native American art to works by classic western American masters, plein air art on a desert theme, and contemporary California artists. Much of the artwork was donated by local residents such as author Sidney Sheldon and actor Kirk Douglas. It occupies a striking Modernist building with a sunken sculpture garden.

> psmuseum.org

» **Joshua Tree National Park** Spanning 1,240 square miles, this park protects one of the most spectacularly scenic of desert regions and is named for the peculiarly-shaped Joshua trees, which grow here in abundance. Fantastical rock formations draw climbers, and a spiderweb of hiking and mountain bike trails lace the park. Be sure to call in at the Visitor Center and Keys West, a lookout with panoramic views over Coachella Valley, with the San Andreas Fault clearly visible below.

> nps.gov/jotr

» **Living Desert** Despite the sizzling heat and lack of water, wildlife abounds in the desert. Most desert denizens hide by day, especially in summer. To see them, head to Living Desert Zoo & Park, which displays fauna from arid environments around the world. Local critters include desert tortoise, mountain lion and bighorn sheep, while exotic wildlife include oryx, giraffes and Mexican wolves. More than four miles of interpretive trails weave through the surrounding wilderness.

> livingdesert.org



JOSHUA TREE NATIONAL PARK, top; young buck mule deer in the high desert, above; family fun in Palm Springs, opposite left; Uptown Design District, Palm Springs, opposite right.

INSIDER'S » TIP

SOCIAL CYCLE—a 16-passenger, pedal-powered cycle steered by a professional guide—lets you tour Palm Springs while partying and without fear of losing your license. It plies a route through downtown with stops at a selection of top bars and restaurants. You can hop on a public tour or reserve it for you and a group of friends. Two-hour tours depart Friday-Sunday; departure times vary by day. socialcycleca.com

desert landscapes of Anza-Borrego Desert State Park and Joshua Tree National Park, where boulder formations prove an exciting challenge for climbers.

Fabulous winter weather spells Nirvana for hikers, rock-climbers, cyclists and other outdoorsy folk. Incising the slopes of the San Jacinto Mountains, the three Indian Canyons tempt hikers with 30 miles of trails and picnic sites. Fed by natural springs, stands of desert fan palms crowd the canyon floors, providing sheltering oases for kit fox, bighorn sheep and coyote. Ancient petroglyphs can be seen while hiking Andreas Canyon and Tahquitz Canyon, with its spectacular 60-foot-tall waterfall.

Cultural Connections

Culture vultures delight to find the desert is far from dry. The Native American Agua Caliente occupied the Palm Springs region long before Europeans arrived. Their proud legacy is on show at Agua Caliente Cultural Museum in downtown Palm Springs; it will debut in a superb new venue in 2020. History buffs also delight in the Palm Springs Air Museum, replete with World War II-era warplanes from a P-51 Mustang to a B-17 Flying Fortress. The monied elite that pours into Palm Springs for winter is a huge patron of the arts, including as major donors to the Palm Springs Art Museum, one of California's top regional

art venues—its plein air, Mesoamerican and contemporary glass collections are outstanding.

Down valley, more than 150 unique works of art decorate the streets of Palm Desert, grouped for four self-guided tours. Colorful murals grace historic downtown Indio, painting a big picture on the city's past. And visitors can explore the vast Sunylands Estate, in Rancho Mirage, where billionaire Walter Annenberg hosted President Richard Nixon after he resigned in 1974, and President Ronald Reagan on a score of New Year's Eves.

Festivals to Casinos

Palm Springs has festivals to please every taste. The season kicks off in January with the Palm Springs International Film Festival, when Hollywood's finest hit town. In March, the world-class Indian Wells Tennis Garden fills to overflowing for the annual BNP Paribas Open. And in April, be there or be square for the Coachella Music Festival, hosted in the warm open air of neighboring Indio. Almost 200 star performers rock half a million attendees; with Beyoncé and Eminem head-lining, the 2019 festival guarantees that it's one hot ticket!

Higher culture? Palm Desert's McCallum Theater resounds to laughter and cheers of delight with a lineup that can range from Itzhak Perlman and The Vienna Boys Choir to *The Nutcracker* ballet and the Peking Acrobats.

Since the valley's Cahuilla Indian territory is a sovereign nation, it's exempt from California's state ban on gambling. Try your hand with Lady Luck at any of half a dozen casinos. Most have venues that host class acts from world-title boxing to top performers such as Kesha, Sheena Easton and the desert's own Barry Manilow. And shopaholics are in for a treat: Art galleries, *haute couturiers* and boutique stores specializing in retro modernist décor offer a dash of retail therapy between your spa treatments.

Natural Wonders

Brimming with the glories of nature, the desert is a paradise for anyone who appreciates stupendous landscapes. The scenery is far more diverse than you might imagine, ranging from below sea level to almost 11,000 feet atop Mount San Jacinto.

Abundant rains in winter carpet the desert with wildflowers—nowhere more spectacular than the springtime bloom of Antelope Valley Poppy State Reserve, near the town of Mojave. Snaking south through the Coachella Valley, scenic palm-lined Highway 111 will deliver you to Anza-Borrego Desert State Park. Capital of desert botanica, this 500,000-acre park is ablaze with fiery red poppies and other wildflowers.

A 30-minute drive northeast from Palm Springs, Joshua Tree National Park spans 1,240 square miles of Mojave and lower Colorado deserts and protects one of the most spectacular desert regions in North America. Popular with rock climbers, its dramatic landscapes are made surreal by the “Joshua tree” species of yucca, with strange, arm-like branches.

From Joshua Tree, historic Route 66 unfurls past Mojave National Preserve, where the Kelso Dunes tower almost 1,000 feet above the desert floor. They’re known as the “singing dunes” because they emit a buzz or rumble when sand slides down the dune-face. Nearby, 32 ancient volcanic cones stud

Cinder Cones National Natural Landmark—a gateway to the stand-out draw of the northern Mojave: Death Valley National Park. The highest ground temperature ever recorded on earth was here, at Badwater, a sunken trough that reaches 282 feet below sea level. Yet Death Valley is rimmed by 11,000-foot mountains. Winter months are deliciously temperate, when tourists flock to marvel at chromatic canyons and sun-bleached salt pans. Well-paved roads lace the park, while dirt roads open up a world of extreme adventure for visitors with suitable vehicles.

Family Fun

Kids love the desert, which offers heaps of family fun, including old ghost towns such as Pioneertown, an old movie set where shoot-out recreations bring old Westerns back to life. Another favorite is the Living Desert Zoo & Gardens, exhibiting nearly 400 species of animals, from aardvark to zebra. With luck you might even spot bighorn sheep in the wild on a Desert Adventures eco-tour by Jeep. Even camels add to the fun at Indio’s Riverside County Fair & National Date Festival in February.

In summer, beat the heat splashing about at Wet’N’Wild waterpark. Or take to the air

with Fantasy Balloon Flights for a bird’s-eye view of the Coachella Valley. Then delight the kids, and yourself, with a ten-minute jaunt to Alaska (at least metaphorically) aboard the Palm Springs Aerial Tramway. It ascends through four life zones to the mountaintop station, where the air is 30 degrees cooler than it is in the desert below. **CA**

DRIVE » TOUR

Start in downtown **PALM SPRINGS** and follow Highway 111 southeast to **PALM DESERT**, then head into the San Jacinto Mountains along steep, twisting Highway 74 to the **COACHELLA VALLEY VISTA POINT** for a sensational view. Retrace your route to Highway 111 and continue east. Turn south onto Highway 86 past date palms and vineyards and the Salton Sea to **SALTON CITY**, then head west along Highway 522 through the **BORREGO BADLANDS** to the artists’ community of **BORREGO SPRINGS**. Explore the fantastical metal sculptures in **GALLETTA MEADOWS**, then lace up your hiking boots to explore cactus-studded **ANZA-BORREGO DESERT STATE PARK**.

