

#CELEBRITIES #ARCHITECTURE

# Mid-century marvellous

Palm Springs is the epicentre of mid-century glamour and now you can step into the enviable homes of the Hollywood megastars who lived there. *By Brian Thacker*

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HEN FRANK SINATRA MOVED into Twin Palms Estate, he planted a flagpole in his garden between two tall palms so he could raise a Jack Daniel's flag to let his neighbours know it was cocktail hour. As I stand by the glistening piano-shaped pool, I can just imagine him on a balmy evening with his favourite whisky in hand, leaning on the bar as he waited for Dean Martin or Humphrey Bogart to waltz in for a martini.

Sinatra commissioned his first home in Palm Springs in 1947 from modernist architect E. Stewart Williams. He famously swaggered into a local realtor wearing a sailor's cap, eating an ice-cream and saying that he wanted a house built in time for his Christmas party.

The low-slung house is airy and bedecked with rusty hues and warm timbers. It still has all the stark but uber-cool mid-century furnishings – along with a chip in the master suite bathroom sink where it's said a flying bottle of champagne was hurled during one of Sinatra and Ava Gardner's lively battles.

I'm doing it 'My Way' at Sinatra's house on a self-guided tour during Modernism Week October – a four-day indulgence in all things mid-century modern, featuring 50 events covering design, architecture, art and fashion. This is really a 'mini' Modernism Week – the 10-day February Modernism Week extravaganza showcases more than 350 events. Although you can only tour many of the mid-century homes during Modernism Week, you can actually lounge at Sinatra's house 'Night and Day': it's available to rent on Airbnb for US\$3,300 a night.

📍 **TRAVEL FACTS**

**GETTING THERE**  
Most major airlines fly from Australia to Los Angeles. From there it's a two-hour drive to Palm Springs.

**STAYING THERE**  
The swanky Cole Hotel is the refurbished Bahama Hotel, built in 1959. [sonder.com](http://sonder.com)

**FURTHER INFORMATION**  
[visitpalm Springs.com](http://visitpalm Springs.com)  
[modernismweek.com](http://modernismweek.com)



**ELVIS IS IN THE BUILDING**  
Sinatra wasn't the first mega movie star to make Palm Springs his home. The desert oasis became the playground for the Hollywood elite through a quirk in studio contracts stipulating that Tinseltown actors needed to be no more than 160 kilometres from Los Angeles in case they were called back for a last-minute reshoot. Soon after, the stars started tumbling in. Joining Frankie and the Ratpack were stars so famous you only need their first names: Marilyn, Bing, Zsa Zsa, Liberace and Elvis.

The area not only attracted the Hollywood clique, but also star architects. They included Richard Neutra, John Lautner, William Cody and Albert Frey, who designed hundreds of modernist masterpieces, from celebrity homes to banks – and even gas stations. This desert modernism style was characterised by clean lines, floor-to-ceiling glass and open-plan spaces that came together to bring the warmth of the desert into every setting.

I'm greeted with a vast, open living area and a 22-metre-long curved couch when I step through the front door of Elvis Presley's Honeymoon Hideout. I imagine the same for Elvis as he carried Priscilla over the threshold on their first night together as husband and wife, singing the Hawaiian Wedding Song. Their plan had been to be married in the backyard; but once the press got wind of it, they flew to Sin City in Sinatra's jet for a classic Vegas wedding instead.

Dubbed the 'House of Tomorrow', this iconic home with a spaceship-like winged roofline was designed in 1960 by architect William Krisel. Sadly, much of the original mid-century décor inside was replaced in a refurbishment for an upcoming sale (since I visited it sold for \$US5.6 million). Although it wasn't the original bed, it still felt surreal standing in the main bedroom knowing that exactly nine months after Elvis and Priscilla's honeymoon night here, Lisa-Marie arrived.

**A MODERN MECCA**  
The Greater Palm Springs aesthetic is a unique one, boasting the world's largest cache of mid-century modern architecture – and all it takes is a drive through the neighbourhoods to see that. Point your camera pretty much anywhere and chances are you'll land on an Instagram-worthy home. You can drive it yourself using a celebrity home map, but I hop aboard an open double-decker bus tour for a heady cocktail of mid-century eye candy and cactus porn. Or, as our guide dubs it: 'The Over the Hedges Tour'.

From our higher vantage point, we peek into the backyards of the rich and fancy. As our guide points out Leonardo DiCaprio's lavish love nest, I'm hoping I might see him lounging by the pool, but apparently he doesn't stay there often. And yep, like Sinatra's house, you can book it out for a mere US\$4,000 a night.

Probably the biggest drawcard to Modernism Week is the opportunity to be

a sticky-beak. You don't just have to do drive-bys – you get the chance to mosey around regular folks' homes as part of a Home Tours series. Although many feel more like museums than homes, the attention to period detail is both impressive and obsessive. I also discover that Palm Springs is the quirky inflatable pool toy capital of the world, featuring a flamboyance of flamingos, unicorns and pool rings perfectly matched to the pool cabana, floating in every pool.

Even when it's not Modernism Week, Palm Springs is a must-visit for cinephiles, history buffs, adventure seekers, architecture enthusiasts and foodies. And with more than 300 days of guaranteed sunshine per year, it's also perfect pool-lounging, mai-tai sipping weather. ☺

OPENING IMAGE: The stunning homes you'll see in Palm Springs © Finn/Unsplash ABOVE: The retro vibe is in everything you see from the cars to the colours