

**My blue heaven**  
The piano-shaped pool at Twin Palms, Frank Sinatra's first home in Palm Springs. Below, downtown Palm Springs



IN THE FIFTIES, PALM SPRINGS WAS HOLLYWOOD'S PARTY BASE AND SINATRA'S HOME TOWN, BUT THEN THE GOLFERS TOOK OVER. NOW A NEW GENERATION IS DISCOVERING ITS CHARMS

## SWINGING BACK

WORDS *Philip Watson*

**S**undry American cities lay claim to the life and legend of Frank Sinatra: his birthplace in Hoboken, New Jersey; his kinda town, Chicago; Rat Packed Las Vegas; and, of course, New York, New York. Only one city, however, can incontrovertibly be called Sinatra's home, and that is Palm Springs, the desert community 125 miles inland from Los Angeles in which he lived for more than 50 years.

So enamoured was Sinatra with this town that he had his father, Anthony, exhumed from his New Jersey grave and reburied here. And so fond of their celebrity resident were the people of Palm Springs that pilots flying him back to the city used to announce across the PA: "Welcome home, Mr Sinatra."

It's easy to see why Mr "Sin-atra" had a home built here in 1947. At this time, and into the Fifties, this was where *le tout* Hollywood escaped to party. With other playboys such as Tony Curtis, Dean

Martin and Rock Hudson making it their home, the town became famous as a haven where stars could be themselves and do as they pleased. It was, in short, where Hollywood went to have sex.

Although Palm Springs fell out of fashion in the Eighties and Nineties, becoming a tacky oasis for golfers and crusty retirees, the town has recently enjoyed a renaissance. Rediscovered by style-watchers hip to the town's mid-century modern architecture (that's Fifties to you and me), Palm Springs is seeing a return of its party spirit and liberal edge.

With the revival in lounge bars and dry Martinis, the arrival of Hollywood glamour couple Jennifer Aniston and Brad Pitt, and the forthcoming George Clooney and Pitt remake of the classic Palm Springs-meets-Vegas Rat Pack movie *Ocean's 11*, Palm Springs is swinging again. As *Vanity Fair* declared, "What Art Deco did for Miami Beach in the Eighties, modernism is doing for Palm Springs today."

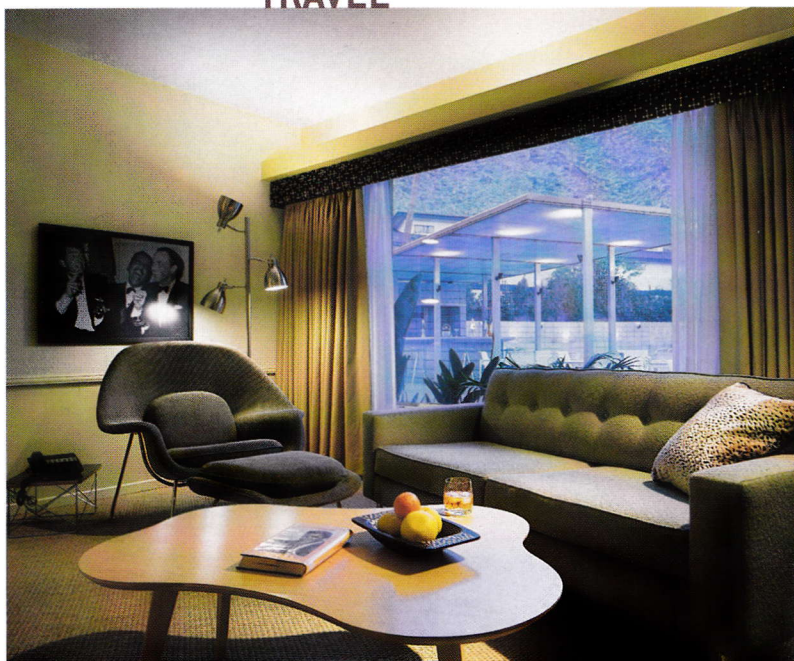
**Once a tacky oasis for golfers, Palm Springs is seeing a return of its party spirit and liberal edge**

Yet Sinatra continues to be the town's biggest draw. Three years after his death, Swoonatra is everywhere, from the folk who recall hanging out with him in his favourite bars to Sinatra memorabilia shops, the annual Frank Sinatra Golf Tournament and even a "Sinatra Cigar".

Although everyone seems to have an anecdote about El Padrone and his many wives and lovers, fans can go straight to the source simply by pressing a button in the tiny Wolfson Park in the Rancho Mirage district. Located in Frank Sinatra Drive, the park has an audio station which allows you to hear a recording of The Voice. With a desert panorama of the Santa Rosa mountains as a backdrop, and hummingbirds flitting between the carob and mesquite trees, the machine







**"This place has always attracted celebrities, but it wouldn't matter who was in the restaurant, if Frank was here he was the star"**

plays a recording of Sinatra welcoming visitors to the spot. "If only for a brief interlude, may this park bring you peace and happiness. I thank you." It's a weird, incorporeal communication that, like his grave nearby, draws strange pilgrims.

"Pretty cool, huh?" asks a ponytailed neo-hippy, who looks like he's been having a little too much fun. "I try to come here every day and listen to Frank. Sort of reassuring, doncha think?"

For a more authentic Sinatra experience, try Sorrentino's (1032 North Palm Canyon Drive; 00 1 760 325 2944). This Italian-American restaurant was founded in Hollywood in the Forties, but Sinatra and Bob Hope convinced owners Bill and Mary Sorrentino to relocate to Palm Springs in 1966. A favourite of stars, mobsters and celeb-spotter, the joint is now run by the Sorrentinos' son Bill Jr and remains the city's oldest restaurant (the sign outside reads "Welcome Back"). Sinatra songs trickle out of ancient speakers, oysters are served "Rockefeller" and the salads are simply chopped.

Sinatra went to Sorrentino's for its fine fillet (that's "fill-gy") steaks. You can ask for his favourite corner booth and order "Steak Sinatra", a house special. "People seem to like it when I invite them to have 'a slice of Frank'," says Bill Jr, with a smile.

Melvyn's (200 West Ramon Road; 760 325 2323) is a glitzy faux-Greco-Roman restaurant where Sinatra had his pre-wedding (to wife number four, Barbara Marx) dinner in 1976 – and which looks unchanged. Mayo's Supper Club (73,990 El Paseo, Palm Desert; 760 346 2284) has a private Rat Pack Room and a painting by the man signed "Sinatanthro". "I call it his Jack Daniel's painting," says the manager.



Sinatra's favourite dining room was the Lord Fletcher Inn (70,385 Highway III; 760 328 1161). Frankee came to this slightly cheesy English pub-style restaurant for more than 30 years and celebrated his 70th birthday here. Owner Michael Fletcher loves showing British Sinatra fans around the joint, from his favourite table to the many photos that adorn the walls. "This place has always attracted celebrities, but it wouldn't matter who was in the restaurant, if Frank was here he was the star," says Michael, who served Sinatra his Jack Daniels Black Label on the rocks for more than a decade. "He was chairman of the board."

Elsewhere, you can check into the Frank Sinatra suite at Ballantines Movie Colony hotel (see "Where to stay", right), which has original photographs and is painted in Ol' Blue Eyes' favourite colour, orange. Go to the Visitor Information Centre (760 778 8415) in Rancho Mirage and you can pick up an eight-page

#### Making Whoopee

*Clockwise from below, Esquire gets close to the hosts of the Lord Fletcher Inn; Frank's kind of town; Sinatra with Dean Martin, 1961; the "mid-century-modern" Orbit Inn*



booklet, titled "All the Stops along the Way", which details the places – most long gone – that Sinatra frequented.

You can also head to Twin Palms (1148 East Alejo Road), Sinatra's first home in the city. Unless you charm the caretaker or owners, you're unlikely to be allowed in, but it's still worth the journey. From the outside it remains a sleek modernist masterpiece; inside are four bedrooms, seven bathrooms and a piano-shaped swimming pool. It was into this pool that Ava Gardner took a nude dive after a spat with Sinatra during a party in 1952, just one of many dramatic incidents in their brief marriage. "It was the site of probably the most spectacular fight of our young married life," Ava Gardner later said. "And honey, don't think I don't know that's really saying something."

The Compound (70,588 Frank Sinatra Drive), where Sinatra lived for more than 40 years, can also be seen from the outside but, again, it's unlikely you'll ever see inside. As well as the main house, there are five guest cottages, a cinema, a barber shop, an art studio, and a room dedicated to Sinatra's unlikely lifetime hobby, collecting toy trains.

For a final fond farewell, little beats a visit to the Desert Memorial Park (69,920 East Ramon Road, Cathedral City) where Sinatra is buried in a family plot next to his parents. His grave has a modest granite headstone, where fans leave mementoes such as bottles of JD, Martini glasses, flowers and US flags. Underneath the inscription "Francis Albert Sinatra, 1915-1998, Beloved Husband and Father" there is a typically unequivocal message. It reads: "The Best is Yet to Come". ☎

#### WAY TO GO

I flew to LA with Air New Zealand (020 8741 2299; [www.airnz.co.uk](http://www.airnz.co.uk)) and stayed at the Regent Beverly Wilshire (0800 917 8795; [www.regenthotels.com](http://www.regenthotels.com)). Next day, I made the two-hour drive to Palm Springs – alternatively, take the 25-minute flight. The best time to visit is November to May – summer temperatures can exceed 40°C. Call the Palm Springs Desert Resorts Information Line on 020 8875 2859 or go to [www.palmspringsusa.com](http://www.palmspringsusa.com)

#### WHERE TO STAY

I stayed at Westin Mission Hills, a plush resort with spa and golf course. Virgin Holidays (0870 000 0875; [www.virginholidays.co.uk](http://www.virginholidays.co.uk)) offers seven nights at the Westin from £699pp, including flights to LA and car hire. Virgin can also book you into mid-century modern motels Ballantines (1420 North Canyon Drive; 760 320 1178; doubles from £110 plus taxes) and Ballantines Movie Colony, with its Sinatra room, and the Orbit Inn (562 West Arenas; 760 323 3585; doubles from £105 plus taxes), which offers tours of the city on Schwinn bicycles. All three have Fifties furniture and a cool atomic-age vibe.