

Six reasons to escape winter in Palm Springs



Rotating capsules of the Palm Springs Aerial Tramway carry visitors on a breathtaking journey from the floor of the Coachella Valley to Mt. San Jacinto State Park at 8,516 feet. *Courtesy of visitgreaterpalmsprings.com Visit Greater Palm Springs @visitgreaterps*

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By Katherine Rodeghier

Remember those bone-chilling days in suburban Chicago last January? When it was 10, 15 below with wind chills dipping dangerously close to minus 40? I do, and I remember how happy I was to hop on a flight bound for Palm Springs, California, with T-shirts and sandals in my suitcase.

So happy that I'm planning to return this winter to flee subzero temps and experience some of what I missed last year. This expanse of California desert 110 miles east of Los Angeles encompasses more than Palm Springs. Nine municipalities stretch along the Coachella Valley fitting together like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle 30 miles long and 17 miles wide. I could spend the entire winter — wishful thinking — and not get to everything.

The nine cities of Greater Palm Springs cover a broad range of price points for vacation planning, everything from budget motels to the swankiest resorts. Dining options run the gamut from fast-food joints to gourmet emporiums at eye-watering prices that might even make locals like the Kardashians blink.

And so, so much to see and do in a place where the average high temperature in January and February hovers around 70. Some of what I discovered last winter:



Some Native American baskets in the Agua Caliente Cultural Museum are a century old. The museum opened in 2023 on a plaza built by the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians on the site of the ancient mineral spring in Palm Springs. *Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier*

Indigenous roots

The newest attraction in Palm Springs is also its oldest.

Near the end of the last Ice Age, water in a natural cavern 1.5 miles below the valley floor gushed to the surface creating the hot springs that give Palm Springs its name. An oasis of palms formed around the mineral springs, which became a gathering place for ancient Native Americans to bathe and prepare food and medicine.

The Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians recently built a 5.8-acre cultural plaza on the site in downtown Palm Springs. See aguacalienteculturalplaza.com/. The Spa at Séc-he, which sources mineral water directly from the hot springs, opened on the plaza in April 2023 with 22 individual tubs for soaking, 15 treatment rooms, two salt therapy caves and a eucalyptus steam room. It's the fifth spa structure on the site since the first bathhouse was built in the 1880s, said spokesperson Kate Anderson. Hollywood celebrities took the waters here after they made Palm Springs a hot spot in the 1920s and '30s.

The Agua Caliente Cultural Museum, an affiliate of the Smithsonian Institution, opened on the plaza in November 2023. Construction had been halted for six months to allow workers to sift through the excavation for artifacts. "It became one of the largest Indigenous archaeological projects in the world by, for and of the people," said Anderson. Some pieces in the museum's collection are as much as 8,000 years old. Treasures include shells and beads used for trading,

projectile points, mortars and pestles, jewelry, artwork and 100-year-old baskets so tightly woven they can hold water.

Thrill ride

Mountain ranges flank both sides of the Coachella Valley. For a view near the top, the [Palm Springs Aerial Tramway](#) took me on a palm-sweating 10-minute ascent over the jagged rocks of Chino Canyon in the world's largest rotating tram cars. The Swiss-made 80-passenger capsules slowly spin during the 2.5-mile journey so everyone has a view — providing their eyes are open. See [pstramway.com/](#).

Mountain Station, at 8,516 feet, has observation decks with valley views, two restaurants and a lounge for those who want an adult beverage, perhaps to steady their nerves. Two theaters show documentary films, one detailing the feat of engineering in building the tramway, the other the attractions of Mt. San Jacinto State Park located right outside the door. The 14,000-acre mountaintop park has 50 miles of hiking trails from 1.5 miles to 12 miles long. If you miss the snow back home, head to the Adventure Center, open when there's sufficient white stuff, and rent cross-country skis or snowshoes for clomping around.

Mecca for midcentury architecture

Turning onto the road leading to the tramway, I passed one of many examples of Modernist architecture in Greater Palm Springs. Midcentury architect Albert Frey designed the building as a gas station in 1965, but now it serves as the Palm Springs Visitor Center. Its cantilevered, triangular roof was intended to catch the eye of motorists as they entered the city and continues to turn heads today.

In Greater Palm Springs I found a treasure trove of modern architecture designed around the middle of the last century. The style stands out for its minimalist clean lines, flat or butterfly-shaped rooflines, breeze blocks and carports, open floor plans and lots of windows blending interiors with outdoor desert landscapes. Examples can be seen on guided tours year-round. Learn more at [visitgreaterpalmsprings.com/](#). Have a peek at Elvis' Honeymoon Hideaway, Frank Sinatra's Twin Palms Estate known for its piano-shaped swimming pool, the Albert Frey House II built around a massive boulder and the Kaufmann House, a 1946 design that helped to define Modernist architecture.



Sunnylands Center & Gardens is among the many examples of Modernist architecture in Greater Palm Springs. *Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier*

Sunnylands is the historic estate of former ambassador Walter Annenberg and his socialite wife, Leonore. I strolled around the Modernist Sunnylands Center & Gardens with its rotating art exhibits, but I neglected to buy tickets in advance for tours of the Annenberg's grand manse. It's on my list.

A celebration of midcentury architecture on steroids happens every winter during Modernism Week. For 11 days, design enthusiasts from around the world join home tours, parties, fashion shows, double-decker bus tours, film screenings, lectures and classic car shows. More than 350 events are expected to draw some 120,000 attendees for the next Modernism Week Feb. 13-23, 2025. See modernismweek.com/.

Adventure in the fault zone

There wasn't a whole lot of shakin' going on during my San Andreas Fault Jeep Tour until driver/guide Phil La Greca went four-wheeling over a pile of rocks. Learn more at red-jeep.com/. The infamous fault associated with California earthquakes isn't one long crack in the Earth, he explained, but thousands of cracks from 100 feet to two miles wide in a zone where two tectonic plates, the Pacific and the North American, meet. When they rub together — and here he twisted an Oreo cookie to demonstrate — earthquakes happen. About 100 to 200 quakes occur each week, ones or twos on the Richter scale, he said. There hasn't been a major one in the Coachella Valley for many years.



It was a thrill to hike between two tectonic plates on a Jeep tour of the San Andreas Fault Zone. *Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier*

Still, it was a thrill to follow him on a short hike through a slot canyon where rock walls tilted left and right. The three-hour tour took our group through Bureau of Land Management property and the private Metate Ranch, two stretches of desert nestled at the base of the Indio Hills.

La Greca has 14 years of guiding experience and is one of a team of guides the tour company employs as naturalists. While driving through the cuts and canyons of the San Andreas Fault Zone, he shared his knowledge of desert plants and animals, history and Native American culture. Fun facts: Palms are not trees but monocots, grasslike flowering plants; the Coachella Valley isn't a valley, it's a sink or graben; 3,000 years ago, more than 10,000 Native Americans lived here, now there are about 700 and they own as much as 30% to 40% of the land; the valley is a leading producer of bell peppers, table grapes, citrus fruits and dates.

Sexy dates

More than 90% of the nation's dates grow in the Coachella Valley, thriving in the desert's hot, dry weather. I sampled the sweet, plump fruit at Shields Date Garden founded when Floyd and Bess Shields came to the California desert in 1924. See shieldsdategarden.com/. In the 1940s and '50s, it was one of several date stands attracting tourists driving between Palm Springs and the resorts at the Salton Sea. To educate customers about date production, Shields gave lectures and a slideshow. Now visitors get schooled in a 15-minute film titled "The Romance and Sex Life of the Date" in a 105-seat theater. It takes 15 years for a date palm to mature, I learned, and each acre has 48 female palms for every male. Nice odds for those sexy males.

After a sumptuous brunch under the palms in the garden's café, I ordered a date shake to-go from the garden's 1950s-era soda fountain. Shields is credited with inventing date crystals, the defining ingredient in the shakes. I'm told people either love or hate the sweet, creamy concoctions. As for me, I can't wait to go back and have another.



The giraffe feeding area is one of several animal encounters visitors enjoy in The Living Desert Zoo and Gardens. *Courtesy of visitgreaterpalmsprings.com Visit Greater Palm Springs @visitgreaterps*

A zoo and a garden

I'll never forget the look of absolute delight on a little boy's face as the long neck of a giraffe swayed down to take a leaf of lettuce from his tiny hand. At The Living Desert, animal encounters turn a visit to this zoo and garden from a passive to an active experience. Learn more at livingdesert.org/.

Rated one of the 10 best zoos in the U.S. by Condé Nast Traveler, The Living Desert Zoo and Gardens has been a beloved Southern California institution for more than 50 years. It specializes in the deserts of North America, Australia and Africa with more than 150 species of animals and 1,200 species of plants.

In addition to those hungry giraffes, the African Safari section has cheetahs, zebra, African wild dogs, an Amur leopard and a baobab tree, one of the largest succulent plants in the world. The Rhino Savanna is home to the zoo's largest inhabitants, Nia and Jaali, representing The Living Desert's commitment to protect the endangered Black rhinoceros. In the Australian Adventures habitat, wallabies bounce alongside visitors, reptiles bask in the sun, a bearded dragon arboreal lizard casts an inquisitive eye and kookaburras laugh and sing. In the Wilds of North America, you might see a mountain lion, jaguar, Mexican wolf and a bighorn sheep. Watch a G-scale model train wind through re-created landscapes on 3,300 feet of track.

The Living Desert's botanical gardens represent the deserts of North America and Mexico. Three nature and hiking trails range from an easy half-mile stroll to a challenging 5-mile hike climbing and jumping through rocky canyons opening onto views of the Coachella Valley.

• *Information for this article was gathered on a research trip sponsored by Visit Greater Palm Springs and Visit California.*

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If you go

Information: Visit Greater Palm Springs: [visitgreaterpalm Springs.com/](https://www.visitgreaterpalm Springs.com/)

Where to stay:

Agua Caliente Resort Casino Spa, Rancho Mirage. Forbes four-star resort with 340 rooms in a 16-story tower with resort-style pool and cabanas, a theater drawing big-name talent and a casino operated by the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla

Indians. [aguacalientecasinos.com/properties/rancho-mirage/](https://www.aguacalientecasinos.com/properties/rancho-mirage/)

La Quinta Resort & Club, Curio Collection by Hilton, La Quinta. An original desert hideaway on 45 acres at the foot of the Santa Rosa Mountains; 620 casitas and suites, 98 villas, 41 swimming pools, 23 tennis courts, spa and five golf courses including three at PGA

WEST. [laquintaresort.com/](https://www.laquintaresort.com/)

Where to eat:

Porta Via, Palm Desert. Contemporary California bistro and bar in the El Paseo luxury shopping district. Wine program features 150 wines from around the world. [portaviarestaurants.com/palm-desert/](https://www.portaviarestaurants.com/palm-desert/)

1501 Uptown Gastropub, Palm Springs. Rustic sports bar with wraparound bar, comfort food, charcuterie boards, giant Bavarian-style pretzels. [1501uptown.com/](https://www.1501uptown.com/)

The Steakhouse, Rancho Mirage. Forbes and AAA four-star and Wine Spectator awards in the Agua Caliente Resort Casino Spa. Featuring prime meats and seafood. [aguacalientecasinos.com/dining/steakhouse/](https://www.aguacalientecasinos.com/dining/steakhouse/)

Morgan's in the Desert, La Quinta. Showcasing contemporary American cuisine inspired by the bounty of the Coachella Valley. Replicates the hacienda-style decor in La Quinta Resort & Club. [laquintaresort.com/dining/morgans-in-the-desert/](https://www.laquintaresort.com/dining/morgans-in-the-desert/)

J's Deli, Palm Desert. Delicatessen dishes, hearty breakfast/brunch and comfort food. [jsdeli.com/](https://www.jsdeli.com/)

Kiki's Dining & Drinks, La Quinta. Italian dishes, pizza, wine and craft cocktails. [kikislaquinta.com/](https://www.kikislaquinta.com/)

The Café at Shields, Indio. California cuisine served at breakfast and lunch inside Shields Date Garden. Paved patio under date palms, live music. [cafe.shieldsdategarden.com/](https://www.cafe.shieldsdategarden.com/)

Nightlife:

Marvyn's Magic Theater, La Quinta. Adults-only 75-minute magic and risqué comedy show hosted by Jeff Hobson, a veteran of the Las Vegas Strip. Preshow magic in the bar. [marvynsmagictheater.com/](https://www.marvynsmagictheater.com/)

<https://www.dailyherald.com/20241031/travel/six-reasons-to-escape-winter-in-palm-springs/>