



Following their secret wedding in Las Vegas, Elvis and Priscilla Presley spent their honeymoon in the “House of Tomorrow” in Palm Springs, California. *Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier*

Palm Springs a mecca for Modernism:

California city draws Midcentury architecture lovers to the desert

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By Katherine Rodeghier

What's old can become cool again. Wide-leg jeans. Vinyl records. That colorful PYREX bowl grandma used for her tuna casserole.

And so it is with Midcentury Modern architecture, a style spanning the post-World War II years in the middle of the last century, the 1940s through the 1960s. The minimalist style known for its clean lines used simple, geometric forms and natural materials such as wood and stone. Large glass windows and open floor plans blurred the lines between indoor and outdoor spaces. It was especially popular in Palm Springs, California.

Why Palm Springs? Movie stars.

Hollywood hangout

Contracts required actors to be within two hours of their studios, so Palm Springs was at the end of their leash. The city became a celebrity playground during the heyday of Hollywood. Marilyn Monroe, Bob Hope, Frank Sinatra and others came to loll in the sunshine during their downtime. The publicity put Palm Springs on the map. The rich and famous hired top architects to design lavish homes in the style of the day. Developers made fortunes constructing modest homes for the middle class drawn to the desert by the buzz and the climate.

The result? Palm Springs and neighboring cities in the Coachella Valley have one of the largest concentrations of Midcentury Modern architecture in the world.

Not everyone is a fan. On my flight to Palm Springs, I sat next to an elderly woman who has a winter home there. I asked her about this signature architectural style. "Oh, I don't like it," she said, shaking her head. "I grew up in the 1950s, so it's just old, outdated stuff to me."

Modernism tours

She would not find much in common with the more than 130,000 visitors who come to the Palm Springs area in February for Modernism Week (Feb. 12-22, 2026; modernismweek.com/). The 11-day festival embraces all things Modernism in more than 400 events: home tours, parties, fashion shows, double-decker bus tours, film screenings, lectures and classic car shows. A scaled-down event spans four days every October.

But visitors don't need to attend a festival to quench their thirst for Modernist architecture. Tours take place year-round, by bike, bus or on foot, guided and self-guided.

Although I've enjoyed events during Modernism Week in the past, I chose to return for a deeper dive into this style with Modern Tours Palm Springs (moderntourspalmsprings.com/), a collection of self-driving itineraries highlighting architecture and celebrity homes. Each uses audio and interactive mapping and directions. While tours are exteriors only, photos on the online platform give glimpses inside.

My husband and I set off on the Modernism Top Ten Tour, stopping to look at each building, sometimes getting out of our rental car to take photos. We were glad to go at our own pace

without worrying about keeping up with a tour group, but had to chuckle when the same car full of folks pulled up behind us at several spots, obviously on an identical itinerary.

My patient husband is not an architecture fan, but after listening to the excellent audio narration at each stop, he began to share my enthusiasm. Many buildings had colorful backstories.

Like this one.

Elvis and Sinatra

The Elvis Honeymoon Hideaway is the “House of Tomorrow” in a 1962 issue of *Look* magazine. Constructed in four circles on three levels under a diamond-shaped roof, it evokes the Space Age. Owned by the wealthy developer of modern tract homes, it was large enough to entertain a party of almost 200 guests. The fun times didn’t last long, tragically. The owner and members of his family died in a plane crash in 1965. The house changed hands and for a time was available for rent. That’s when Presley stepped into the picture. Elvis and Priscilla honeymooned here in 1967 following their wedding they kept secret to avoid a media frenzy. Frank Sinatra loaned them his private jet for their nuptials in Las Vegas.

Sinatra’s Palm Springs home was an add-on to our top 10 tour. It’s hidden behind a wall so there’s nothing to see. Still, it makes a juicy story, so the audio tour includes it.

After he made his first million, Sinatra wanted a grand home for weekend getaways. He was dressed in a white sailor hat and carried an ice cream cone when he walked into the office of prominent Modernist architect E. Stewart Williams in the summer of 1947. He wanted a Georgian-style mansion and he wanted it done by Christmas. Knowing he would be ruined if he built something so out of character in Palm Springs, Williams persuaded him to pivot toward his design for what became Sinatra’s Twin Palms estate. Work went on nearly 24/7 until it was ready for a raucous New Year’s bash. The 4,500-square-foot home has four bedrooms, seven bathrooms and a pool in the shape of a piano. A crack remains in a bathroom sink struck by a Champagne bottle thrown in a fight between Sinatra and girlfriend Ava Gardner. The residence is now rented out for private functions.



Architect Richard Neutra won the commission to design the Kaufmann house, beating out rival Frank Lloyd Wright. *Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier*

Designed for the desert

For Modernist purists, the Kaufmann house ranks at the top in international recognition. Frank Lloyd Wright won acclaim for Fallingwater, Edgar J. Kaufmann's Pennsylvania home, so he assumed he'd design the department store magnate's winter residence in Palm Springs. Instead, Kaufmann chose Wright's former colleague Richard Neutra because he thought Wright did not understand desert design. Wright fumed. After he saw the home, he begrudgingly admitted it was beautiful.

When we pulled up to the address, the first thing we saw was a "No Trespassing" sign with additional text "armed response." 'Nuf said. I remained in the car, craning my neck to see as much of the house as I could from the side of the road before we skeddaddled.

The tour narration filled in the details. The five-bedroom, five-bathroom home built in 1946 has a pinwheel design with low horizontal planes hugging the desert landscape. Its flat roof, covered outdoor spaces and slatted metal walls help mitigate the harsh desert sun. After Kaufmann's death, the house remained vacant before going through several owners, including singer Barry Manilow. In 1992, buyers began restoring the home, purchasing adjacent lots, doubling the size of the property. It later sold for \$19.1 million in an auction, but the deal fell through. Is it still for sale? No one is sure, but there's no "For Sale" sign next to that ominous warning to trespassers.



The upside-down arches at Chase Bank help withstand earthquakes. The former Coachella Valley Savings & Loan #3 was built in 1960. *Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier*

Public places

Midcentury Modern designs aren't confined to residences. The 17-room Del Marcos Hotel, built in 1947, gives off a retro vibe with Eames-style chairs and splashes of tropical orange. Upside-down arches front Chase Bank, built in 1960 as Coachella Valley Savings & Loan #3. They strengthen the building against earthquakes and support a colonnade providing shade.



Palm trees growing through the roof of the awning at the Palm Springs City Hall accentuate the building's low-slung profile. *Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier*

The Palm Springs City Hall built in 1952 ranks among the most noteworthy Midcentury Modern civic structures. Designed by Albert Frey and a team of architects, palm trees grow through a circular hole in a broad awning over the striking main entrance. The three trees tower above the building accentuating a low profile common in Desert Modernism, a style Frey pioneered. Another element of the style, brise soleil or breeze blocks, uses decorative shapes to create shade walls. At City Hall, the brise soleil comprises rows of angled metal tubing that let in light while shading the façade.



Architect Albert Frey created a cantilevered triangular roof to draw attention to the Tramway Gas Station, which stood near the entrance to the city in 1965. The building now houses the Palm Springs Visitor Center. *Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier*

In addition to two residences he designed for himself, one an 800-square-foot home built around a boulder, Frey created the Tramway Gas Station. Now the Palm Springs Visitor Center, it sits just down the road from the Palm Springs Aerial Tramway. When it opened in 1965, its cantilevered, triangular roof was intended to catch the eye of motorists as they entered the city on California Route 111.

Today movie stars fly in for getaways in Greater Palm Springs as do visitors who aren't zipping in on I-10.

If you go

Modern Tours Palm Springs: moderntourspalmsprings.com/

Modernism Week: modernismweek.com/

Visit Greater Palm Springs: visitgreaterpalmsprings.com/

Visit California: visitcalifornia.com/

• *Katherine Rodeghier is a travel journalist whose first house had a turquoise refrigerator and matching range. She still uses her grandmother's PYREX cookware.*

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