

GET AWAY TO PALM SPRINGS

U.S. California desert offers spectacular scenery, unfailingly good weather, great restaurants and plenty of places to explore

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TIMES & TRANSCRIPT

Planning a vacation – especially a getaway during the winter months – means one thing for many Atlantic Canadian families: picking a destination with warm weather.

But making that selection can be a gamble, with the odds iffy as to whether you'll hit a decent stretch of balmy temps or spend the majority of your time toting an umbrella and/or more layers of clothing than expected.

Enter Greater Palm Springs, Calif., about 170 kilometres east of Los Angeles and 430 kilometres west of Phoenix, Ariz. In addition to Palm Springs itself, Greater Palm Springs refers to a collection of small cities along Highway 111 in the Coachella Valley, including Palm Desert, Rancho Mirage, Indian Wells, La Quinta, Indio, Cathedral City, Desert Hot Springs and Coachella.

The total population of the area – nicknamed 'The California Desert' – is about 450,000 year-round residents, a figure that rises to about 600,000 during winter and spring as a result of visitors and seasonal 'snowbirds' who own or rent second homes.

So, why so popular?

At 148 metres above sea level, Greater Palm Springs is sheltered by the Little San Bernardino Mountains to the north, the Santa Rosa Mountains to the



Located in Indian Wells, the Miramonte Resort and Spa is a luxurious, Tuscan-themed property, featuring more than four hectares of olive trees, fragrant citrus groves, rose, herb and flower gardens. PHOTO: CATHY DONALDSON/TIMES & TRANSCRIPT

south, and the San Jacinto Mountains to the west. Averaging more than 300 days of sunshine (often many more) and only 130 millimetres of rain annually, this top U.S. travel destination is one of the best bets for holiday weather-worriers.

During a February visit this year, my daughters and I enjoyed near-perfect conditions, at least in our estimation: dry, desert heat hovering no less than 25 C every sunny day.

The region's almost unfailing good weather translates into spectacular

scenery far and wide. In fact, it's a bit like driving into a postcard when you head into the Coachella Valley.

As my daughters and I cruised along palm-lined, village-like streets, we were awed by the lushness of the obviously well-irrigated, precisely-manicured cityscapes of Greater Palm Springs, each a stark contrast to the arid backdrop of the mountains in the distance. The peaks appeared to be almost a paper façade, perhaps a leftover movie set from yesteryear?

Film set definitely comes to mind since

by the 1930s, this desert region became a playground for some of Hollywood's most elite celebrities. It seems the desert had its heyday in the '40s, '50s and '60s, especially when movie studios required stars to remain no more than two hours from Tinseltown. Greater Palm Springs (slightly under that driving distance) became a favourite haunt for the likes of Frank Sinatra, Bing Crosby, Dean Martin – even Elvis.

The influx of celebs who arrived for fun, sun and relaxation led to the creation of many hotels, resorts, shopping

Getting there

- The Palm Springs International Airport is located three kilometres east of downtown Palm Springs and is served by 11 airlines that connect to 500 cities around the world, including major cities in Canada. (We opted to fly into Los Angeles and rent a car for the drive to Palm Springs.)
- For information on reservations, events, activities and transportation in Greater Palm Springs, visit visitgreat-erpalmssprings.com.

areas, eateries, and homes. The mid-century modern architecture of those structures, featuring clean lines, natural materials and simple elegance, remains today in many properties across the region.

While there may now be fewer stars living in and around Greater Palm Springs, the number of retirees has – not surprisingly – exploded, making the area one of the U.S.'s most popular retirement communities.

Mind you, during our stay, we discovered folks of all ages enjoying the beautiful landscape, diverse culture, fine restaurants, outstanding attractions and, of course, magnificent weather.

And this desert oasis is for everyone. Infused by nature, the region truly has something for all whether you're into biking, walking/running, rock climbing, natural history, or just want to enjoy stunning vistas.

No doubt the region's earliest settlers, the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians, were impressed when they established their home in the area 2,000 years

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ago. The first non-natives reportedly visited Greater Palm Springs in 1774, with the first hotel – the Palm Spring Hotel – being built in 1886.

Today, there are hundreds of lodging options in the region, with a decent range to fit your budget and vacation needs, from chic, full-service hotels and historic inns to retro retreats and bed and breakfasts.

We unwound at the spectacular Miramonte Resort and Spa in Indian Wells, located between Palm Desert and La Quinta. The property's 215 guest rooms, suites and villas sit amid more than four hectares of olive trees, fragrant citrus groves, rose, herb and flower gardens. Bliss!

Not long after our arrival, and with sunscreen in hand, we made our way from our bougainvillea-covered building to the resort's signature pool, opting for sunny loungers rather than optional poolside cabanas.

From our tranquil perches, the views of the property's Tuscan-inspired architecture – from stunning fountains to grand archways – kept us oohing, as did the parched mountains against the cloudless blue sky.

We pondered trying some golf at one of the resort's two championship courses, playing a little tennis or speaking to the concierge about a desert jeep tour or other more extreme adventure.

But relaxation won out and our poolside pleasure continued.

We somehow pulled ourselves away from our comfy posts to do some browsing in Palm Desert's El Paseo, 'The Rodeo Drive of the Desert.' We also visited an array of local attractions and tempted our palates at an assortment of dining locales.

Fun Facts

- With more than 50,000 pools, Greater Palm Springs has more pools per capita than anywhere else in the world.
- Greater Palm Springs is the home of more than 100 golf courses, which is why the area is frequently referred to as 'The Golf Capital of the World'.
- Date gardens in the Coachella Valley produce more than 80 per cent of the delicacy in the United States, making the region the U.S. 'Date Capital'.
- Greater Palm Springs hosts the nation's only citywide Golf Cart Parade each October. About 25,000 spectators watch more than 100 golf cart-powered floats parade up and down El Paseo Drive in Palm Desert.
- Frank Sinatra's former Twin Palm Estate in Palm Springs boasts a famous piano-shaped swimming pool. The luxury home is now available for vacation rentals, weddings and corporate events.
- Palm Springs has the largest concentration of mid-century modern residential architecture in the world, showcased every February during Modernism Week.
- The 'Spa City' of Desert Hot Springs is home to one of the greatest mineral water aquifers in the world. The water is naturally heated to temperatures as high as 180 degrees.
- Source: Greater Palm Springs Convention and Visitors Bureau.

Our favourite attraction was The Living Desert, a 486-hectare wildlife and botanical park in Palm Desert, featuring rare and endangered desert animals. (Don't forget the bird exhibit – as long as you don't mind getting up close and personal with feathered friends!)

A close second on our top attraction list was a self-guided tour of the region, a drive that ended near the Santa Rosa and San Jacinto Mountains National Monument with a trail hike.

Our trek along a dry, rocky valley trail in the area was fairly short (bring more water than you think you'll need!) but long enough to make me feel at times that we'd landed on the moon.

At other times, it was cactus heaven.

More than once while hiking, and while driving, did we stop to investigate numerous species of cacti and other botanical delights such as jojoba and yucca. (Definitely not something common along the

roadways of Metro Moncton!)

My daughters were keen to try the Palm Springs Aerial Tramway, which takes riders on a journey up the sheer cliffs of Chino Canyon. We ran out of time for that and for one of the other attractions I'd hoped to explore: the famed Joshua Tree National Park, just 45 minutes away.

We did follow some dining advice, enjoying fresh and tasty offerings at Stuff Pizza in charming La Quinta and delectable prime rib at The Chop House in Palm Springs.

With its good food, beautiful surroundings and consistently amazing weather, Greater Palm Springs is a winner in my book.

Cathy Donaldson

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The Living Desert was established in 1970 in Palm Desert as a non-profit educational and conservation centre, dedicated to preserving desert plant and animal life. PHOTO: CATHY DONALDSON/TIMES & TRANSCRIPT



Located in Palm Desert, the world famous El Paseo Shopping District is known as 'The Rodeo Drive of the Desert' and boasts a wide spectrum of stores from big department stores to individually-owned boutiques.

PHOTO: CATHY DONALDSON/TIMES & TRANSCRIPT