

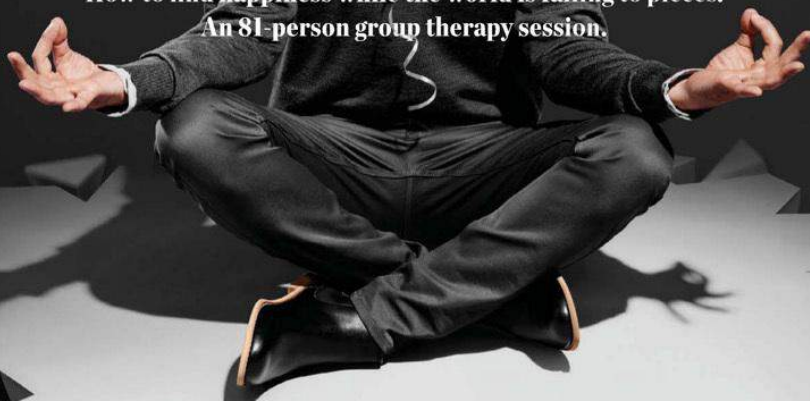
2018's Top Doctors 554 OF THE SHARPEST MINDS IN MEDICINE

# San Francisco

IN MEMORIAM  
**Mayor Ed Lee**  
His Life, His Legacy.  
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## SERENITY NOW

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**BODY  
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MIND  
ISSUE**

A DOCTOR WAGES  
WAR AGAINST  
STROKES

THE ROCK STAR  
SCIENTIST WITH A  
GOD COMPLEX

WINTER TRAVEL

# AN OLD GETAWAY IS NEW AGAIN

Five views of a Palm Springs in the midst of a renaissance.

BY IAN A. STEWART



## GETTING VERTICAL

**IN THE LAND** of the low-slung, modernist single-story dwelling, the seven-story building is king. And some people really hate the king. "It's a disgrace," a bartender on the southern end of Palm Canyon Drive tells me about the new **Kimpton the Rowan**, which opened in November to both excitement and scorn. "It's blocking the mountains!"

I've been tooling around the Palm Springs desert now for three days, and talk of the city's newest and tallest hotel—and in particular its rooftop bar—looms over Palm Springs as surely as the San Jacinto Mountains do. The scale of the Kimpton the Rowan, the 153-room, contemporary-hip digs just a block off Palm Canyon Drive, registered as a seismic shock when it opened this fall. Palm Springs has no shortage of ticky-tack hotels with swimming pools, but one thing it's conspicuously lacked all these many years has been rooftops. Or, rather, rooftops high enough to offer views of all the ticky-tack hotels in the valley below. Now that it's got one, it's not sure how it feels about it.

Part of that might have to do with the bribery charges brought against the former mayor and two developers in 2017 involving the city's massive downtown redevelopment—albeit not the Rowan—which soured some on the entire revitalization effort. But another bartender I talk to, at a joint on the northern end of Palm Canyon Drive, hails the Rowan's arrival. "We need a shot in the arm," he says. If the hotel's opening seems to have outsize importance here, it's because the place has been loaded up with the symbolic weight of representing the New Palm Springs. Planners, hoteliers, and those who make their buck off the tourists envision a version of the city that's modern, upscale, even—forgive the term—*elevated*. Witness the flurry of craft cocktail joints sprouting up, the farm-to-table brunch spots, the spit-and-polish renovations being given to the old haunts. The town seems intent on scrubbing the "gay and gray" spirit out of the old downtown as quickly as possible. You'll forgive, then, the sense of letdown I experienced upon actually visiting the hotel. To my San Franciscan eyes, it's...



**Top:** At seven stories high, the newly opened Kimpton the Rowan hotel is the tallest building in downtown Palm Springs. **Above:** The Palm Springs Aerial Tramway takes visitors 8,516 feet up the San Jacinto Mountains to the west.

TOP: COURTESY OF KIMPTON; THE ROWAN, RIGHT: CHRIS MILLER/VISITGREATPALMSPRINGS.COM



not that big? From directly below it, yes, the mountains are blocked. But there are a lot of mountains left to see. They're everywhere. And they're spectacular (especially as seen from the famed aerial tramway, still a must-do for first-timers).

My wife and I ride the elevator up to the Rowan's rooftop, where a three-foot-deep swimming pool is casting its electric-blue hue in the fading dusk. The decor says Hollywood wrap party at the W, in miniature. A bartender in ice-cream-truck pink pours me a sticky-sweet Aperol drink

from a slushee machine. Young men and women lounge on padded couches beside gas-powered fire pits. I peer out through a plexiglass window and onto the narrow valley. The mountains to the west are so close you can practically reach out and touch them. The valley is a carpet of twinkling lights. Down below, the town may be in the midst of its most profound transition in a generation, building itself up literally and metaphorically. But up here, sitting in a short-sleeved shirt in the mild cool of the evening, Palm Springs' appeal is the same as it ever was.

### 3 TO STAY



**Kimpton the Rowan** 100 W. TAHQUITZ CANYON WAY. Downtown anchor project offering drop-dead mountain views (from \$189).

**Sparrows Lodge** 1336 E. PALM CANYON DR. Rustic cabin-inspired rooms and popular weekly communal outdoor dinners (from \$279).

**Holiday House** 200 W. ARENAS RD. Riviera-style glam in this renovated motel (from \$229).



**Top:** Cabin-style rooms and a former barn turned bar and kitchen surround the swimming pool at Sparrows Lodge in Palm Springs, one of a new generation of tastefully refurbished motels coming online all across Palm Springs. **Below:** Bartender Chad Austin mixes a drink at Bootlegger Tiki.

### THE NEW ORDER

"Someone actually called it a Rose Kennedy," Chad Austin says, incredulously, about the drink that best epitomizes the worst traits of Palm Springs. "It's vodka-soda with a splash of cranberry. So just call it that!" I've found Austin sitting at a corner table at **Truss & Twine**, one of the new breed of craft cocktail bars popping up on the strip. We met earlier in the day at **Bootlegger Tiki**, the orgiastically eclectic bar where Austin has burnished a reputation as the city's foremost authority on extravagant drinks.

For years, Palm Springs beverages, like Palm Springs itself, had been stuck in another era, as if preserved in mid-century amber. The vodka martini and the vodka-soda dominated the scene, paired with the classic slab of prime rib. But as the crowd has gotten younger and more urbane, drink menus have grown more daring. Truss & Twine, a muscular exposed-steel-beam-and-poured-concrete operation that opened in March, is a prime example.

Earlier, at Bootlegger, Austin poured me something of his own devising called a Pod Thai (a swashbuck-

ling mix of white rum, coconut crème, lime, cardamom-lemongrass syrup, and soda). Here, he opts for a Negroni because it's hot and it's late and it's a Tuesday. For me he recommends the Fallen Angel, a concoction of gin, crème de menthe, lime, and sugar. Before the end of the night, I'll also have a Game Changer (gin, lime, cucumber, celery bitters, sea salt, sugar, and onion brine—wonderful!), a Green Philter (absinthe, pineapple, lime, housemade orgeat, and cucumber—licoricey!), and, unadvisedly, a shot of absinthe (woof!).

We talk about what makes the perfect Palm Springs drink. Something refreshing, of course, not too heavy. The big-city obsession with knockout IPAs and craft whiskeys doesn't play well in the heat. Austin nominates a Campari and soda as a worthy candidate. Light, a little tart, not too sweet. We cheers to that, and before long, he's out the door and on his way. Draining the bottom of my glass, I eye the drink list again, unable to land on the perfect follow-up. Something light and refreshing and maybe a little tart. I turn to the bartender: "You ever heard of a Rose Kennedy?"



RIGHT, FROM TOP: COURTESY OF KIMPTON THE ROWAN; JAMIE KOWAL; ZEEK RUELAS; CENTER: JAMIE KOWAL; BOTTOM LEFT: ARIANE BARAK



## WINTER TRAVEL

## A BRUSH WITH DEATH

Adam Seaman is sitting in the driver's seat of a \$70,000, 444-horsepower, turbo-charged, 2017 BMW M3. I'm in the passenger seat. "You've got your seat belt on, right?" he asks. Seaman is a driving instructor here at the **BMW Performance Driving School**, which offers classes for would-be racers and weekend wannabes looking for a speed fix. Almost before the words "Are you kidding me?" are out of my mouth, my head is pinned back against the headrest.

Seaman guns it straight into the first turn, slams the brakes at the last possible moment, and skids us through the almost 90-degree bend. Again he stomps the gas and we're shot forward at 125 miles per hour, only to again screech through the second turn. My eyes begin to water. Seaman is a professional drift-car racer; back at home, I drive a scooter. As we begin our second lap, he demon-

strates the drift-car form, letting the rear wheels fishtail out behind us through each turn, sending a cloud of tire smoke into the air. We're in *Fast and Furious* territory.

It isn't until we're back down to 25 miles per hour and pulling off the track that the lump in my throat dissolves. Seaman gives a chuckle—he's used to this reaction—and takes me on a tour of the grounds. The track and school are part of the überwealthy Thermal Club, whose members fly in to test out their Lamborghinis and fly back out. Like a lot of places around here, the club seems to serve as its own sort of aspirational mirage—an oasis of priceless cars and date trees and tire smoke seen through the heat haze of the otherwise barren desert. The tour wraps up, and I hop behind the wheel of my Nissan Altima rental car, turn out onto Highway 86, and—there's hardly anyone out here—whisper *Vroom!* and gun it back to town.

**Clockwise from top:** Muscular exposed-steel beams frame the bar at Truss & Twine; visitors in a sleeping pod at artist Andrea Zittel's A-Z West compound in Wonder Valley; burning rubber at the BMW Performance Driving School in Thermal.



## 3 TO EAT

**Farm 6 LA PLAZA**

Charming farm-to-table Provençal-style brunch joint downtown.

**Lulu California Bistro** 200 S. PALM CANYON DR. Colorful, eclectic eatery perfect for simple breakfast and lunch.

**Morgan's in the Desert** 49499 EISENHOWER DR., LA QUINTA Classic, well-executed white-tablecloth steakhouse fare inside the luxurious La Quinta Resort & Club.



## ARTISTS IN REPOSE

A slender man with long, graying hair is standing behind the buffet table inside a modest community center. We're just north of Joshua Tree, two miles past where the road stopped being paved. The absolute middle of nowhere. "You tried the hummus?" he asks me. "It's made from acorns."

The author of the dish is Sarah Witt, cook and host of a monthly potluck called the **High Desert Test Kitchen**, focused around a single desert-themed ingredient. (Tonight's is acorn.) The dinners, which Witt has hosted for a little over a year, have become a popular meet-up among the growing community of artists who've found themselves drawn to the middle of nowhere. Witt describes herself as "an artist at heart, but I don't use that label." The dinners, she explains, are both a practical nicety (it's lonely out here) and a creative outlet for her. I serve myself a scoop of the hummus, which has a pleasingly bitter taste (juniper leaves, I later learn), and pull up a seat next to two artists who are both living and working as fellows at Andrea Zittel's 50-plus-acre



**A-Z West** compound, the minimalist artists' colony in Wonder Valley. The dinner is no one's idea of a raucous scene, but compared with A-Z—an experiential art installation centered on quietude and intentional living—it's practically an orgy of conversation. The desert arts scene may be a vibrant one, but it's a decidedly quiet one, too. The hushed vibe reminded me that we were mere miles away from the **Noah Purifoy Outdoor Museum**, a 10-acre ranch made up of blown-out television sets and porcelain toilet bowls and blistered wooden pallets. In the near-total silence of the desert, the works give off a haunted, Lynchian vibration. What little wind there is whistles through the sculptures.

I find Witt toward the end of the dinner, swirling the last inch of wine in a plastic glass. Outside, the scruffy artists are piling into cars and trucks and driving away in a cloud of dust. It's pitch-dark now; there's a sharp chill in the air. We chat about the desert as an artistic muse. "It's an extreme place," Witt says. "It draws people in when they're at a crossroads, or questioning themselves. It can cause you to ask questions—and maybe answer some of them."

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: COURTESY OF TRUSS & TWINE; LANCE BREWER; SCOTT BAYTER; LEFT, FROM TOP: COURTESY OF FARM; COURTESY OF LULU; BARBARA KRAFT



## WINTER TRAVEL

## CHASING GHOSTS

My phone's map keeps pronouncing Dinah Shore Drive as "Dinosaur Drive." Which is fitting: Palm Springs may be modernizing, but the ghosts of Old Hollywood still haunt the place. I've sidled up to the bar at **Melvyn's Restaurant**, where the napkins have a picture of Frank Sinatra printed on them. The maitre d' is wearing a tuxedo and bending my ear with stories about "Mr. S." Sinatra held his fourth wedding reception here and, as legend has it, made a tour of the kitchen handing out hundred-dollar bills as tips. (He tipped the valet double that, I'm told.)

The bartender, Suzy, says today's celebs are different from Mr. S and his ilk. More private, less likely to belly up to the bar with the everyman. They fly in private to the tony golf-resort towns—Palm Desert, Indian Wells, La Quinta—with their grand, gated compounds, then fly back out. Later, in a Lyft on the way back to our hotel, I ask our driver whether it's true that the high rollers have left for the resort towns. He tells me he used to work at the Madison Club, a super exclusive golf resort in La Quinta, and recounts the list of actors and musicians he's seen on its grounds. He recalls how, during Coachella, the rapper Drake, who was staying there, showed up with an entourage at the private club and got his entire crew kicked out. "They don't care who you are," he tells me.

Before long our table is ready, and the maitre d' escorts us to Mr. S's favorite booth. I close my eyes and try to imagine myself as Ol' Blue Eyes, holding court over a dry martini

and a steak, a blonde on each arm, handing out Benjamins like business cards. It's not the first time I've fallen into this kind of make-believe reverie down here. By the pool at the **Ace Hotel**, I was a Dionysian rock god; at the posh **Holiday House**, I was a fashionable art dealer at a Mediterranean resort; at the BMW track, I was Steve McQueen.

Soon I'll be on United 133 headed back home, to my real life. The San Jacintos shrink and fade into the distance, and Palm Springs flattens out. We climb higher, and the landmarks become indistinguishable; I can't make out the seven-story hotel anymore. Like a mirage, the whole town disappears, and the reverie is finally broken. ■



## 3 TO DRINK



**Bootlegger Tiki** 1101 N. PALM CANYON DR. Small, inviting tiki bar serving elevated takes on Don the Beachcomber classics.  
**Melvyn's Restaurant** 200 W. RAMON RD. Recently renovated Rat Pack-era hangout (above, left).  
**Truss & Twine** 800 N. PALM CANYON DR. Craft cocktail menu broken down by time period, including pepped-up versions of "dark ages" drinks like the Surfer on Acid.

TOP: COURTESY OF MELVYN'S RESTAURANT; RIGHT: ARENE BARBA

A 90 minute flight to 82 degrees. Do the math.

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