

TRAVEL

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HOTEL REVIEW

In the desert, a surprising oasis

In Palm Springs, a cheeky makeover yields the Ace Hotel, a fun, affordable retreat that is a bit urban, a bit like a camp-out.

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REPORTING FROM PALM SPRINGS

The first thing that caught my eye: the coyote wearing a pearl necklace.

The critter strides in a diorama above the front desk, near a cactus with red Christmas ball flowers.

Then there is the vintage ice cream cart from which tamales are served poolside. And those guest room meditation cushions woven from foil gum wrappers.

No wonder I barely blinked when a waiter bearing drinks rolled by on a skateboard.

It's how things are at the Ace Hotel & Swim Club, a quirky but super-stylish place that opened Feb. 12 in a reimagined 1960s complex, a former Howard Johnson's that had fallen into disrepair.

It's not much to look at from the street — five barracks-like two-story buildings. But once you're inside, it's clear that millions of dollars and a hip team of designers and artisans has created something magical. Also magical: room rates that start at \$89.

This isn't just another of the city's signature midcentury modern hotels. "We absolutely didn't want it to be just about that," said Roman Alonso, a partner at L.A.'s Commune, the principal design team. "There are elements of camping, elements of communal living, elements of nature" — as well as an urban-vibe-meets-desert-resort ambience.

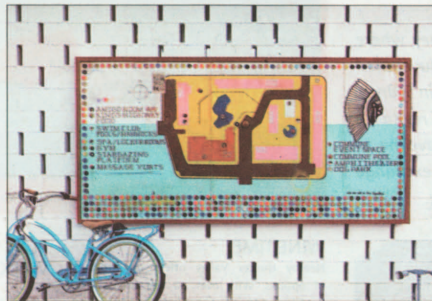
Having booked one of the \$89 rooms, I expected little more than a Motel 6. I was wrong. The second-floor room, a simple king, was 295 square feet with a nice sitting area. At first I was puzzled by all the off-white canvas covering one wall, the French doors and the platform bed. Nautical in the desert? Then it dawned on me: Sahara and tents.

One bedside table was a slice of tree trunk, the other a custom-made wooden crate. Two walls of horizontal white wooden slats had pictures from old National Geographics hanging from S-hooks. (Guests may hang their own photos.) For bedtime reading, there were vintage issues of the magazine. There was a radio-alarm with an MP3/CD plug-in. The mini-bar offered the usual, plus Rawnola (unbaked granola bars), organic Goji bars and condoms. No coffee maker.

Faux animal-skin rugs lay on the dark cork floor. A flat-screen TV was wall-mounted above a campaign table; a footlocker held extra pillows. There were an iron and board, a safe and two striped flannel robes, their labels reading, "Thank you for sleeping with us." An in-room double sink had a roomy shelf and good lighting. The stall shower in the small bath had a rain head, lots of hot water and pump bottles of body wash, shampoo and conditioner.

Over the bed were a pair of bullet-shaped "love lights" with red bulbs at one end, white at the other. Electric outlets were plentiful and placed conveniently high. There's Wi-Fi throughout the hotel.

In short, there was nothing to dislike — until I went for dinner at the King's Highway restaurant. One look at the brightly lit, Denny's-like space and I retreated to the dark and pleasantly cave-like Amigo Room bar, where I was served a good steak sandwich. The dinner menu offers only five entrees, from spaghetti at \$10.95 to cowboy steak at \$28.95. But there's also an all-day breakfast and a selection of basics and sides that includes chill, fish tacos, brisket and a black bean burger. The focus is on local and



YOU ARE HERE: A map to the property adds a splash of color to a cinder-block wall. Ace is a bit barracks-like but deftly redesigned.



ON A STRING: The lobby is decorated with a free-form curtain of fisherman's nets, sailors' knots, pulleys and hooks.



Photographs by DOUGLAS LYLE THOMPSON and JON JONSSON. Ace Hotel

THAT 1960s VIBE: A former Howard Johnson's complex has been thoroughly made over as the Ace Hotel & Swim Club. Community and interaction are big — at poolside or at seven outdoor living rooms with fireplaces. There are two big saltwater pools, a spa and a dog park.

Ace Hotel & Swim Club

701 E. Palm Canyon Drive
Palm Springs, CA 92264
(760) 325-9900
www.acehotel.com

Prices begin at \$89. Side-by-side suites with private patios starting at \$309 are nice. King lounge rooms, with twin beds that can be curtained off, are a good choice starting at \$149 for a couple with two kids.

organ.

I learned later that the King's Highway restaurant actually had been a Denny's. The green vinyl booths have been replaced with brown leather, and a terrazzo floor was unearthed beneath a layer of linoleum. I relented and had lunch there, a good chicken club sandwich with homemade mayo and roasted tomatoes on rustic bread. Nice touches: French press coffee brewed to order, a mini-milk bottle creamer, raw sugar in a little

Mason jar.

Young couples and their dogs lounged by one of the two big saltwater pools as I strolled the grounds. "Ace even has a dog park. "For today's couple, it's the dogs and the kids," manager Jonathan Heath said.

At night, guests gather for drinks and conversation at one of the seven communal outdoor living rooms with fireplaces. Community and interaction are big at Ace, as is greenness.

My favorite rooms are the 27 with

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Palm Springs panache

Go online for more photos of the Ace Hotel.

lovely walled patios with igloo-shaped gas fireplaces in spaces that formerly were airports. Rates start at \$199 a night. Planned perks include do-it-yourself barbecues in the patios and at the communal fireplaces. "We'll have the chef bring the food and instructions" with the grill "and we'll give you an apron and tongs," Heath said.

The biggest disappointment at the Ace was the spa. The very basic locker area and showers are shared by those

using the 24-hour gym and the pool, which is open to the public for a fee. The one-hour massage (\$90 plus added-on 20% tip) was short on pampering — no soft music, flickering candles or aromatic teas.

Guest perks include free bikes. Coming soon: a shuttle bus, a '60s hippie van to take guests from the hotel in South Palm Springs to the city center.

How is all this — and room service too — possible at \$89 a night?

In truth, there are only nine rooms — four simple kings and five simple doubles — starting at \$89. Room rates vary by season and day of the week. Guests schlep their own bags and must belly up to the bar to order drinks. For short stays, towels and sheets are changed only on request.

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