

# Palm Springs' splendor expands eastward

**Opening of Desi Arnaz' hotel in 1957 brought fanfare, glitz to valley**

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Special to Palm Springs Desert Sun  
USA TODAY NETWORK

"New. Luxurious. Desi Arnaz' Western Hills Hotel opened its doors to the public this weekend and became another example of growth in the ever-developing desert area. Early Friday afternoon a special plane left Los Angeles bringing newsmen, celebrities of television and screen, and many distinguished guests to the Palm Springs airport, where they were entertained while they awaited turns for helicopter transportation to the million-dollar hotel which nestles at the edge of the desert near the Santa Rosa mountains, bordering on the beautiful greens of the Indian Wells Golf Course."

In April 1957, the center of gravity in the Coachella Valley was moving east. New cities popped up between Palm Springs and Indio bringing excitement and expansive new housing developments.

Desi Arnaz and Lucille Ball had a gorgeous, modern house in Thunderbird (designed by Paul R. Williams) and were well aware of the charms of the desert. Thunderbird opened in 1951 and the decade of the 1950s was one of ascendancy for Desi and Lucy as well as their Desilu Productions. Credited with innovations in television production and an unconventional management style, the couple was wildly successful and even more famous.

The same year, Arnaz would go into the hotel business in Indian Wells, Desilu purchased the venerable RKO Pictures for \$6 million, giving the TV empire a total of 33 sound stages - four more than giant MGM Studios and 11 more than 20th Century Fox. Desilu was flying high, and Arnaz, an amazing showman, flew his guests by helicopter to the party.

(The idea of flying in wasn't new. The Desert Air Park and Hotel featured the ability to fly your small plane or helicopter and park next to your accommodations and the pool.)

"As the helicopters dropped down on the greens of Indian Wells Country Club, the guests were met by Desi Arnaz, General Manager Frank Bogert, and operators of the Western Hills Hotel ..."

Frank Bogert had been part of the initial Thunderbird effort and was signed to be managing director of the hotel, starting with 36 units and with immediate plans for another 30 to be built in the summer hiatus. Frank's involvement was testament to the development move eastward.

In February 1957, the newspaper expounded, "except for four years in the U.S. Navy, (Bogert) has held important positions in the community. He was manager of the famed Racquet Club, Palm Springs Chamber of Commerce, Thunderbird Country Club and El Mirador Hotel. One of the most active civic workers in this community, he is vice-president of the Desert Riders Association, member of the board of directors of the Chamber of Commerce, president of the Desert Turf Club, president and publisher of the Villager Magazine, president of the Palm Springs Polo Association, executive vice-president of



Desi Arnaz' Western Hills Hotel was luxurious with "every thought given to the comfort and enjoyment of the guests."



Each room had its own air conditioner. PHOTOS BY PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY



Private patios overlooked the 70-foot swimming pool.

Club of Palm Springs was the first good cause that was benefited:

"A fundraising party staged by Desi Arnaz at his newly opened Western Hills Hotel in Indian Wells featured Lucille Ball, Dean Martin and Walter Winchell and over \$18,000 was raised to build the clubhouse which was dedicated on December 14, 1958. The building still serves the clubhouse."

The first of the PGA's Bob Hope Chrysler Classic in 1960 began the tradition of celebrity golf tournaments in the desert. And in 1995 made headlines when Presidents Bill Clinton, George H.W. Bush and Gerald Ford played together, with Bob Hope himself rounding out the foursome. The associated classic cocktail party was the highlight of the social season.

In addition to golf tournaments, there was a baseball tournament featuring Sandy Koufax, Don Drysdale, Dean Martin, Joey Bishop, Phil Harris, Danny Thomas and Hugh O'Brian, who was also part owner of the resort.

The end of each season featured the Indian Wells Pow Wow "steaks, broiled on huge outdoor charcoal grills, were the entrees of the evening served with salad, corn and beans. Champagne music filled the night with danceable melodies and Lawrence Welk tripped the light fantastic with more than a score of ladies present. Motion picture stars were present... To top off the celebration a fantastic fireworks display was staged. ..."

The Western Hills Hotel preceded the incorporation of the City of Indian Wells by a decade, but the fashionable crowd had already moved in, with Desi and Lucy leading the way, as they had done in television, with their celebrity friends in tow.

the Palm Springs Capital Company, and a member of the Naval Order of the United States."

After being dropped off by helicopter, "A cocktail party and tour of the new hotel preceded the lavish buffet that was served to 800 persons. Lt. Gov. Harold J. Powers, a frequent visitor to this desert area, was taken on a tour of the new resort hostelry by Bogert and was amazed by its wing-shaped splendor."

The hotel was indeed luxurious with "every thought given to the comfort and enjoyment of the guests" with separate air-conditioning units in each room, it was advertised as "one of the hotels in

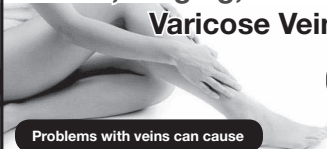
the Palm Springs area to be fully air-conditioned. Private patios assure complete privacy for either sunbathing or dining, and each one overlooks the 70-foot swimming pool. There is a movable television set in every room."

Offering golf privileges of the Indian Wells Country Club, "the course is as close as the electric carts which await the guests to transport them in a few minutes to the first tee. There is a putting green adjoining the hotel. All other forms of entertainment, from horseback riding to ping pong, badminton, shuffleboard and horseshoes are available, aside from both indoor and outdoor polo fields nearby."

Interior decoration of the ultra-modern hotel was done by Claudio Guzman of Desilu Productions. Entertainment at the opening night extravaganza was furnished by the famous Desi Arnaz Orchestra, and Arnaz introduced guests from the stage above the sunken bar. Palm Springs Mayor Florian' Boyd presented a "key to the city" to Arnaz. At the conclusion of the evening's festivities, guests were transported back to Palm Springs where their plane awaited to return them to Los Angeles.

Immediately after opening, charity events were welcomed at the new resort as reported in the newspaper. The Boys

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