

# Pacific islands' style enthralled hotels in 1960s

**Tracy Conrad**

Special to Palm Springs Desert Sun  
USA TODAY NETWORK

"Special Offer, Tiki Spa Hotel Come Sun., Mon., or Tues., Stay 4 Days — Sleep 3 Nites And Pay 2 Nites — \$15 up, Free Spa — Bikes — Pool Table."

As recently as 1976, the Tiki Spa Hotel was advertising \$15 per night for a holiday in Palm Springs. That was for the weekdays, presumably the weekends were a bit more, but hotels in the desert were always trying to lure visitors with enticing offers. Nothing is more appealing than Hawaii, or the South Seas, replete with tiki torches, grass skirts, and brightly colored patterned shirts, and those iconic images were invoked, even in the desert.

Back in 1966 the hoteliers hoped to extend the traditional November 1st to May 1st season, inaugurated decades earlier by The Desert Inn with a Hawaiian Festival over Memorial Day Weekend. In a somewhat weird, decidedly not-politically-correct conflation of Hawaiian and Native American tribes, representatives were to attend the concurrent American Indian Tribal Dancers Pow Wow and compete for what the newspaper reported to be "plenty of wampum as 100 of the nations' finest Indian War dancers (will) compete for \$1,000 in prize money." The amalgam of offerings didn't seem to bother anyone much.

Friday afternoon some 4,000 youngsters turned out at the Desert Inn for the festivities; the Hula Hike and the Luau Leap featured several musical groups in a four-hour show sponsored by the radio station KOES and culminated with the international rock-and-roll singing group, The Turtles, offering their first concert since returning from a world tour.

The festival started on Friday evening with 300 flaming tiki torches lighting Palm Canyon Drive, affixed atop parking meters. The Tiki Torch Parade down the center of the boulevard was



**Janice and Frank Bogert chat with the waitress at Aloha Jhoes.**

PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY/SPECIAL TO THE DESERT SUN

touted as "one of the world's most unique, in that anyone can enter anything legal without an entry fee, providing it is well lighted with torches or flashing lights."

Saturday featured a Royal Hawaiian Luau, Palm Spring style, and poolside vibes at the El Mirador Hotel, with a grand finale on Sunday being a mixed twosome golf tournament at the Canyon Country Club Inn. And at the Holiday Inn Riviera Hotel, there was a bikini contest. Entry rules were appropriately brief: "girls in bikinis."

Unlikely as it seems, the tiki theme was popular in the desert of the 1960s. The Tiki Spa Hotel wasn't the only tiki

accommodation. The Caliente Tropics had an imposing A-frame lobby on Palm Canyon and must've stopped traffic as it was so entirely anachronistic in the desert. Aloha Jhoe's was even more stunning. Designed by Bill Cody, it graced the curve of the highway between Mesquite and Ramon.

Featuring 12-foot high tikis, the work of John F. De Cuir and Lyle Wheeler were brightly colored and inside patrons would find equally brilliant characteristic Polynesian décor with masks and incense burners. There were four rooms of the restaurant, each "exquisitely styled in Oriental-flavored décor." The main dining room, the "Tiki Room"

was dominated by a huge tiki specially designed by craftsmen in Hawaii. Interestingly, the food was Cantonese and tropical drinks.

Hotels weren't the only ones dabbling in tiki-style. There were restaurants, and shops also. The most famous of these was Walth Clarke's. In November 1955 The Desert Sun trumpeted the "formal opening of the most complete Hawaiian shop in Southern California... at 136 South Palm Canyon Drive."

The article continues, "interior shelves and cases will boast of close to \$50,000 in South Sea Island wear of all makes and descriptions...Walth Clarke will hand out leis, frangipani flowers and special fun purchases, as he is wont (sic) to call them, for those who visit his new establishment. Permeating throughout the establishment will be that Aloha feeling and his sales girls may or may not be attired in the very latest of Hawaiian fashions even to a point where they will walk about barefooted."

The whole atmosphere was relaxed and casual, his shop "girls" were treated to a trip to Hawaii in order to learn their island manner first-hand. But most importantly the authenticity of the places was illustrated by "dresses in the Hawaiian style that fit into the style and manner of living here on the desert are to be found in all colors, styles and fabrics in a most comprehensive manner."

And if staying, shopping or dining in a tiki-type atmosphere wasn't enough, you could buy a home in the distinctive style too.

Most important of these was the Donald Wexler- and Richard Harrison-designed Royal Hawaiian Estates in South Palm Springs. The exaggerated gables of the ends of the buildings and tiki elements throughout the forty-unit complex conjured up romantic memories for American soldiers who returned home from the South Pacific after WWII and the Korean War.

Poolside, with a rum drink adorned with a tiny umbrella, life sure was sunny.