

THANKS FOR THE MEMORIES

‘Desert Living’ at its best, explained and explored

Tracy ConradSpecial to Palm Springs Desert Sun
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The little booklet written for Coachella Valley Savings and Loan Association by Ralph Hancock in 1958 was aptly named “Desert Living.” It explored every aspect of life in the Coachella Valley in a most definitive and instructive manner. Ostensibly intended to introduce readers to desert living “at its best,” it promised “rent-sized payments can make your dream of owning a home in the desert come true.”

The booklet would be useful today. Currently arriving in droves, newcomers to the desert are fleeing COVID and less-than-gracious living arrangements elsewhere would still find it a friendly welcome as well as highly instructional.

Back then, the booklet sought to ensure potential homeowners were fully informed about every imaginable subject germane to living in the desert, starting with the most elementary: the perception that the desert was utterly unfit for habitation of any sort. “Many have the impression that a desert is a great expanse of sand piled into dunes by the wind, without moisture or vegetation, a land of thirst, desolation, even death ... But most of the desert supports a variety of plant and animal life which, through generations of adaptation, is able to meet the conditions imposed by this environment. Man, the least adaptable animal of all, has found the desert one of the world’s most healthful climates ... American deserts are fast becoming a preferred living, working, and recreational area.”

Nevertheless, there is nothing common, conventional or predictable about the desert. “Newcomers discover in the desert a whole new way of life ... and, as in all things, their enjoyment of the desert is limited only by their capacity to understand.”

The booklet set out to help that understanding, first by explaining that the desert is a land of extremes illustrated by its seasons: two to be exact. The spring and autumn are short. The change from winter to summer and back again is startlingly abrupt. Fortunate visitors learn to spend “whole seasons on the desert or buy permanent homes here for all-year living.” But appreciating the desert in the



The finest desert homes featured a pool. COURTESY PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

summer takes some understanding.

The booklet opines: “People who live in natural extremes are prone to look with disdain on those who live where nature makes life easy. Cold winters or stony soil develops character, they say. And perhaps they are right for we grow strong battling adversity and ingenious by solving problems. But the same principle can apply in the desert where nature’s opposite extremes exist.”

So, a desert summer isn’t nearly as bad as an East Coast winter and “if you are contemplating the purchase or rental of a house in the desert for all-year use ... an intelligent approach to the problems of desert living is absolutely essential.” The booklet goes on to catalog those challenges and offer intelligent solutions.

Architecture is high on the list of factors affecting enjoyment of desert living. Architects and contractors familiar with the peculiarities of the desert should be consulted. A cooling system, not just evaporative cooling, is essential. Surprisingly, heating is also requisite for comfortable year-round living, although the elaborate systems of other climes aren’t necessary.

“Everything that goes into your desert home should be subjected to analysis and examination. Woods that remain sturdy and beautiful in Ohio and Indiana homes may crack and split into ugly shambles in desert construction. Paints that retain their newness for years in other parts of the country may fade and peel

in the desert. Most rubber, leather and plastics oxidize and disintegrate rapidly in dry air. On the other hand, glass, metals and stone last forever.”

The desert’s extreme dryness and wind are inescapable. Good construction can eliminate sand creeping through cracks, but even the best of houses will be dusty after the worst wind storms. Fortunately, clean dry sand “shakes off of clothes and draperies easily and leaves no soil marks like city soot or other country dust. Draperies have been known to hang for 28 years in one Palm Springs home without a single cleaning other than occasional shaking or dusting. Although slightly color faded, they looked, after all these years, as clean and new as they day they were hung.”

As to interior appointments, “there are few pleasures in desert living that exceed those one gets from furnishing and decorating a house. Whether you do it yourself as an exercise of your artistic talents or employ the services of one of the many competent professionals, you will find interior decoration of a desert home is an experience that belongs in the field of creative arts.”

The little pamphlet also covered the creative art of landscape. “Whether you want to make your place a small oasis in the desert with shrubbery and grass or bring the desert to your door with cactus and rocks will depend on personal whim. It may also depend on your pocketbook or spare time, for a lawn, flowers and

shrubbery are expensive to put in and they cost money and time to maintain. A desert setting of cactus and rocks on the other hand involves the same installation cost but little upkeep.”

Although nearly everything grows or can be grown in the desert, “a few of the more tender things require so much shade and water it is hardly worthwhile bothering with them...especially since there is a wide variety of annuals, perennials, shrubs and trees that thrive in the desert climate, and some of them require little water and less attention than the novice gardener would expect.”

And the most important feature of the backyard is the ubiquitous swimming pool. Long thought to be an economic necessity rather than a luxury, “many families consider a pool to be in the same investment classification as a basement playroom in other climes. Some prefer a swimming pool instead of a second car or extra bedroom. And the declining cost of pool installation puts them in competition with these items in family budgets.”

“The family home designed for all-year use will find that a private pool or access to one of the hotel pools is a tremendously refreshing asset during the long summer. Whether it is used for a brief daily dip, or for day-long play, most desert dwellers find they more than get their money’s worth from a private pool ... where children are concerned a pool may become the most important part of desert living in the summertime.” The finest desert homes definitely had a pool.

Finally, the expense of the pool might be offset by prodigious savings on attire. “Desert dwellers spend less money on clothes than people in any other region. No heavy winter clothes are needed, and in fact, one cannot even buy in desert stores such things as winter underwear, overcoats, raincoats, children’s snow suits, rubbers or galoshes, umbrellas, warm gloves, etc. Furthermore, the informality of desert living makes fewer and less expensive clothes necessary.”

And in such manner, newcomers experiencing their first summer find the desert extends a very friendly welcome indeed.

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