



# The Deserts

It's hard to believe, but over 25% of California is desert, from the lower Sonoran (aka Colorado) Desert that straddles the US-Mexico border, to the vast Mojave Desert, with its twisted forests of Joshua trees, 'singing' sand dunes and volcanic cinder cones. The Mojave is also home to the hellaciously hot Death Valley and the Rat Pack-era celeb playground of Palm Springs. Hidden fan-palm oases, rare wildlife such as bighorn sheep and desert tortoises, geological wonderlands of rocks and towering mountain summits are all protected by various national and state parks that deserve at least a week, if not a lifetime, of wandering.

For early Western explorers, such as conquistador Juan Bautista de Anza and frontier trailblazer Jedediah Smith, the desert was just a barrier to the California coast. Treasure-seeking miners also came and went, establishing now ghostly towns that died as the minerals played out, leaving their skeletons and stories scattered in the sand. Dust Bowl refugees with 'California or Bust' signs on their old jalopies braved desert crossings along Route 66 during the 1930s Great Depression. Military bases took over after WWII, when General Patton rolled tanks and trained troops in the Mojave. At high-tech aerospace testing grounds, the sound barrier was first broken by Chuck Yeager in 1947 – and records are still set here today.

Visit the deserts in spring when wildflowers bloom, or during the cooler fall months. In summer the crazy heat peaks above 120°F. Temperatures commonly drop below freezing on winter nights, when snow-covered Joshua trees, palms and cacti are not unheard of, even on the desert floor.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- **Most vertiginous views** Ascend through five distinct life zones in under 15 minutes aboard the Palm Springs Aerial Tramway (p651)
- **Wildest history lesson** Poke around miners' ghost towns and hark to Old West pioneer disaster stories in Death Valley National Park (p680)
- **Coolest rock-and-roll adventure** Go boulder hopping around the 'Wonderland of Rocks' at Joshua Tree National Park (p664)
- **Most far-out trip** Hunt rare elephant trees and scramble around the wind caves of vast Anza-Borrego Desert State Park (p669)
- **Best place to find solitude** Hide out at Hole-in-the-Wall in the forgotten Mojave National Preserve (p678)



# PALM SPRINGS & COACHELLA VALLEY

The Rat Pack is back, baby, or at least its hangout is. In the 1950s and '60s, Palm Springs, some 100 miles east of LA, was the swinging getaway of Sinatra, Elvis and dozens of other stars, partying the night away in Mid-Century Modern estate homes. Once the Rat Pack packed it in, the 300-sq-mile Coachella Valley swarmed with retirees in golf clothing. That is, until the mid-1990s, when a new generation fell in love with the city's retro-chic charms: steel-and-glass bungalows, boutique hotels with vintage decor and kidney-shaped pools, and piano bars serving perfect martinis. In today's PS, elderly denizens mix amicably with younger hipsters and an active gay and lesbian community. Around here, you can hike palm-oasis canyons or snowshoe high into the mountains (or both in the same day), hunt down Mid-Century Modern architecture, sample a date milkshake, tour a windmill or straddle a fault line.

## HISTORY

For over 1000 years, Cahuilla (ka-wee-ya) tribespeople occupied canyons on the southwest edge of the Coachella Valley, where streams flowed from the San Jacinto Mountains. Early Spanish explorers called the hot springs where the city now stands *agua caliente* (hot water), which later was used to refer to the local Cahuilla band.

In 1876 the federal government divided the valley into a checkerboard. The Southern Pacific Railroad received odd-numbered sections, while the even-numbered sections were given to the Agua Caliente as their reservation. But boundaries were not established until the 1940s – and by then much of the Native American land had been built on. Some local tribes today are quite wealthy, because they own the valley's casinos.

The town of Indio, about 20 miles southeast of Palm Springs, began as a railway construction camp and its artesian water was tapped to irrigate crops. Date palms were imported from French-held Algeria in 1890 and have become the valley's major crop, along with citrus fruit and table grapes.

## FAST FACTS

**Population of Palm Springs** 46,900

**Average temperature low/high in Palm Springs** January 43/70°F, July 76/108°F

**Los Angeles to Palm Springs** 110 miles, two to three hours

**San Diego to Borrego Springs** 95 miles, 1½ to two hours

**San Francisco to Barstow** 415 miles, 6½ to seven hours

## ORIENTATION

At the northwest edge of the Coachella Valley, downtown Palm Springs is compact. Traffic goes south on Palm Canyon Dr (Hwy 111) and north on parallel Indian Canyon Dr. Tahquitz Canyon Way, dividing addresses north from south, heads east to Palm Springs' airport. Southeast of the city, Hwy 111 continues into commercial Cathedral City and tony 'Down Valley' towns – Rancho Mirage, Palm Desert, Indian Wells and La Quinta – which boast world-class golf resorts, ritzy shopping and aristocratic retirement homes. Visiting the valley, it's often quicker to take I-10, then cut over on roads named for Frank Sinatra, Bob Hope, Gerald Ford, Dinah Shore and the like, than to follow Hwy 111 through miles of suburbs and dozens of traffic lights.

## INFORMATION

High season is October to April, but Palm Springs (population 46,900, elevation 487ft) stays reasonably busy even in summer, when hotel rates drop and temperatures spike above 100°F. Between June and August, many businesses keep shorter hours or even close, so call ahead to check.

**Anderson Travel** (Map p654; ☎ 760-325-2001; 700 E Tahquitz Canyon Way; ☎ 8:30am-5pm Mon-Fri) AmEx representative for foreign-currency exchange.

**Desert Regional Medical Center** (Map p654; ☎ 760-323-6511, emergency room 760-323-6251; 1150 N Indian Canyon Dr; ☎ 24hr)

**Palm Springs Koffi** (Map p654; ☎ 760-416-2244; 515 N Palm Canyon Dr; ☎ 5:30am-8pm) Free wi-fi.

**Palm Springs Official Visitors Center** (Map pp652-3;

☎ 760-778-8418, 800-347-7746; www.palm-springs.org; 2901 N Palm Canyon Dr; ☎ 9am-5pm) North of downtown, the city's main visitor center books hotels, offers specialty tourism guides (mobility-impaired, gay and lesbian, architecture etc) and sells maps. It's inside a 1965 Albert Frey-designed gas station with a landmark design.