

The Coachella Valley—better known to golfers as Palm Springs— isn't just a destination, it's a pilgrimage. With year-round sunshine blanketing over 125 courses, this desert oasis transforms the game of golf into a spectacular experience. Beyond the perfectly manicured fairways and dramatic mountain backdrops, a golf trip here is a blend of world-class resort luxury, cutting-edge game improvement, and exhilarating desert adventure ... all surrounded by mountains, some even snow-capped.

Fortunately, my trip this past December came just before cold and snow gripped Chicago.

Direct flights are usually easy to find from O'Hare to Palm Springs. Your vacation starts the minute you deplane at Palm Springs International Airport and realize that yes, you are outside. It is, in my humble opinion one of the world's greatest airports, offering sunshine and mountain views the minute you walk off the plane. Best of all, it's a very small, easy-to-navigate airport, with rental cars a pitch shot away and your final destination no more than 25 minutes away.

The Epicenter of Golf

The sheer number of golf courses in the greater Palm Springs area is staggering. From the classic layouts of Palm Springs, Rancho Mirage, and Palm Desert, to the championship complexes in La Quinta and Indian Wells. With daytime temperatures hovering between 65 to 80° and surrounded by the Santa Rosa Mountains to the west and Little San Bernardino Mountains to the east (with Joshua Tree National Park in the distance), there really isn't any other place like it in the country.

Very little cloud cover and just a trace of annual rain makes this destination perfect for golf, dining, relaxing, hiking, and much more. It's a two-hour drive from Los Angeles and a four-hour drive from Las Vegas.

Golf options in the greater Palm Springs area are endless. You can play a course that has hosted the PGA Tour in the morning and a beautifully playable Ted Robinson design in the afternoon. This unparalleled density of high-quality tracks makes the region a bucket-list destination for every golfer.

Want to spend the day in one of the great U.S. National Parks, Joshua Tree? Done. Want to take the aerial tramway up Mount San Jacinto and hike at 8,500 feet? Done. Want to tour the San Andreas Fault in a Red Jeep? Done. Want to feed a giraffe and tour one of the country's most unique zoos, The Living Desert? Done.

Resort Royalty: The JW Marriott Desert Springs

Your journey into desert opulence should begin at the JW Marriott Desert Springs Resort & Spa in Palm Desert. This sprawling, 450-acre property isn't just a hotel; it's a world unto itself, complete with its own Venetian-style waterways and even pink flamingos on the grounds.

The resort boasts two championship courses, the Palm Course and the Valley Course, both masterfully designed by Ted Robinson. The Palm is defined by its abundant water features and rolling greens, demanding accuracy from tee to green. Keep an eye out for the picturesque back nine, which features the signature Flamingo Island near the 16th tee. It's challenging yet friendly, offering a memorable resort-golf experience. The Valley Course provides a strategic counterpoint, with tighter fairways, strategically placed bunkers, and undulating greens that emphasize precision and shot placement over raw power.

After your final putt, the resort caters to every post-round whim. The resort features over 20 on-site retail stores, offering everything from the latest high-end golf apparel from brands like Peter Millar and Travis Mathew to unique desert-inspired merchandise. It was hard for my wife to pull me out of the shops offering classic '70s Palm

PALM SPRINGS PROVIDES THE PERFECT RESPITE FROM WINTER

By Dave Silbar

Springs-inspired merchandise.

With nearly a dozen restaurants and lounges, your culinary options are vast, most offering palm tree-laden views and mountainous backdrops. From authentic Japanese cuisine to classic American fare using the freshest local ingredients, you can find a perfect spot to celebrate a low round or commiserate over a high one.

The PGA WEST Experience: Championship Golf and Instruction

No Palm Springs golf trip is complete without a stop at PGA WEST in La Quinta, home to six legendary courses and a new hub for modern instruction.

PGA WEST's Dye Mountain Course is a true standout. Nestled at the base of the Santa Rosa Mountains, the design is famed for its spectacular visuals and challenging playability. To explain how cool the Mountain Course back 9 is, you have to talk about the shift from "desert golf" to "mountain golf." While the front 9 is a great resort course, the back 9—specifically the stretch from hole 13 to 16—is what makes this a bucket-list experience.

The most striking thing about the back 9 is how it physically climbs into the Santa Rosa Mountains. Around hole 14, the course stops being "next to" the mountains and starts being carved into them. You aren't just looking at the scenery; you're playing off of granite boulders and dramatic rock formations.

If there is one signature hole on this stretch it would be the par-3 16th, which features a Pete Dye signature: an island green. However, instead of being surrounded by water (like at the Stadium Course), this green is surrounded by a sea of jagged rocks. The vibe feels like you're hitting a ball onto a green on the moon from an elevated tee box offering a panoramic view of the entire Coachella Valley. It's widely considered one of the most photographed holes in California.

Before you hit the 16th, you play through a natural amphitheater of rock, starting with hole 14, a par 4 that plays directly toward a massive mountain wall. The backdrop is so close and vertical that it messes with your depth perception. Then there is 15. Ah, hole 15 on the Mountain Course. It's a par 5 that literally hugs the base of the mountain. You have to "snake" your way around the rock face to reach the green. It's the definition of "risk/reward" because the mountain doesn't give many friendly bounces.

For the dedicated golfer looking to shave strokes or simply wanting to take a deep dive into the science of the swing, the newly unveiled Performance Lab at PGA WEST is a game-changer. This state-of-the-art training facility incorporates cutting-edge technology



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that moves beyond traditional instruction.

The cornerstone of the lab is the Swing Catalyst system, utilizing technology with integrated force and pressure plates, along with high-speed video and launch monitors that provide a detailed, data-driven analysis of your swing. It captures key metrics including Ground Reaction Forces (measuring how you use the ground for power), Center of Pressure (analyzing weight shift and balance throughout the swing), and 3D Motion Capture (tracing every degree of rotation and joint angle without the need for wires or markers).

This comprehensive feedback allows the world-class instructors to pinpoint inefficiencies and provide customized, measurable strategies for improvement, transforming your understanding of your own swing. Want to see what forces propel Rory and Bryson into the stratosphere of pro golf? They'll show it to you here.

Refined Relaxation: Renaissance Esmeralda Resort & Spa

For a different flavor of luxury, a stay at the Renaissance Esmeralda Resort & Spa in Indian Wells offers a sophisticated retreat adjacent to the renowned Indian Wells Golf Resort. The journey begins on the resort's famed course, a stunning example of desert golf design. The meticulously manicured emerald fairways of the Indian Wells Golf Resort's two championship courses—the Celebrity Course and the Players Course—beckon. While not directly on-site at the Renaissance, Indian Wells' privileged proximity and shuttle access (I just walked across the connecting parking lot) make it the natural extension of the experience.

The Celebrity Course is a modern masterpiece known for its breathtaking water features, strategic bunkering, and dramatic elevations that frame the mountain views perfectly. Each hole presents a new photographic opportunity, where the landscape acts as a flawless, challenging canvas. The 11th hole, a par 3 that demands a precise shot over a shimmering lake to an island-like green, is the day's moment of truth. Success here feels like a small, private victory against the desert's vastness. The round, a blend of camaraderie and concentration, spans four hours of pure, unadulterated pleasure. The final putt drops, and the satisfaction is profound—the kind that only a challenging round in a spectacular setting can deliver.

The Transition to Tranquility

Post-golf, the body hums with a pleasant fatigue, while the transition from sun-drenched fairways to the hushed, cool

sanctuary of Spa Esmeralda is a ritual in itself. The spa's atmosphere is immediately soothing, a blend of understated elegance and desert-inspired serenity.

The journey to complete relaxation begins with a one-hour Full Body Massage. The therapist, a true artisan of relief, begins the work of undoing every tension knot stored from the first drive to the last chip. Using a custom blend of aromatic oils, the session is a deep, flowing sequence designed to restore mobility and flush away fatigue. The focus is comprehensive, addressing the strained lower back, the tight shoulders from the follow-through, and the weary feet that carried the body across miles of turf. Every stroke is deliberate, moving the body from a state of performance readiness to one of profound calm.

My wife on the other hand opted for the one-hour Hot Stone Massage. This is where the luxury truly peaks. Smooth, basalt stones, heated to the perfect temperature, become extensions of the therapist's hands. The gentle, penetrating heat of the stones is not just superficially warming; it works its way deep into the muscle fibers, coaxing them into a state of pliability and release that manual pressure alone cannot achieve. The stones are strategically placed along the spine, between the toes, and in the palms, anchoring the body in a state of suspended relaxation. As the warmth radiates through the back and legs, the mind drifts. Thoughts of missed putts and perfect drives melt away, replaced by the single, exquisite focus on the present moment. The sound of trickling water from the spa's fountain is the only interruption to the silence.

The cumulative effect of these treatments is total revitalization. Emerging from Spa Esmeralda, one feels lighter, taller, and completely re-centered. The aches of the day are gone, replaced by a soft, warm glow.

Desert Adventure: Red Jeep Tours and the San Andreas Fault

Take a necessary break from the links and immerse yourself in the natural drama that defines the Coachella Valley.

A Red Jeep Tour of the San Andreas Fault takes visitors onto a private 800-acre reserve called Metate Ranch. Here, you can walk between the narrow, towering walls of slot canyons and see the "bones of the earth" where two tectonic plates meet, all while a naturalist guide explains the area's seismic history and desert ecology.

Beyond the fault line, the tours delve into the rich cultural heritage of the Cahuilla Indians, featuring visits to recreated ancestral villages and natural palm oases where water bubbles up from underground aquifers. The guides provide deep insights into how indigenous people used desert plants for food and medicine, adding an educational layer to the adventure. Whether you're opting for a sunset excursion, a stargazing "Nightwatch" tour, or a journey into the lush Indian Canyons, the experience is designed to be a "soft adventure"—meaning it's accessible and engaging for families and seniors without being overly jarring.

Our driver and tour guide, Morgan, was among the most knowledgeable persons we've ever met, not only about the rich past of the San Andreas Fault and Coachella Valley, but also of western and Native American history. The three-hour trip into the Fault went quickly, with breaks to make short hikes across the area and even between tight crevasses between the cliffs.

Top Courses You Can Play in the Coachella Valley

PGA WEST: TPC Stadium Course (La Quinta)

Designed by Pete Dye, this is arguably the most famous public course in the desert. It is notoriously difficult, featuring the "Alcatraz" island green and massive bunkers. It is a bucket-list destination that frequently hosts the PGA Tour's American Express.

Desert Willow: Firecliff Course (Palm Desert)

Consistently ranked as one of the best municipal courses in the country, Firecliff is known for its incredible landscaping, hundreds



PGA WEST



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Renaissance Esmeralda Resort & Spa



Indian Wells Golf Resort



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of bunkers, and stunning mountain views. It offers a "pro-level" challenge without the exclusive price tag of a private club.

Indian Wells Golf Resort: Players Course (Indian Wells)

Often compared to a "desert version" of Riviera, the Players Course features wide fairways and classic bunkering. It is meticulously maintained and offers a more traditional golf feel compared to the lush, floral design of its sister course, the Celebrity.

SilverRock Resort: Arnold Palmer Classic (La Quinta)

Set directly against the base of the Santa Rosa Mountains, SilverRock is one of the longest courses in the valley. The proximity to the mountains provides a dramatic "wall" of rock that looms over several holes.

Classic Club (Palm Desert)

Originally built to host the Bob Hope Classic, this Arnold Palmer design feels like a parkland course in the middle of the desert. It features over 30 acres of water, pine trees, and rolling terrain, offering a unique break from the typical "sand and cactus" aesthetic.

Escena Golf Club (Palm Springs)

This Jack Nicklaus design is known for its "desert modern" vibe. It features wide-open corridors and unobstructed views of the San Jacinto Mountains. The clubhouse is an architectural landmark and a favorite for post-round dining.

Ram's Hill (Borrego Springs)

Located about 90 minutes south of Palm Springs in the remote town of Borrego Springs, Rams Hill Golf Club is a bucket-list destination widely regarded as one of the best public-access courses in the United States. Designed by the legendary Tom Fazio, the course is carved into a hillside overlooking the vast Anza-Borrego Desert State Park, offering dramatic elevation changes and panoramic views of the desert floor that are rare for the region.

Marriott's Shadow Ridge (Palm Desert)

Designed by Nick Faldo, this course was inspired by the Great Australian Sandbelt. It features deep, ragged bunkers and large greens. It is widely praised for its exceptional turf conditions and "pure" golf experience.

PGA WEST: Nicklaus Tournament Course (La Quinta)

A favorite for long hitters, this course offers wide fairways but punishes mistakes with challenging elevated greens. Like the Stadium Course, it is a regular stop for the PGA Tour.

Eagle Falls at Fantasy Springs (Indio)

Designed by Clive Clark, this course is often cited as the best "hidden gem" in the valley. It features a stunning 40-foot waterfall and more elevation changes than your typical desert layout, often at a slightly more accessible price point.