



The Colony Palms Hotel

DESIGN INSPIRATION FROM A REFURBISHED DESERT LEGEND.

BY CAROLE DIXON

What do you get when you mix a former speakeasy, brothel, and gambling house with a \$15-million renovation? Throw in some **Middle Eastern-meets-Mediterranean** design influences, and you've got an inspired setting for a hot desert getaway.







Palm Springs has always been a haven for Hollywood, and over the years the Colony Palms (previously known as the Colonial House and Howard Manor) has played host to Clark Gable, the Marx Brothers, Jack Benny, Frank Sinatra, and boxing legend Jack Dempsey, among others. Located just off Palm Canyon Drive, the property was originally constructed in 1936 by Purple Gang mobster Al Wertheimer, whose shady past included co-orchestrating the Valentine's Day Massacre with Al Capone. Many owners followed, including Robert and Andrea Howard, the grandson of the owner of champion thoroughbred Sea Biscuit and a well-known actress, respectively.

The hotel was purchased by the Pacifica Capital Group in 2004 and opened last year after an extensive redesign. Interior designer Martyn Lawrence-Bullard looked to Turkey and Morocco for inspiration, which he feels ties in nicely with the Mediterranean style of the property. "I love that period of California architecture: Spanish meets Colonial," he says. But do Turkish tapestries and Moroccan tiles mix? "If you use those elements sparingly, you get a very sophisticated look," he says.

The Spanish-style grounds still evoke the glamorous golden era but the contemporary revamp spans the 56 rooms, eight casitas, and three suites. The Purple Palm restaurant has created a good buzz for its innovative food, and the Sunday jazz brunch is a major draw for the local community. The poolside and courtyard views of Mt. San Jacinto are stunning at sunset and the adjacent

bar crowd ranges from all ages and walks of life. Late spring will bring a spa as well as a basement speakeasy (the site of the aforementioned brothel).

Upon arrival, beautiful antique floor tiles and an elaborate, brightly colored large Suzani (an embroidered textile from Central Asia) hanging behind the reception desk are clues that this is no ordinary hotel. Walk the open-air grounds towards your accommodations and you'll notice other eclectic touches, such as the Buddha statue serenely planted in the jasmine-scented landscape.

The terra-cotta tiled-roof casitas have cozy fireplaces with distressed leather armchairs and large sisal rugs, but it's the dramatic textiles and turned-wood details that catch your eye—especially the towering headboards. Lawrence-Bullard had all the fabrics made by weavers from five families in a village in Uzbekistan, using patterns based on the original antique Suzani hanging in the hotel lobby. "They make a statement and we needed something to make a splash in those rooms and create a signature," says Lawrence-Bullard.

Black, white, and red are the predominant colors. Vintage black-and-white photographs, striped curtains, and accent pillows on the bed tie in well with the overall color scheme. Small, round Moorish-style yellow and green tables are the perfect perch for a tittle from the bar credenza. It's generously stocked with full-size bottles, cocktail mixers, a silver shaker, wine, and ample glassware should you want to throw an in-suite soiree.

Original red concrete floors are inlaid with deeper red, black, white, and yellow tiles. According to Lawrence-Bullard, the Turkish influence from the project development and the tiles are what really stand out as unique design elements on the property. Though the lobby tiles are antiques brought over from a French chateau, new tiles were custom designed and colored to match and to flow throughout the guestrooms, bathrooms, and restaurant.

The real showstopper is the Purple Palm restaurant. Considering the previous Purple Gang owner and the sordid past of the property, Lawrence-Bullard wanted to evoke a great forties-era club—and re-create a purple palm. He commissioned a photographer to take pictures of palm trees on Venice Beach and had them enlarged, tinted purple, and made into the wallpaper that lines the restaurant. “It’s actually something anybody can do,” states the designer, “with a little imagination and good printer.” The result is an elegant, yet fun—almost kitschy—decor awash in pale green and deep purple banquettes and chairs.

The new chef James Corwell has an impressive pedigree: he worked with Daniel Boulud, is one of 61 Certified Master Chefs in the United States, and has represented the US in the Culinary Olympics twice. Corwell was also the executive chef of Napa Valley’s Greystone Restaurant at the Culinary Institute of America’s West Coast campus.

Corwell’s menu is focused around what is in season and he plans to highlight fresh local produce whenever possible. To coincide with the warmer weather, a lighter Mediterranean menu with herb-infused sauces will be on offer. The braised spring lamb brushetta with white beans or the duck charcuterie assortment make excellent starters. For the main event, baby black sea bass with asparagus risotto, butter-poached whole Maine lobster, or pancetta-wrapped tenderloin of Black Angus beef are standouts. And it’s worth the drive alone just for the rotating selection of Valrhona chocolate desserts, such as the warm molten chocolate cake or the freshly made churros with hot chocolate.

On the quirky, yet well-appointed wine list you’ll find selections such as the Innocent Bystander pinot noir from Australia and the Hollywood & Vine “2480” cabernet sauvignon from Napa Valley.

The staircase under the Purple Palm restaurant leads to the heart of the former brothel, which is being renovated into a modern-day speakeasy. Recent excavation uncovered a wall mural with three nude, ethereal women cavorting, which will serve as a backdrop to the bar and will be visible from the booths. “We’re going for almost a Cotton Club vibe with great live jazz bands. A fantastic—almost retro—sexy space ... and a little bit naughty,” laughs Lawrence-Bullard. The same level of decadence is planned for the full-service spa, which will have a traditional *Hamman* (Turkish bath).



Opposite page: Designer Martyn Lawrence-Bullard isn't afraid to mix pattern. A cohesive, grounding color palette of reds, browns, blacks, and whites—with touches of yellow and green—keeps everything in perspective. This page, clockwise from left: Black-and-white striped fabric mixes with Moorish elements for a surprisingly sophisticated look; the dramatic Suzani-style fabric headboards make quite a statement, both on the wall (above) and reflected in the mirror (below). Fabrics are available from the designer (www.martynlawrencebullard.com).



Moroccan half-shell lanterns will cast mosaic shadows across the walls to create a moody environment. Four treatment rooms with separate men's and women's locker rooms, a pre-treatment relaxing room, and a unisex steam room with a more of a Middle Eastern influence will also be featured.

One of the aims for the hotel is to become a Palm Springs version of the Chateau Marmont on Sunset in Hollywood—hip, trendy, yet rooted in tradition. If the poolside-patio crowd is any indication, they are well on their way to claiming the title. The central courtyard fountain is surrounded by cream- and brick-colored cabanas where musicians such as Perry Ferrell (of Jane's Addiction) have been known to hang out. But it's not for celebs only: The open-air bar has a mixture of locals, industry types, and couples spanning all ages.

Lawrence-Bullard's design cache certainly doesn't hurt the Colony Palms' goal: He has been associated with some very chic Hollywood homes over the past decade. Clients have included Christina Aguilera, Edward Norton, Kid Rock, Cher, and Vidal Sassoon; he has just finished an LA apartment for Elton John.

While Lawrence-Bullard rose to fame as a residential designer, the idea of a hotel venture appealed to him tremendously. "You get to create an environment that many different people will experience," says the designer. "It's a challenge to come up with something that would work for young people, older people—to bring different experiences to many kinds of people."



The Purple Palm restaurant serves up more eclectic design and a Mediterranean menu that's adjusted seasonally; the Colony Palms once housed a brothel, where this mural was uncovered during excavation. It will be prominently featured in the new speakeasy, set to open later this year.

Lawrence-Bullard believes that "beauty and diversity are key to good design." This boils down to, "Never be scared of eclecticism. There are beautiful things from every period and you can find things from \$10 to \$10,000. I believe that one should never be scared of mixing. If there are two objects that you love, then why won't they work together? To be eclectic and individual is the key to fine design." ■

The Colony Palms Hotel is located at 572 N. Indian Canyon Drive, Palm Springs; 800-557-2187 or www.colonypalmshotel.com.

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