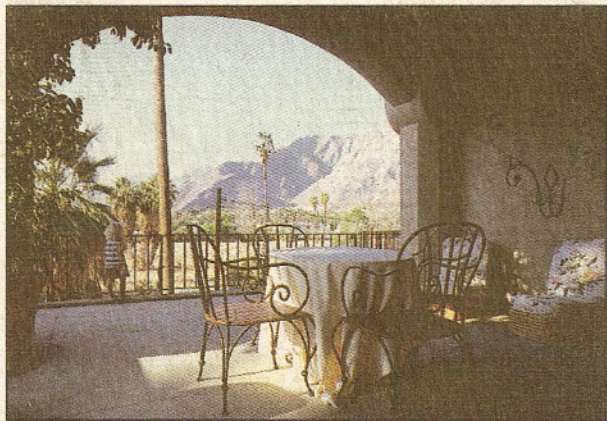


TRAVEL



Los Angeles Times



BARBARA DeMARCO BARRETT

WEEKEND ESCAPE

From an afternoon on
the veranda to the
luxury of a nighttime
desert swim at the
just-opened Willows
Historic Palm Springs
Inn. **L5**

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Desert Hospitality

New owners of a historic house-turned-inn throw out the welcome mat with off-season rates

By BARBARA DeMARCO BARRETT

PALM SPRINGS—We like going to Palm Springs. We like the desert, the relaxed atmosphere and the heat. The heat makes you feel like doing nothing, and that's exactly what my husband, our son Travis, and I were looking to do.

It was my husband's birthday. The last time Brian and I were in Palm Springs, at the Moroccan-style Korakia, we heard about the Willows Historic Palm Springs Inn, a magnificently restored 1927 home cloaked in celebrity lore that opened in early July.

The groundskeeper was hosing down the gated slate parking lot when we arrived. The gate opened, and we walked through and followed him up the steps to the veranda. We could hear Billie Holiday singing softly through the speakers.

Paul Marut, one of the owners, met us. As he showed us out of the 112-degree heat and into the air-conditioned inn, he handed us our own electronic parking-gate opener and keys—to the front gate, house and our room.

Because we were the only guests that weekend (August is the lowest of Palm Springs' low season), we were upgraded to the Palm Room at no extra charge. Then



VICTOR KOTOWITZ / Los Angeles Times

Marut gave us a tour of the house, an eight-room inn nestled against the San Jacinto Mountains, just behind the Desert Museum in Old Palm Springs.

From 1928 to 1943, it had been the winter estate of famed New York attorney and human rights advocate Samuel Untermyer. Then from '43 until the current proprietors bought it, it went through various owners. Marut believes that Marion Davies, lifelong mistress of William Randolph Hearst, lived here—most likely in the '50s when she owned The Desert Inn on North Palm Canyon Drive, just blocks away.

The Great Hall's high ceiling with mahogany beams, polished wood floor, antiques and grand piano got my attention, as did the dining room's enormous fireplace with original handmade tiles. Marut narrated as he showed us the rooms: "This is the room where Clark Gable and Carole Lombard are said to have honeymooned" (although he couldn't say exactly when).

We learned later from the Palm Springs Historical Society that Albert Einstein often stayed here in the '30s. Untermyer brought Albert and Mrs. Einstein to the Willows when the Nazis began to threaten the freedom of Jews in Germany. We entered Einstein's Garden Room with quiet reverence. Marut showed us a calendar with Einstein's photo, taken on the property.

We peeked into the Acanthus Room, the least expensive and the one we had booked. It was cozy, with a queen-size iron sleigh bed and maple armoire, high ceiling and chandelier. In off-season it's \$175, still more than we would want to pay. But when I first called for information about the Willows, Tracy Conrad, Marut's partner, said they were offering 25% discounts through September, bringing the room down to a somewhat affordable \$131.25.

Marut showed us to our suite, the Palm Room. On the coffee table beside a white brocade sofa sat a silver platter with fresh fruit. A shiny two-person claw-foot bath-

Budget for Two

Gas from Corona del Mar.....	\$15.00
The Willows Inn, 2 nights.....	289.01
Dinner with wine, Magie's.....	57.33
Lunch, Delhi Palace.....	20.00
Snacks, cappuccinos.....	16.14
FINAL TAB.....	\$397.48

The Willows Historic Palm Springs Inn, 412 W. Tahquitz Canyon Way, Palm Springs, CA 92262; telephone (619) 320-0771.



BARBARA DeMARCO BARRETT

Cooling off: Author's husband and son Travis in the Willows' pool.

tub and pedestal sink sat in the far reaches of the bedroom; behind a pewter-handled door was the toilet and shower. New white terry-cloth robes hung on the bathroom door. Paul announced that there was iced tea in the kitchen, then left so we could get changed for a swim.

Afterward, we strapped Travis into the stroller and walked a few short blocks into town for dinner. (At 7 p.m., the thermostat registered 90 degrees.) We went to Magie's La Nuova Cucina Italiana. My *timballo di melanzane* (eggplant Parmesan, at \$9.95) was good, but Brian's *ravioli al pomodoro con spinaci* (\$10.95) was excellent, and the *tiramisu* (\$4.95) was the best we'd ever had.

When we returned to the Willows, we climbed a stone path that spirals upward beside the 50-foot waterfall constructed not long after the house was built. It was a

moonless night, so dark we could see a million stars from the hilltop.

One week earlier, our friends Cheryl Pruett and Galen Guseman from Capistrano Beach had stayed at the Willows and remarked how much they loved the Great Hall. "You could easily imagine the parties of the '30s that went on here, the elite coming out from L.A.," Cheryl said. "We brought a pizza back from town and ate it on the veranda under the night sky with a bottle of wine that Tracy had left in our room. We felt apart from the world."

Being the only guests at the Willows that weekend too, they were upgraded to the Marion Davies room. (In season, the room goes for \$550 a night! Through the end of September, with the 25% inaugural discount, it goes for almost half that. Gorgeous as the premises are, we couldn't help but

wonder who can afford high season.)

The next morning we ate breakfast in the dining room adjacent to the Great Hall. We sat beneath the original frescoed ceiling at a cloth-covered table with linen napkins, watching the waterfall and listening to Dinah Washington. Paul brought us hot blueberry muffin tops that spread out like small fat pancakes, fresh-squeezed orange juice, coffee and fruit artfully arranged on a platter.

Later he told us we were among their first guests. Marut and Conrad are emergency room physicians, she in Los Angeles, he in Palm Springs (when they're not there, guests have a beeper number to reach Paul).

After breakfast, we discussed plans: go to the Oasis WaterPark in South Palm Springs, the Moorten Botanical Gardens just minutes away on South Palm Canyon Drive, horseback riding or ice skating at the Ice Chalet in Palm Desert Town Center. In the end, we decided to go for a swim and enjoy doing nothing. Then a late lunch at the Delhi Palace Indian restaurant on North Palm Canyon Drive.

A complimentary dinner at Le Vallauris across the street from the Willows comes with a two-night stay, but we chose instead to have the restaurant deliver dinner to the Willows dining room by the waterfall. Because of the major power outage that we later learned affected seven Western states, the restaurant was closed, but the chef would cook for us using a tiny gas burner.

The table in the dining room was set with linens, silver, china and crystal. The waiter came to take our order, then returned to the restaurant. I scanned Le Vallauris' wine list: Prices ranged from \$21 to \$370, with the average bottle coming in at \$110 (gasp!).

Midway through appetizers of asparagus tips with a mushroom sauce and Caesar salad, the inn's air-conditioning kicked in, the waterfall flowed and "Willow Weep for Me," an old jazz standard, soon came on over the speakers. How appropriate.

After dinner, we set out for town, peeking into Le Vallauris on the way. The restaurant occupies a 1927 Mediterranean/Spanish revival home, with antiques, tapestries, fireplaces, twinkle lights and an outdoor dining area under tall ficus trees.

Palm Springs' main drag was surprisingly lively for off-season and the 10 p.m., 90-degree temperatures. It reminded me of Laguna Beach on summer nights. We stopped at Peabody's Jazz Studio Coffee Bar, drank strong cappuccinos outside beneath air-misters and listened to a blues band. Back at the Willows later, we went for a night swim under a star-encrusted sky. One of the things we love about Palm Springs: It's hot enough to swim at night.

DeMarco Barrett is a freelance writer based in Corona del Mar.

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