

YESTERDAY

# SUNNY DAYS ON THE SALTON SEA



An early 1960s Kodachrome of the North Shore Yacht Club designed by architect Albert Frey shows its porthole windows and nautical flags. Inset: The pool at the neighboring North Shore Hotel. Both photos courtesy of John Sanborn and the Palm Springs Historical Society.



The outcome of a natural disaster, the Salton Sea emerged as a 1960s recreational paradise—something worth remembering as we debate its future today.

**F**rightening potential environmental impacts and mind-numbing economic analyses dominate the conversation about the Salton Sea these days. But there was a time when the sea's great gift as a vast recreational resource for the valley was much easier to fathom—before the drastic reduction in water volume and quality dimmed its allure. Picture it: According to a *Time* magazine article, the sea's North Shore Yacht Club once boasted the largest marina in California, and the sea hosted more visitors during some years than Yosemite National Park.





Clockwise from the top left: Romance on the club's dock. Waterskiing became a major diversion at the club. Fishing in unpolluted salt water at the jetty in 1963. A shipwreck cocktail party at the club draws Palm Springs Mayor Frank Bogert, an unidentified partygoer, developer Ray Ryan and Janice Bogert. Bogert and a lovely compatriot show off the then-edible catch of the day. All photos by Gail B. Thompson, Gayle's Studio, courtesy of Tracy Conrad and The Willows Historic Palm Springs Inn.

### THE SEA'S BEGINNINGS

In 1905 there was a deluge that caused the mighty Colorado River to spill over its banks and flow into the ancient Salton Sink. The escaping water raced along manmade irrigation ditches that took the Southern Pacific Railroad almost two years to repair—during which the countless lost gallons of water, measured in millions of acre-feet, created the Salton Sea.

Unlike most natural disasters, this one left behind a benefit. The sea was not only a flyover stop for migrating birds or a nurturing addition to an ecosystem, but also a new water playground in the middle of a vast desert.

During the 1920s, the sea was enjoyed as a bird-watching and fishing sanctuary. But by the 1950s, it was becoming the "American Riviera" and was in full swing through the 1960s.

### THE GROWTH YEARS

Developer Penn Phillips pioneered by laying out the sea's first resort. Time magazine reported in March 1959 that he sold \$1.2 million worth of real estate in a single week. In the article, the developer quipped, "You can't buy a poor piece of California land; you can only pay too much for it."

He optimistically mapped out more than 50,000 lots, developed around 11,000 and actually sold 7,000 of them at \$2,000 to \$4,000 apiece during that year alone.

Palm Springs local Ray Ryan followed. The owner of the El Mirador Hotel, Ryan and his friend Trav Rogers commissioned architect Albert Frey to build the North Shore Yacht Club, which became the area's centerpiece.



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Above, a bathing beauty intrigues onlookers at the club. Right, a view of the marina. Both photos courtesy of John Sanborn and the Palm Springs Historical Society. Far right: An aerial view of the club and marina in the foreground shows the North Shore Hotel in the upper right. Photo by Gail B. Thompson, Gayle's Studio, courtesy of Tracy Conrad and The Willows Historic Palm Springs Inn.



### THE FUN YEARS

Even with a striking yacht club building in place, the Salton Sea was an everyman's destination. As such, it was decidedly fun, an egalitarian paradise peopled by locals, tourists and movie stars alike. The waterfront and parties were shared by the-guy-next-door and Rat Pack pals like Dean Martin and Frank Sinatra, along with Jerry Lewis, the Marx Brothers and the Beach Boys.

Little communities composed of modest second homes sprung up along the shoreline to take advantage of the recreation offered by the sea. Here, California beachfront living was within reach of the average guy, delivered with abundant sunbathing, waterskiing, boating—even racing complete with regattas—fishing and, befitting the good times, plenty of cocktail parties.

### THE DOWN YEARS

In the 1970s, increasing salinity plagued the boats and the fish, chasing the crowds back to the mother Colorado River or to the real beach along the ocean far to the west. In 1981, fluctuating water levels destroyed the yacht club's jetty and with it, the last lure for recreation.

In the decades before its downward spiral, the Salton Sea was easy to appreciate. No analysis was required. No government or scientific reports were necessary. But look at what we've lost. Still, the sea's potential for delight, though diminished, beckons.

—BY TRACY CONRAD

Tracy Conrad is a board member of the Palm Springs Historical Society and also of the Palm Springs Preservation Foundation. She has served on the Historic Site Preservation Board for the city of Palm Springs and is currently a Palm Springs Planning Commissioner.





Top: Developer Ray Ryan and Sir Donald Campbell on the dock during construction. Middle: Publicity photo of the yacht club in the early 1960s. Above: Frank Bogert towers over bevy of bathing beauties at the club. Photos by Gail B. Thompson, Gayle's Studio, courtesy of Tracy Conrad and The Willows Historic Palm Springs Inn.



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