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MARCH 2004

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# Solitary Refinement



## NORTH 10 Exclusive Hideaways for 2004 SOUTH

**I**N OUR MYRIAD JOURNEYS AT HOME AND ABROAD, we are at times apt to sacrifice prestige for privacy, grandeur for comfort, over-the-top indulgence for elegant restraint. The hideaway ideal exists to satiate this craving for solitude and simplicity, yet our criteria for this nonpareil vary as divergently as our tastes in automobiles or fine art. For some, a remote tropical resort sets the hideaway standard; for others, it is a little-known lodge situated close to home. In the following pages, we reveal 10 of our favorite locales—from private-island bungalows to royal safari tent camps—for satisfying the wanderlust of all in search of seclusion. ➤

## SMOKE TREE RANCH

### LOCATION

Palm Springs, Calif., at the foot of the San Jacinto mountain range.

### ACCOMMODATIONS

57 uniquely individual guest cottages. Several offer multiple bedrooms that connect to a central sitting room to accommodate groups or families.

### RECREATION

Swimming pool, a three-hole practice golf course (arrangements can be made for guests at Palm Springs' many full-scale courses), tennis, horseback riding, bicycling, lawn bowling, croquet, basketball, horseshoes, fitness center.

### DINING

The Ranch House restaurant serves buffet-style meals three times a day. Cocktails are served daily from 6 pm. Dishes range from osso buco and chicken Véronique to grilled cheese sandwiches. The restaurant also offers a complete wine list.

### WORTHY DIVERSION

Scheduled breakfast rides, by horseback, into the canyons are not to be missed.

### RATES

Open only October to April; from \$395 to \$625 (double occupancy). Special rates are available for extended stays, and holiday rates apply. The ranch is a private community; however, *Robb Report* readers are always welcome. Please reference this article when making a reservation.

### CONTACT

800.787.3922, 760.327.1221, [www.smoketreeranch.net](http://www.smoketreeranch.net)

# Eternal Springs

“HOW DID YOU HEAR ABOUT US?” THIS IS THE QUESTION put to all who phone the *Smoke Tree Ranch* in Palm Springs, Calif. The answer often given is from a friend—or, even more often, from one of the ranch's 85 Colonists, or residents, for whose guests the 20-acre central compound, which lies at the heart of 400 acres of ultraprivate Mojave land, is maintained. Indeed, the casually curious will discover little on their own: Though the entrance to the ranch lies but a horseshoe's toss from the desert resort town's famous Palm Canyon Drive, its gates—all but concealed behind a palisade of pipe organ cacti—are easily overlooked. Many lifelong residents of the city are unaware of Smoke Tree's existence, and very few have ever gone inside.

Those few who have enjoyed the privilege seldom have remained indifferent to the property's charms. The main road, divided down its middle by ranks of wispy, ash-hued smoke trees, carries one back in time: The street traffic vanishes as the San Jacinto mountains rise up, crevassed by shadows in the winter sun, and a mantle of peacefulness descends quietly upon the visitor. The gardens reflect the landscape, disturbed only by foraging cottontails and the silent arabesques of black-throated hummingbirds. The buildings, low-slung ranch-style bungalows encircled by inviting porches and richly fruited orange and grapefruit trees, underscore the property's historic Western ambience. The impression created is one of the California Dream of a century ago, when the state was largely agrarian—the pastel-toned idyll of ranchos, mountains, and citrus groves found now only on the labels of vintage lemon and avocado crates.

Daily life on the ranch emphasizes rustic simplicity. The rooms of the period bungalows, though spacious, are bright (many have wood-burning fireplaces) and ascetically furnished: The beds throughout are twins (their headboards adorned with the ranch's distinctive cattle brand), though the staff will, on request, place two of them together. Meals are served at the Ranch House, the social axis of the enclave, which stands adjacent to the pool pavilions and the bowling green. Here guests gather in the spacious dining hall three times a day (meals are announced by the ringing of a large iron triangle) to partake of sumptuous, if not luxurious, fare. Though jackets and ties are (somewhat incongruously) required, the atmosphere is unostentatious, lively, yet elegant—not, admittedly, for everyone; but those seeking unfussy comfort and a hearty antidote to the homogeneity of 21st-century luxury will want to head on back to the ranch, again and again. —BRETT ANDERSON



# Magic Kingdoms

BEFORE THE TECHNICOLOR INTERPRETATION of King Ludwig II's Neuschwanstein castle that forms the centerpiece of Disneyland, a bronze statue of Walt Disney grasping the four-fingered hand of his rodent mascot stands to greet visitors. The founder is depicted in his habitual suit and tie, the latter adorned with a cryptic symbol. For decades, Disney enthusiasts have debated the meaning of this strange character (the symbol, not the mouse), some suggesting that it's a device of exotic Eastern origin, others positing links to secret societies. As a child I noticed the emblem but never gave it a moment's thought, since it could be found throughout my parents' and grandparents' homes—on playing cards, ashtrays, cigarette lighters, and cocktail glasses. I assumed it was universal.

In a way, my grandparents did belong to the same secret society as Disney and his wife, Lily: the Smoke Tree Ranch in Palm Springs, Calif., whose highly stylized cattle brand (formed by the initials STR) is immortalized in bronze on Walt's tiepin. Maziebell and Fred Markham, Los Angeles socialites who wanted

to create a bastion of peace and quiet beauty on a 400-acre tract at the foot of the Mojave Desert's San Jacinto Mountains, founded the ranch in this fashionable desert enclave in 1936 (see "Solitary Refinements," page 99).

By that time, Palm Springs had transformed itself from its first incarnation as Agua Caliente—essentially a stagecoach stop—into the streamlined and stylish mix of Art Deco glamour and Spanish Colonial charm to which Hollywood's luminaries would flee like bats from a klieg light. The Markhams' vision was the antithesis of the palm-planted daydream that had begun to engulf the area. Their private resort ranch paid homage to the previous century, when settlers carved out homesteads and ranches from the sage-strewn landscape. The flavor was self-consciously Western: Barbed wire and split-rail fences encircled the resort, which comprised spacious bunkhouse-like cottages, stables, and a large rambling ranch house—all connected by scrupulously sprinkled and raked dirt roads. A private rodeo arena hosted professional exhibitions, and square dances provided lively diversions for residents and their guests. Even as lawns, gardens, and an immense pool surrounded by pavilions added a gentrified touch to the property in the postwar era, Smoke Tree retained its Old West ambience



that seemed to belong to another, less tainted epoch.

This thematic purity appealed to Disney, who sought escape from the constricting pressures of his growing studio. His first visit coincided with the production of *Snow White*, the film that would place the one-time advertisement illustrator on the path to moguldom. He purchased his first home at Smoke Tree in 1948—but not without first encountering polite resistance from the existing colonists, who worried that he represented the first-wave invasion of a Hollywood that had, theretofore, been successfully kept at bay. To pledge his troth to the colonists, Disney employed his own design skills and studio carpenters to build three cottages on the ranch, all of which remain there today. Disney's airy structures merged contemporary lines with a

countrified ease, and the project won over the members, who consented to let him join.

Like the cottages he built, Disney was perfectly suited to ranch life. An avid lawn bowler, he assisted in laying out the ranch's bowling green and always played in tournaments. But he would not remain in his new hide-

away for long: He had, for some years, been concocting plans for a great escape of his own—a theme park of unprecedented complexity among the orange groves of Anaheim. To realize this vision, he leveraged or sold just about everything he owned—including his house at Smoke Tree. Though he relinquished his prized retreat in order to raise the nearly \$20 million needed to construct his park, he showed no qualm about pitching the ranch's other members on investment in his venture. Many of those who declined, my grandmother included, would live to regret the decision. As with his storylines, however, Walt's project reached a happy (and profitable) conclusion, enabling the Disneys, in 1957, to buy their second Smoke Tree home, which for the next nine years provided them with refuge from the world at large. In 1966, Walt withdrew from that world altogether, passing away at 65. Still, while his company, under various managers, reinvented itself in subsequent decades, his haven in the Mojave continues to live on, an unaltered and restful island in a restless age. ☐

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