



Palm Springs Area Road Trip (P24A)

With stays in Palm Springs, California each of the last two springs, you might get the idea that I'm a big fan of the city. Well, not really. But there have been a number of sites in the area that I've wanted to check out. By this trip, however, there were only a handful of minor sites left in the area that I wanted to see, along with the Agua Caliente Cultural Museum in the city itself that was closed during each of my past two visits.

To get to Palm Springs, I drove directly down to Phoenix with no sightseeing stops. Then, the next day I drove west along I-10 more or less to get to Palm Springs, making a number of stops along the way.

My first stop was actually in Phoenix itself. I learned that the diner whose exterior served as a stand-in for "Mel's Diner" on the TV show *Alice* back in the 1970s was just a few blocks from my hotel, so I figured I'd have breakfast there before leaving Phoenix.



The original diner sign



The show wasn't actually filmed here, and in fact the diner wasn't called Mel's Diner at the time (much like North Bend, Washington's Mar-T Café served as the Double R Diner in *Twin Peaks*). But the current owner decided to tap into nostalgia for a show that most people have probably forgotten in the 40+ years since it went off the air. This included interior décor and cast photos on the menu.



And for the record, they do have grits on the menu, in case you're overcome with the urge to Kiss My Grits! when you're here.



My next stop was at Saddle Mountain. I had hoped to see a rock art site here, but I needed BLM Road 8612, and none of the half dozen roads that headed toward the mountain were marked. I tried a couple of them, but eventually gave up on the site for this trip. I'll have to prepare better for some future attempt to find the petroglyphs.



If you're looking for a sign of Hope, drive US 60 across Arizona. You'll eventually find it.



But don't drive much further than that, or you'll soon find yourself beyond Hope.



This is what Hope looks like. If you think it looks more like Despair, you'd be in the wrong state. You'll find the town of Despair in Colorado.



There isn't much to Desert Center, California to justify stopping. Not even a service station. But when it was first established, it was one of the few stops in this stretch of desert where you could get gas, get your car repaired or have a decent meal. All thanks to Steve Ragsdale and his family. "Desert Steve" as he came to be called even dug his own grave, and put up this marker where he planned to be buried.

During World War II, the U.S. military began planning its effort to free North Africa. It tasked General George S. Patton with establishing what would become the Desert Training Center, a number of camps in the desert lands of southeastern California and southwestern Arizona. The reasoning was that for U.S. troops to succeed in North Africa, they needed to train hard in comparable desert conditions.

Today, the Bureau of Land Management maintains the sites of the camps, although there isn't a whole lot to see. Just markers, the outlines of some roads and occasionally some building foundations.

However, at Chiriaco Summit, California you'll find the General Patton Memorial Museum, which primarily focuses on the life of Patton and the Desert Training Center, but more broadly on war. It also features a number of military vehicles, mostly tanks but some others.



Some of the photos and artifacts from the Desert Training Camps in the museum's collections



Some of the tanks in the museum's collections



One of the museum's more unusual exhibits features a set of weapons built using plans originally created by Leonardo da Vinci. This is a "scythed chariot". As horses pulled the chariot causing the wheels to turn, gears and rods connected to this thing looking like it's topped with helicopter rotors. Large scythe blades were mounted on these, spinning with enough force that they could cut through arms, legs and torsos of anyone unfortunate enough to be in the way.



At the south end of Joshua Tree National Park, I took a break from driving for a short hike along the Bajada Nature Trail, whose signs describe a number of the plants encountered. Not worth the price of the park's admission if this is all you do there, but I have a senior parks pass, so I didn't pay any extra.



Look southeast from the nature trail, and you're looking toward what was once the Desert Training Center's Camp Young. A historical marker but not much else can be seen at the site today.



For my first full day in Palm Springs, I actually headed north of town to visit four sites and to make a quick photo stop at a fifth – this, the Integratron. It was originally built by ufologist George Van Tassel, who claimed that the Integratron was capable of rejuvenation, anti-gravity and time travel. After he died, the current owners appreciated its acoustically perfect sound chamber, and started offering “sound baths”, where you lie down with a bunch of strangers while listening to “harmonic sound frequencies” produced by quartz bowls, which they claim have a deep calming effect. Personally, I’d rather pay for time travel than a sound bath.



Nearby is Giant Rock, although it would look comparatively bigger had I parked closer to it. The rock is seven stories high and covers 5800 square feet of ground. Even after a piece of it calved off a few years ago, it is the largest free-standing boulder in North America and possibly the world. In the 1950s, it was a popular gathering spot for UFO believers, although today it draws graffiti artists and off-roaders.



If you think that you're being watched when you visit Giant Rock, you may soon notice that the hill has eyes.

One of my stops was to tour the Noah Purifoy Outdoor Desert Museum of Assemblage Sculpture, a “found objects” sculpture park. Purifoy was a well-known artist who co-founded the Watts Tower Art Center before moving out into the desert to create his sculpture park. Even though he died in 2004, his work is still exhibited in many famous art museums.



Although I found some of the works rather eye-catching, I suspect that “found object” sculpture is not everyone’s cup of tea.



An “art movement” is a style in art with “a specific art philosophy or goal, followed by a group of artists during a specific period of time”. Art movements are particularly important in modern art. American Impressionism, Art Nouveau, Jugendstil, Romanticism and Vienna Secession are but a few examples of art movements.

Given how routinely I come across toilet bowls in “found object” sculptures, and I’m wondering if modern art also includes a “Bowl Movement”.

Cabot Yerxa was an early pioneer in the Coachella Valley area that includes Palm Springs. He established his homestead and built a home there in the style of a large Hopi pueblo. Today, his home is a museum with small collections of art, Native American artifacts, and photos and artifacts related to early desert homesteader life.

He discovered two aquifers on opposite sides of the hill he lived on, one with hot water and one with cold, not realizing that these were separated by the Mission Creek Fault, a branch of the San Andreas Fault that runs through Coachella Valley. The hot water aquifer was used to feed mineral bath spas and resorts, which led to the creation of the town of Desert Hot Springs.

Palm Springs and most other cities in the Coachella Valley are on the Pacific Plate side of the San Andreas Fault; Desert Hot Springs is on the North American Plate side.



Yerxa's 35-room home is now the heart of Cabot's Pueblo Museum.



In what had been the home's kitchen. Note the "safe" (red arrow). A mason jar was built into the wall. Put things in it, screw on the lid, and put a piece of furniture in front of it to hide it.

My last sightseeing stop of the day was at the Coachella Valley Preserve, where I hiked the trail out to the Willis Palm Oasis and back. With all the rain California's had this winter, I was hoping to encounter a wildflower superbloom, but I hadn't seen anything to suggest that before this point on this trip – or on my Death Valley trip a couple weeks ago. But there were lots of flowers to see along this hike.

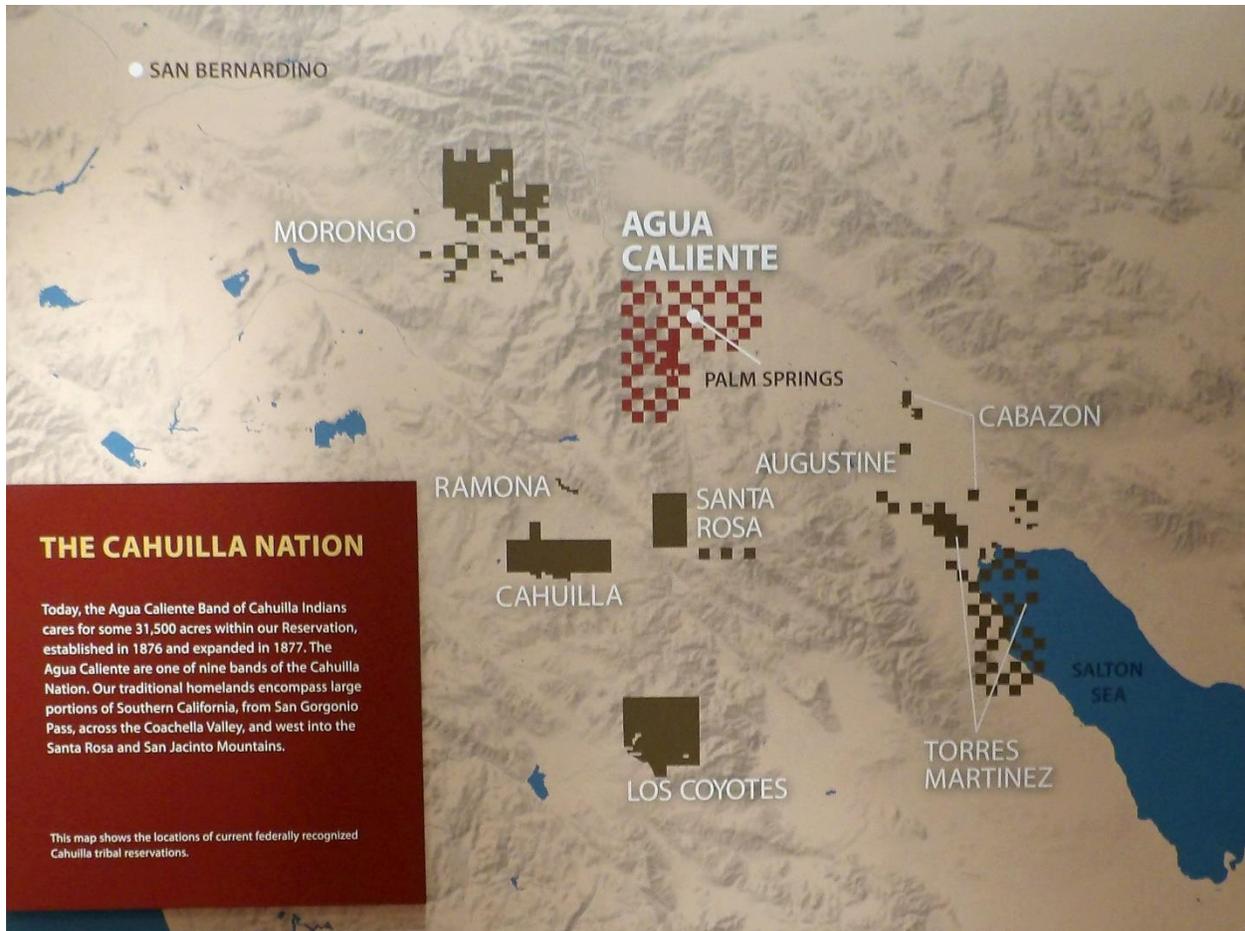




New palm fronds grow out of the top of a palm tree, replacing old ones that die and droop down, giving the tree a “skirt” of dead fronds (left). In nature, birds and rodents build nests in these dead fronds. But in an HOA community, these must be removed and discarded – at a cost of \$50 - \$75/tree when done by professionals. Nature gets rid of old fronds through fire (right). For the most part, a palm tree can withstand the fire. But if the fire kills the spot at the top of the tree where new fronds appear, then the tree dies. At the Willis Palm Oasis, it’s clear that fire recently hit some but not all of the trees there, charring their trunks and burning off their skirts.



The west end of the Willis Palm Oasis, some wildflowers, and the San Andreas Fault landscape



To promote the development of the railroads, the federal government gave railroads land along the route in what looked like a checkerboard pattern of 1-mile squares that they could sell to raise money and use to encourage development along the train routes.

When Native American reservations were established in this area, the Agua Caliente band of Cahuilla Indians ended up with a number of squares that weren't part of the railroad lands, land that the tribe still owns today. As a result, large sections of Palm Springs are actually tribal lands that have been leased for development, including a chunk of prime land in downtown Palm Springs. The tribe has successfully defended its ownership and development control over this land through the courts.

I've hiked some trails on tribal lands during past visits. I've wanted to see the Agua Caliente Cultural Museum for a while now, but it was being replaced by a new facility, work on which was delayed because a number of artifacts dating back as much as 8000 years were found at the site.

The new facility has finally opened. Exhibits focus on tribal traditions, artifacts and history, including a display of some of the artifacts found during construction.



Agua Caliente basketry



Ancient pottery ollas found around the Coachella Valley

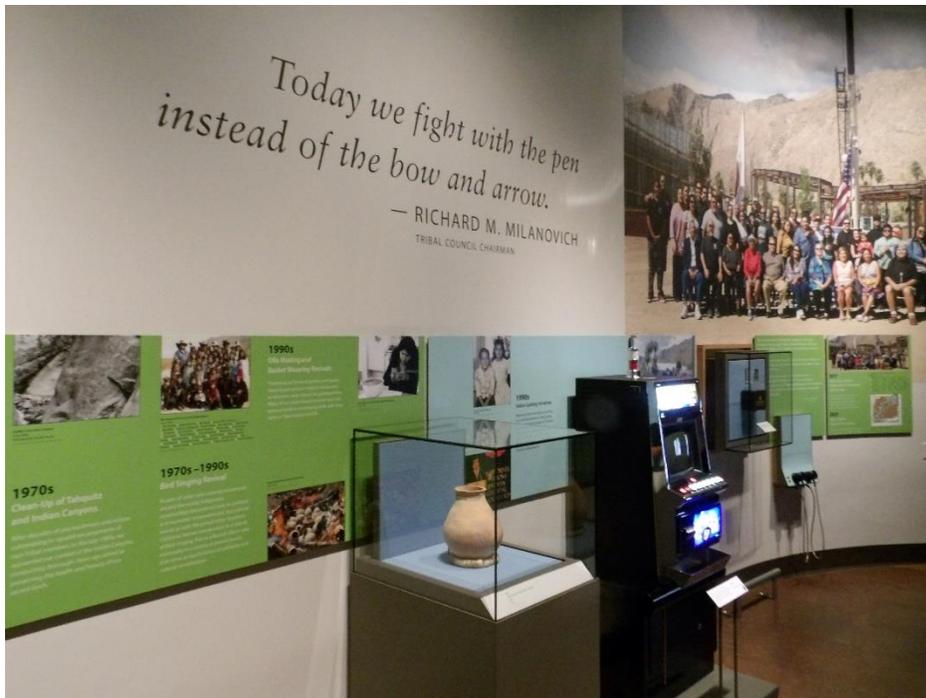


Exhibit on the tribe's modern history



Some seed grinding artifacts discovered during construction of the new museum



A temporary exhibit featured photos by a Native American photographer who captured Native American life, including this Kiowa tribe couple's wedding photo.

My last two Palm Springs stops were return visits to the Palm Springs Art Museum and the Palm Springs Art Museum Architecture and Design Center.

The main art museum always has new temporary exhibits to see, but even its permanent collections regularly change pieces in and out. Much of what I saw was for the first time.

The Design Center is a small, single-exhibit space that replaces its exhibit a couple times a year. So, this exhibit was entirely new to me.



An exhibit on artist Kali showed how she combined Polaroid photos and other media in her work. As she got older, she began to obsess over UFOs, which informed her later work.



One of the pieces in the *Norman Zammitt: Gradations* exhibit



Painting of someone cutting a potato. Note the potato's eyes.

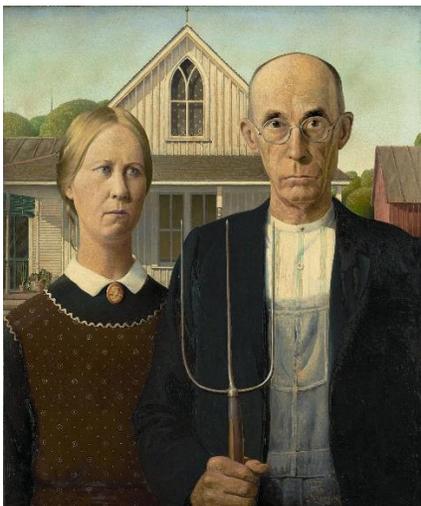


Glass-based art



This Grant Wood lithograph, *March*, was part of an exhibit of works by LGBTQ artists. Yes, Grant Wood was gay, even though he dated my Grandma for a while when they both taught in the same Cedar Rapids, Iowa elementary school in his pre-fame years. (Perhaps he turned gay after Grandma dropped him in favor of Grandpa. 😊) The placard identifying the art quotes an art critic: “One doesn’t need a contemporary sense of gay identity to see that there is something wonderfully queer in Wood’s world.”

Think of his most famous work, *American Gothic*, which features a farmer and his daughter (yes, daughter!) standing in front of a house. (His dentist served as model for the farmer; his sister Nan served as model for the daughter; the house used in the background is in Eldon, Iowa.)



Does *American Gothic* strike you as “wonderfully queer”? I think that art commentators try a little too hard sometimes.



The Design Center exhibit focused on the work of architect Albert Frey, who helped bring modernist architecture to the United States, and specific a style known as Desert Modernism centered on Palm Springs. The exhibit told Frey's story and featured some of his work primarily through photos.

My original itinerary included two days to make the 300-mile drive back home, because I planned to visit some backcountry areas along the way. Unfortunately, what was a dry forecast on Monday became a significant chance of rain by Wednesday, and continuous rain – and some snow – on Friday when I headed home. Saturday morning, weather radar showed rain and snow over the whole area I had planned to explore that morning when I first came up with my trip itinerary.

Unpaved desert roads become impassable when wet, and because it's so close to home, I figured I could always return on some future trip when the weather is more accommodating.