

# Shine On Colony Palms

**A passion for preservation returns a historic property to its seductive side**

BY DAWN MOORE



Palm Springs' standing as the go-to haven for celebrities with a mind to misbehave gained legendary status long before there was even a road to get here. Like any bona fide refuge, its remoteness equaled exclusivity. Eighty years later, the mere hint of scandal has a wonderfully seductive quality, but now anybody can simply slap down a credit card and bask in the shining wickedness.

Steve Ohren knows the allure of this naughty past, and his Colony Palms Hotel on North Indian Canyon Drive in Palm Springs oozes the essence of past glamour and high jinks. "This has been a premier place since the '30s, so every major celebrity has either stayed here, swam here, or ummm ... been here," he says, winking. Purple Gang mobster Al Wertheimer built the Spanish hacienda in 1936 as a gambling den called The Colonial House, providing his guests with a complete menu of vices du jour.

In the late '40s, Robert Howard, whose family owned the champion thoroughbred Seabiscuit, became proprietor. The rechristened Howard Manor soon saw Jack Dempsey, Frank Sinatra, and pals knock back a few, cementing Palm Springs' Sodom-and-Gomorrah reputation. Finally, when boozing gave way to sipping carrot juice in the '70s, fitness visionary Sheila Cluff, flush with success from her groundbreaking spa The Oaks in Ojai, purchased the property; and Baby Boomers found The Palms a restorative sanctuary.

During weekend walks, Ohren — who owns a home in Old Las Palmas built in the '20s for Jean Harlow — would pass the property, admiring the architecture and wondering about its story. Eventually, the commercial investor picked up the phone. Cluff was ready to sell, and Ohren became a first-time innkeeper.

Ohren sought a designer who understood his vision, which consists of a charming boutique hotel that maintains the architectural integrity, offers a world-class restaurant, and attracts a sophisticated clientele. "I saw an article about Martyn [Lawrence-Bullard] with photos of his home, and I said, 'That's what I want!' From the first color boards he presented, I knew he understood," Ohren says.

DEBORAH ANDERSON

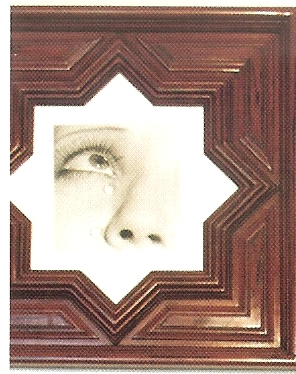
**R**ecently named to *Architectural Digest's* "100," Lawrence-Bullard's own 1923 Spanish Colonial in the hills of Hollywood's historic Whitely Heights area was built for Rudolph Valentino. William Faulkner and Gloria Swanson subsequently called the property home. Provenance and authenticity are the hallmarks of Lawrence-Bullard's style and the foundation of Ohren's vision.

As you enter Colony Palm's arched breezeway through black wrought iron gates, the hotel's color palette of olive, ochre, and terra cotta makes its introduction in the tile path. A suzani textile from Uzbekistan in the same earthy hues hanging behind the reception desk confirms it. Individual casitas dot the grounds, and a stroll through winding garden paths allows the tiled roofs and weathered wood overhangs to work their charm. In fact, the \$15 million spent on renovating is a study in subtlety.

Lawrence-Bullard's inherent sense of drama prevails, but in an organic sort of way. In the rooms, little "carpets" of unsealed tile made in France seem original to the bathroom floors. Walls spilling over with jasmine and dotted with Moroccan star mirrors surround outdoor tubs. "I wanted to make it young and fresh with these mad designs — sort of Chateau Marmont in the desert," the designer says.

The dark and sexy spa inspired by a traditional Turkish *hammam* (bath) emits a soft glow from the highly polished walls infused with marble dust, pigment, and earth. Bold stripes of pale khaki and dusty merlot fabric tent the "quiet room," where the sounds of trickling water soothe and the scent of Moroccan fig wafts through the halls.

**Designer Martyn Lawrence-Bullard (right) captures the drama and glamour of the 1940s in the hotel's Purple Palm Restaurant & Bar, featuring deep eggplant-colored walls and high-beamed ceilings. The long banquettes, fringed parchment lampshades, and oversized mirrors add to the atmosphere. The dining area spills outside under a poolside striped awning.**



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Ohren and Lawrence-Bullard agree the Purple Palm Restaurant & Bar — with a stunning view of Mt. San Jacinto — is the property’s gem. A mural of palm trees silhouetted against a heliotrope sky by photographer Deborah Anderson wraps the entire room. French cement tile; Alice in Wonderland-like, overscale parchment lighting; and eggplant, mustard, and olive banquettes create a fresh take on a ‘40s glamorous vibe.

Ohren’s eyes widen as he describes the indoor-outdoor restaurant’s journey. “When I say this, people look at me as if I was crazy, but this restaurant will have a world-class reputation,” he says. “Renowned chef Jim Shiebler recruited the kitchen staff of 35 from culinary schools across the western United States.”

Under Shiebler’s direction, the kitchen was doubled in size and state-of-the-art equipment ordered to create the contemporary Mediterranean cuisine. The original speakeasy — tucked beneath the property and only accessible through an unmarked door in the kitchen with a whispered “Max sent me” — features an erotic Art Deco-style mural, now the backdrop to a private dining room. The mural’s bobbed blondes are said to whisper some of the storied room’s secrets.

The Colony Palms’ ambiance comes courtesy of Ohren’s preferred style of travel: architecturally interesting boutique hotels with great restaurants. After tolerating the standard withering gaze of ultra-hip hotel staff around the world, he promises an attitude-free environment. And to ensure that warm and fuzzy welcome, just like the original owner, Ohren has created a private two-story space for himself.

“I really want to contribute to the community and look forward to hosting dinners and fundraising events here.” ■

The courtyard pool and spa lie at the heart of the Colony Palms, with guest rooms on one side and the Purple Palm Restaurant & Bar on the other (top). Unsealed floor tile made in France comprises this “carpet” in front of a bathroom sink.



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