

Desert

Summer 2014

magazine

TRAVEL

Palm Springs hideaway

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luxury in the wild

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a sublime sojourn

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lifestyle luxe

The Willows
a boutique retreat
hidden in the heart of
downtown Palm Springs



Where the

The house
that spoke
to Einstein
endures as
a boutique
hotel that
continues to
tell its story

BY LISA MARIE HART
PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAVID BLANK

Willows Bloom



Where the toe of the mountain touches the valley floor, as Willows owner Tracy Conrad describes it, is an extraordinary place neatly tucked into another world. And there it will stay, under the attentive watch of the couple who revived its 1920s charm and protect its authentic splendor.

The Willows, a dignified Mediterranean villa built in 1924, blends into the hush of the hills behind the Palm Springs Art Museum. It's easy to drive by and not notice this landmark hotel, but it's much more pleasurable to ring the bell and become part of its legendary history.

Long before this sophisticated retreat, its lush grounds or its

50-foot tropical waterfall were conjured, "this is where a stand of desert willows grew and bloomed every summer," explains writer and Southern California architectural historian Steve Vaught, who has co-authored an upcoming book with Conrad. "I imagine native people walking through the dusty, dry desert and seeing this green patch. Everyone would have been drawn to that spot, and it's still so welcoming—an oasis of hospitality."

Little has changed in the 20 years since Conrad and her now husband, Paul Marut, wandered across the street from dinner at Le Valluris to peer wide-eyed through the gates of the Willows—the sadly neglected home they would soon own, lovingly restore and open with a warm, refined welcome to an international clientele. What's more, little has changed in nearly a century in terms of the essence and spirit of the magical world behind those black iron gates.



A period writing desk inspires many to put pen to paper in "The Library," one of eight guest rooms, each with their own bold character. The coffered ceiling and dark cherry wood hand-carved fireplace add a refined element of romance to this one.

At the time, the young couple was love-struck with the fantasy of operating an exclusive inn. No, it didn't make sense for two would-be emergency room doctors (yes, still practicing as such) then in residency to borrow money and throw practicality to the wind. Tracy uses the word "naïve," but with a smile. "We were blissfully unaware," she says, of the rigors of running a small luxury hotel. Yet the Willows has realized their dream over two successful decades, becoming "a quiet place in an unquiet world."

"It has a magnetic draw," Steve affirms. "It drew Tracy and Paul across the street. They went to dinner and were so caught up in the romance of it. Essentially they had a patient on their hands that needed rescuing," he laughs. "Logic would tell them not to do it—and so did their friends. Thank God for crazy people."

Without money for a decorator, or even skilled labor, Tracy and Paul rolled up their sleeves and dug into much of the grunt work themselves. "We had to strip all the fabulous mahogany that had been painted, pull up the carpet and undo years of misguided remodeling," she recalls. As a break, Tracy would sit in each room to watch how the light played through the space so she could select appropriate color palettes. She hung botanical prints in homage to its past as a garden house when much of the occupants' time was spent out of doors. She studied old photos to ensure meticulous replication. The result inspires awe, from the sleek shine on the dining room's rock floor to its colorful paneled ceiling.

Some guests discern that the tiles going up the entry stairs and around the swimming pool are copied from the 300-year-old tiles that grace the dining room fireplace, originally imported from Southern Spain. Others simply breathe deeper from the heady scent of the garden's fragrant flowers, and sink into a profound sense of comfort, relaxation, belonging. They aren't the first to do so.

It was in 1924 that, under the wing of the towering desert hillside, prominent Los Angeles businessman William Mead and his wife engaged renowned architect William Dodd to mastermind a resplendent winter estate. After her husband's unexpected death several years later, Nella Mead sold the home to famous New York attorney Samuel Untermyer, and the stream of celebrated guests continued. Three Nobel Prize winners and 12 faces who have made the cover of *Time* magazine join tycoon Lord Beaverbrook and New York's flamboyant Jazz Age Mayor James J. Walker in the fabled guest book. Shirley Temple played in the gardens; silent screen star Marion Davies has a room named after her.



Even the spacious powder room off The Willows' grand living room shows authentic elegance in every detail, a result of the owners' massive two-year restoration.



Photos show frequent guest Albert Einstein basking in the sun on the terrace, one of the few places he found true peace. "You just sit there and think about the conversations that must have gone on here," Steve marvels.

As one of the 10 oldest structures in town, this private hideaway remains infused with the class of bygone eras. China teacups clink lightly during the proper three-course breakfast included in the rate. Wildflowers on each table pair with silver coffee service on linen-lined silver trays. A bountiful evening hors d'oeuvres reception invites mingling in the gracious common areas. One inexplicably wants to sit up a little straighter, walk taller, speak softer, ponder a while longer and think gentler thoughts.

This civil, 1930s time capsule ensures a pampered holiday with amenities for modern contentment. Guests appreciate the tiny flashlight on their key ring, complimentary Wi-Fi, a bedside iPod, bedtime munchies, mini fridge, Molton Brown bath products, inclusive parking and nightly turndown. "People show up in a bad mood and you see them physically relax," says Steve, who spent a stint on staff. "All their big plans are left on the terrace with a glass of wine. The Willows has ruined a lot of dinner reservations!"

From locals on staycation to moguls from the world over, nearly all form an extended family of repeat visitors. Eight bedrooms brim with distinct appeal, but many

guests insist on "their room." Some even switch off the turtle-shaped floor lamp that serves as a nightlight. They know their way across these wooden floors.

It may be the hillside's ambling paths dotted with picnic-perfect sitting areas that draw them back. Or the terrace cross breeze that swishes in past the French doors out to the sun-dappled waterfall's hypnotic splash. Some like to roam the museum's halls around the corner. Others read, write, soak in the hot tub or slip into a poolside afternoon nap. A weekend passes without the ring of a phone nor the notion to craft a to-do list. Needs are instinctively met. "The devoted staff is there when need them," Steve says. "You have your privacy, but are never abandoned."

Meanwhile, a fine mist of the Willows' history hangs in the air and seeps into one's bones. One has the feeling of living in both past and present at once. Questions about the estate's rich history are born in the hours of repose: "Who was here? What did they say? What do these walls know?" Come fall, the book by Steve and Tracy will reveal the full tale in pictures and words.

It is not an exaggeration to say a sense of destiny pervades each stay—each guest a new page in the property's ongoing story. "The house found them, I think," says Steve of its impassioned owners behind this privilege. "And now, in their hands, it is safe." ■



TOP: The Willows owners Drs. Paul Marut and Tracy Conrad at their historic O'Donnell House situated up the hill.

ABOVE: On The Willows' south side beckons a refreshing pool.

RIGHT: A formal coffee service arrives at each well-dressed breakfast table on a linen-lined silver tray.

