Up Against the Wall, Palm Springs Trendies!

The Desert Shimmers With a Hip New Sheen, but the Mountain That Defines It Is More Than a Mirage .

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WHEN I MOVED TO PALM SPRINGS four years ago, my relocation was met with looks of pity and outright scoffing. If you grew up in Los Angeles, as I did, you knew Palm Springs as the place to take visiting aunts from Chicago. It was no place for self-respecting Angelenos to live. That pity has turned to envy since the media declared Palm Springs the hippest place on the planet.

I've studied the gushing articles in the New Yorker, Vanity Fair and Los Angeles magazines, eager to read about my good taste and foresight in moving here. But with each article, my puzzlement grows. The mid-century kitsch lauded in the media has nothing to do with the Palm Springs I know. Kidney-shaped coffee tables, cocktail culture, Jetsons-style furniture—none of these have anything to do with my life here. I almost wonder if the writers visited my town at all because each of them missed the essential truth of Palm Springs: the escarpment.

An escarpment is a steep slope or cliff. Ours, jutting from the desert floor to the 10,801-foot tip of San Jacinto Peak, is said to be the most extreme in North America. The steeper the escarpment, the more it feels as if the mountain is in your lap. The Eastern Sierra has a pretty fine escarpment, but if you live there, you can't belly up to the wall; the foothills get in the way. What's different about Palm Springs' escarpment is its shocking proximity and how that proximity governs your life. From any spot in my house, I can look out past the low-hanging stuccoed eaves, past the eight hummingbird feeders and the overgrown oleanders to a view dominated by a pearly gray rock wall. I see no sky, no borders. Just this mottled bulwark that looks like an elephant's hide—scarred, patched, burnt and beaten.

Driving around town on errands, the wall fills my awareness. To go east toward Indio, I keep the wall on my right. Heading to L.A., I aim for the breach in the wall, also known as the San Gorgonio Pass. Coming home from the airport, I take Tahquitz Canyon Way and aim straight at the escarpment. My car feels so small and the mountain so massive that driving right at it is like playing a game of chicken. My first summer here, I quickly learned to be hyper-aware of the sun's trajectory in relation to the escarpment. (The sun and wind here are forces nearly equal to the wall.) On hot days, I wait for the moment the sun falls behind the rock—my signal that it's safe to leave the cave of my house and walk the dog or have a swim. And whenever I look for a parking place, I size up the position of the mountain relative to my selected berth. Eyeing the notches on the ridgetop, I try to determine: Will the shade remain while I'm in the library? Will the shadow of the escarpment protect my car for another hour?

There's another way, too, the mountain protects us. It serves almost a parental function by establishing a firm limit, a containment. The manufactured human world really does stop where the escarpment begins. Inspect the wall on a black night and you'll see no signs of human habitation other than the tram light atop the peak. There are big cities and multitudinous human dilemmas past that hunky barrier. But the mountain seems to say: Your world stops here. You don't have to take on the universe, just this valley.

While the escarpment marks an end to human habitation, you are free to venture into or onto the great wall on foot, and additional solace belongs to those who do. After a frustrating workday, I like to park at the trail head at the end of Ramon Road and scramble up the hard brown hide. After climbing for a few minutes, I sometimes stop and look around for other hikers. Then, when I'm sure I'm alone, I'll lay my hands and cheek against the smooth warm wall—the escarpment—and feel an instant sense of surrender. Stopping here. Laying it down.

I usually stroll on as far as a heap of fallen rocks marked by a bronze plaque cemented to the granite: "In Memory of Carl Rose: He Loved This Place." My mountainside resting place is sprinkled with bits of cremated bone (Rose's?) and has a view into Tahquitz Canyon, legendary among the Cahuilla Indians for its malevolent spirit who chews up hikers at a regular clip.

With the escarpment as my backrest, the trendy settlement at my feet seems so small, so easily overshadowed. Through a slot in the hills, I watch the great afternoon shadow of the escarpment begin to engulf the red roofs of downtown Palm Springs. It eats up the happening nightclubs and the mid-century furniture shops that have sprung up like desert wildflowers.

I watch the shadow of the mountain fall, also, over my neighbor's '50s flat-topped house. Undoubtedly influenced by all the Palm Springs hype, my new neighbor, an L.A. deejay, recently snapped up this 1950s classic and is busy

turning it into a party palace. Each weekend, hordes of his young friends drive out from the city and revel in everything Vanity Fair says is great about Palm Springs. Their loudspeakers face the mountain and blast hip-hop right up Tahquitz's hungry belly.

I keep thinking my neighbor, Victor, will wake some morning to find the chic wave has crashed. The real estate market will wither, and Victor will be stranded here in his suddenly unfashionable digs, a little older and a lot less cool. He can always pack his orange plastic chairs and move on to the next hip place, and the next and the next. Or, he may finally notice the essential Palm Springs—the escarpment—and even agree to accept this mountain as his boundary. Then, right here is where he can stop.