

A Piece of the Good Life

Customers in this resort town look for apparel that isn't usually carried in the cities, for it is here that they seek to escape and to grab a slice of easy living.

By Kristi Ellis

PALM SPRINGS, Calif. — Two hours east of Los Angeles and a few miles up Interstate 111 in the Coachella Valley lies the ultimate desert resort destination: Palm Springs.

With a permanent population of 42,876, Palm Springs has retained the feel of a village, where

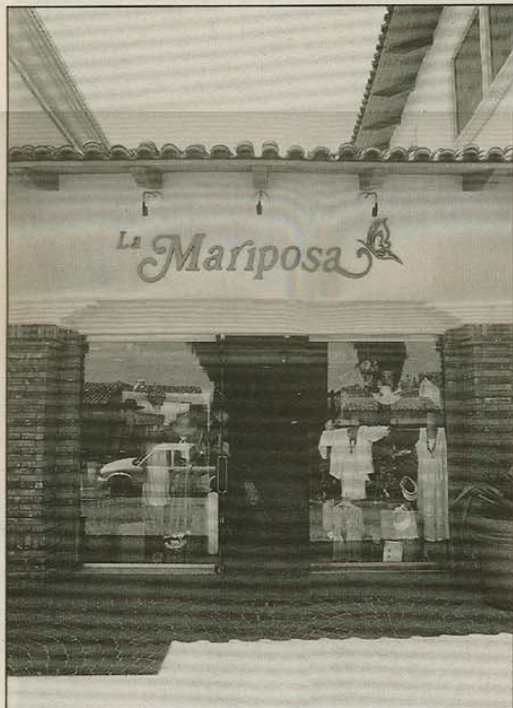
all of the locals know the shop owners. Resortwear is the clothing of choice, and many specialty boutiques have cropped up to service the demand.

Small Town Focus

The city is known mainly for its glamorous ties to Hollywood, golf tournaments, spas, desert hiking trails and camping.

Retailers rely heavily on tourism, which represents 55 to 60 percent of

La Mariposa features ethnic-inspired, arty apparel.



disposable income downtown, according to Jerry Ogburn, director of the downtown development center, city redevelopment agency.

The city supports two malls — one downtown and the other on the outskirts. The Desert Fashion Plaza, in the heart of the downtown, houses the only upscale specialty store in town, Saks Fifth Avenue. It is undergoing a renovation and will have 400,000 square feet at completion.

The other mall, Palm Springs Mall, features 330,000 square feet of space and a Gottschalks/Harris retail store.

Most of the major department stores are located nearby in Palm

Desert, which has become the hub of retail activity in the past 10 to 15 years. Such anchors as Robinsons-May, Macy's and J.C. Penney are housed in the Palm Desert Town Center, and the newest retail development, The Gardens on El Paseo, features Saks, Talbots and Banana Republic.

Although Palm Springs lost its department stores — Bullocks and Robinsons-May — over the past 20 years, it is shedding its T-shirt-shop image and making a comeback catering to a wealthy local clientele and tourists with artisan-style boutiques, dinner clubs and live entertainment.

As Dani Cukier, owner of Dani

C., put it, "My customers are professionals and seasonal. Many have their second or third homes here, and they are country-club people looking for something unique."

The following specialty stores have been successful by offering unique labels and novelty items along with resortwear.

La Mariposa and Mosaic

"We haven't had to re-create the wheel, we've had to shine it up," said shopkeeper Diane Matzner, referring to the town itself. She owns specialty stores on South Palm Canyon Drive.

"Eight years ago, everyone was

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scratching their heads when the factory stores moved in and there was a panic that this would be the end to retailing as we know it. But that didn't happen," said Matzner.

Her three stores — La Mariposa, Mosaic and Aristocat, a cat-themed novelty shop — have a combined volume of \$900,000.

La Mariposa, which has 1,600 square feet, has a distinctive look, featuring artful and ethnic casual elegance.

One of her staple lines is Anna Konya, an arty line that "lets your gypsy out," she said. Rene Derhy Indian gauzy dresses and Dairi, a Moroccan rayon dress line, also do well, and Tabra is a successful jewelry line.

With 65 to 70 percent of her business coming from tourists, Matzner constantly looks for eye-catching novelty items.

"They are looking to live the life of Palm Springs and take home a piece of it," she says of her customers. "A lot of them don't want to shop in a store that they have in their own backyard."

Her second store, Mosaic, has 1,642 square feet and offers unique novelty dressing, accessories and gifts.

"Mosaic caters to a younger customer, whereas La Mariposa serves a more missy customer," she said. Mosaic offers unique hand-made cards and art from local designers, as well as home furnishings and stationery with a few contemporary apparel items sprinkled in.

While La Mariposa, which means "butterfly" in Spanish, is more like a home than a store, its sister, Mosaic, offers the cozy atmosphere of an attic.

"People can spend up to an hour in here," Matzner said.

The eclectic mix at Mosaic ranges from Brighton leather purses, belts and watches to Crane stationery, framed prints and bath fragrances.

Silk dresses by Citron, Plenty and Laureate hang in the store, displaying resort prints such as bright pink thongs or boat prints.

Local artists like Brian Andreas, who does ink prints, are also featured, and Matzner plans to bring in 25 Botero lithographs to round out the selection.

Dani C.

Dani Cukier has fashion in her blood. It all started when she was 10 years old and held her first sewing needle. Ever since, Cukier has been involved in fashion in one way or another.

Her 2,000-square-foot boutique, Dani C., is the culmination of years of manufacturing and retail experience.

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Mosaic has an eclectic mix of gifts, home goods and apparel.

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LOS ANGELES

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A display of unique bags at Dani C.

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In March, Cukier moved out of the Desert Fashion Plaza, which is undergoing a major renovation, and into a street location on South Palm Canyon Drive. She expects to pull in \$500,000 in sales this year.

"My store isn't a typical Palm Springs store," said Cukier. "I don't sell T-shirts.

"When people come here on vacation, they want to find something they can't find in Boston, New York or Los Angeles."

To that end, she offers better merchandise in her sophisticated, simple, clean store. Among her top performing labels are Spencer Alexis, Michael Simons, Tadashi,

Rene Derhy, Joseph Ribkoff and Farouche.

She takes the most pride in her hats.

"I've been told by the manager of Saks that I sell more hats than she does," she claims. Her biggest volume in hats comes from Whittall & Shon.

"I live in Palm Springs, and I am a believer in hard work because I know it pays off," she said. "I give the customer a little more than what she expects."

Charming her customers with her vibrancy and energy, Cukier takes on the role of a personal shopper and stylist, and this, she says, is another key to her success. She dresses customers looking for