



# Cougar Town

Palm Springs isn't just for girls gone wild.  
By Diane Anderson-Minshall

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I'm standing in the middle of a crowded nightclub while a hot blonde with long hair and even longer legs belts out "You Can Leave Your Hat On," the song Joe Cocker made famous, in a voice nearly as throaty as his. The women in the crowd are jubilant, and after a while, drinking leads to dancing and everyone is bumping and grinding and sweating (because after all, we're in the middle of the desert) and it's like any other Palm Springs, Calif. spectacle. Except the singer, Laurie Dean, isn't in her 20s (or even 30s) and tonight, the bar patrons aren't either. They're in town for the annual Bold Strokes Lesbian Book Festival, which unites dozens of authors from one of the largest lesbian publishers with local and visiting lit lovers for a weeklong series of events. (Full disclosure: BSB is this author's book publisher.) Before the dirty dancing, they spent several hours poolside—not drinking and comparing wet T-shirts, but rapturously listening to lesbian authors spin yarns of deceit and seduction in the sun.

By now we're used to tales of lesbians gone wild in the gay/oasis of Palm Springs—no doubt, we'll hear more later this month as Club Skirts' The Dinah and Girl Bar Dinah Shore Weekend embark on the city for the 20th anniversary celebration of those now-dueling annual events. But there's another side to Palm Springs, and it's older and wiser and has better insurance: the real lesbians of Palm Springs.

Since 1999, J. Michelle Secor, a former ad exec/stock investor, and Bernadette Montenegro, a former nurse, have owned two of the city's three all-women getaways, Queen of Hearts Resort and Desert Hearts Inn. Their hotels, says Secor, attract women in the 25 to 65 range, mostly through word of mouth, and often for events like anniversaries and commitment ceremonies.

"Women like to be comfortable vacationing with their partners," says Secor. "At our hotels they can be. The only other hotel like ours that I am aware of is Casitas Laquita."

Casitas Laquita is a resort with 15 *casitas* (bungalows) with fireplaces and, in at least one case, a private Jacuzzi—all surrounding a sparkling pool and Palm Springs-style grassy lounge area with mountain views. It's both cozy and resort-like, and though the spot has wi-fi and business services, it's clear the visitors aren't here for



Joanna Funaro and Denise Robertson (left), co-owners of Casitas Laquita



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Palm Springs Scenes (clockwise from left): The courtyard at Queen of Hearts; Indian Canyons; author Neil Stark at last year's festival; Girl Bar Dinah Shore Weekend (bottom).

the amenities. They're here for the women.

Casitas Laquita, says co-owner Joanna Funaro, is a "safe, comfortable, welcoming place for women to stay, surrounded by wonderful people just like them." Funaro, a former software sales manager, opened up the women's resort in 1998 with her partner Denise Roberson, who used to run the food and beverage divisions of the Westin and Marriott hotels.

Though their visitors range from their early 30s to mid-60s, Funaro admits that "the majority of guests are in their 40s and 50s. We attract middle- to higher-income lesbians—women who are professionals from all walks of life, from superior court judges to actresses and musicians."

Indeed, though Casitas hosted weekly *L Word* parties during the show's tenure, it's not

a surprise to find a Hollywood power player there in real life.

Of the visitors and locals, Funaro says, "All the women mix and mingle, share stories and become life long friends."

While Dinah Shore and The Dinah have their devoted fans, the Lesbian Book Festival also has its devotees, including Funaro, who gushes about both the fans and authors. "Oh my God, what a great group of people. The fans are the best, warm and friendly. The authors, I cannot say enough about them. Who would have ever known what a success this event would become. My wish is coming true, as this event is growing bigger each year."

Back at the club, the owner Victoria Rendall (aka DJ Mixie) is entertaining not just these middle aged lesbians who are flanking the hit lit-sters, but also a bevy of gay and lesbian locals. When Rendall opened Mixies Boy Bar in 2007, it was the first gay bar in the heart of downtown Palm Springs. She says that she "wanted people to know that it was, in fact, a gay bar. Calling it a 'boy bar' helped us send a more direct message." While Mixies recently closed, the spirit of the place still continues in the other Palm Springs attractions like Hunters, a club that hosts Pink Girls Night Out on the last Saturday of every month, and Azul, a gay restaurant and lounge which is also located on the main drag.

Like Casitas Laquita and Queen of Hearts, Mixies attracted both lesbian tourists and Hollywood celebs alike. Actor Candis Cayne

## 20 Years of Lesbopalooza

Yes, the annual events now known as Club Skirts The Dinah and Girl Bar Dinah Shore Weekend are hitting a new benchmark—a 20th anniversary, March 31–April 4—making Dinah Shore, a nearly weeklong, non-stop lesbian party in Palm Springs, one of the longest running festivals in the United States.

The rival events, which were actually one event until organizers split them up a few years ago, bring thousands of women to dance, drink, party and mark new trends in fashion, activism and popular culture. The Dinah (thedinah.com) attracted over 10,000 women last year, the highest number in history despite the recession. This year, The Dinah host hotel for the event is the Hilton Hotel and Spa, and this year promoter Mariah Hanson has secured the Palm Springs Convention Center for all entertainment, a huge boon for a fest that helped propel artists like Lady Gaga, Katy Perry and the Pussycat Dolls to the top of pop charts. In addition

to the performers, there will be a celebrity fashion show and the largest lesbian pool party in the nation.

Girl Bar Dinah Shore (dinahshore-weekend.com), known as much for their performers—last year boasted Macy Gray, the Cliks and Girlicious—as their wild pool parties, is back at the Wyndham Hotel (after a \$30 million remodel) and both Wyndham and Hotel Zoso are offering VIP luxury Dinah Shore passes. The Girl Bar events will be filmed for a 20th anniversary documentary, *Girls Just Want to Have Fun*, and will feature Circus-a-Go-Go and a comedy show benefiting HRC.



(seen most recently on *Nip/Tuck*) has stopped in, as have Cynthia Manley, Pepper Mashay and numerous *L Word* stars. There was even a Mint reunion. (Mint used to be a popular lesbian bar in Los Angeles in the 1960s).

But when the stars leave and the bars and hotels slow down—a rarity that does indeed happen even in glitzy, gay-friendly Palm Springs—Rendall, Secor, Roberson and all these power players of lesbian Palm Springs come together to network with LGBT business groups like Desert Gay Tourism, Desert Business Association, Desert Pride Center and the L Spot (which is both a lesbian social group that meets monthly and [lspotpalmsprings.com](http://lspotpalmsprings.com), a community directory where businesses and groups can reach the lesbian community).

“We do everything we can to support one another’s businesses,” says Funaro. And the group is working hard to solidify Palm Springs as *the* lesbian destination.

“The town has always attracted the LGBT community, even back in the old days,” Funaro adds. “Hollywood’s most closeted gays and lesbians came to the desert to play. The community has become very open. The city gets several thousands of dollars in occupancy tax from the gay and lesbian properties. The shop owners and restaurants flourish. The community feels like a real part of Palm Springs. Our city council has three openly gay council members, including the mayor. The city has lots of fairy dust flying around, making a fantasy land for the LGBT tourists, as well as those who call Palm Springs their home.”

Secor agrees: “Palm Springs is an incredible place to enjoy biking, hiking, horseback riding, tennis, casinos, fine restaurants, outdoor concerts.”

For these women, Dinah Shore, the White Parties, the Book Festival and the celebrities are all just bonuses.

“There’s no place like it in the world,” says Rendall. “Of all the places I’ve visited, it is the most comfortable I’ve felt as a gay person. The gay community here is active and cohesive. Also, the weather—the incredible weather! I could go on forever about what makes Palm Springs so incredible, both as a destination and as my home.” ■



Author VK Powell reading at Bold Strokes (top); Palm Springs Celebs at The Dinah (from left to right): Club Skirts’ owner Mariah Hanson, Uh Huh Her’s Leisha Hailey and Camila Grey and Katy Perry

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