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HOTELS ISSUE

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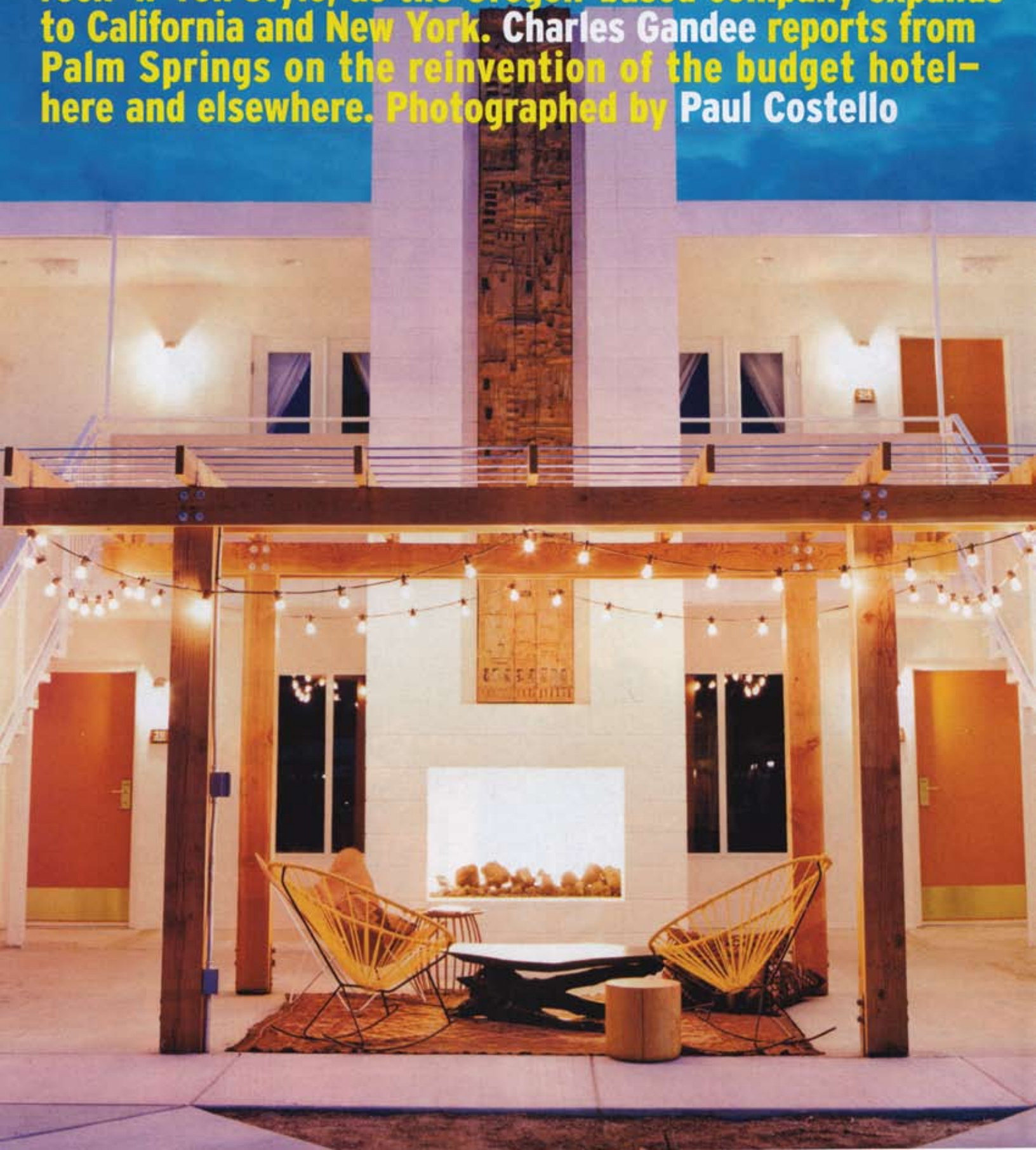
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THE NEW BOHEMIANS

This may be the perfect year for Ace Hotels' lo-fi, rock 'n' roll style, as the Oregon-based company expands to California and New York. Charles Gandee reports from Palm Springs on the reinvention of the budget hotel—here and elsewhere. Photographed by Paul Costello





A guest room with a private patio at the new Ace Hotel & Swim Club, in Palm Springs. Opposite: Vintage rocking chairs in front of one of the hotel's many terrace fireplaces.

B

ACK IN MID JANUARY, A MONTH before the new Ace Hotel & Swim Club, in Palm Springs, officially welcomed its first guest on February 12, the owners held a two-day “job fair” to staff the completely refurbished five-acre property on the eastern leg of Palm Canyon Drive, the city’s main thoroughfare. According to Jonathan Heath, the hotel’s general manager, Ace needed to fill 120 slots—from housekeepers and engineers to dishwashers and front-desk attendants—and some 2,000 people from the Coachella Valley turned up between 9 a.m. and 3 p.m. to vie for the openings. Though, in the insouciant spirit of Ace, there was music and a barbecue to add a festive note to the proceedings, the lottery-like odds of landing one of the 120 jobs were, by any measure, sobering, a gauge of the current economic climate.

Like Target and Mini Cooper, JetBlue and H&M, Ikea and Ralph Lauren’s Rugby line, Ace has verve, a kind of youthful can-do exuberance that is particularly appealing when so many enterprises are anxiously batten down the hatches. “In times of economic stress, people crave emotion and substance, a sense of honesty and authenticity,” says Alex Calderwood, one of Ace’s three founders. “The brands that have a perspective and a point of view, that are creating something of substance, will be okay,” he continues, noting, apropos of Palm Springs, that “this is the time to be more aggressive, more creative, and more innovative...to create reasons for people to be here at the hotel.”

Not least among those reasons, obvious but true, is Ace’s decade-long commitment to offering a category of rooms for under \$100.

Though the idea of a high-design \$100 hotel room is not new—in 1990, Ian Schrager opened the super-affordable Paramount on West 46th Street off Times Square—it is especially timely now. Indeed, the budget hotel is in the process of being reinvented (including by Schrager himself), and Ace epitomizes what might be called a New Bohemian attitude and style: hotels that are not stripped-down and minimalist but rather idiosyncratic, cool, and casual.

“Business is terrible all over,” says a candid Schrager, adding that while “‘cheap chic’ is always a relevant idea—



Palm Springs Escape
Clockwise from above: A macramé installation by artist Michael Schmidt in the Ace’s lobby; ping-pong on the patio; a mobile bar, housed in a vintage camper; hammocks by the pool; a turntable in a guest room; one of the hotel’s two pools; fish tacos with a side of baked corn from the property’s King’s Highway restaurant.





'Ace hotels have a democratic, highly urban vibe, so it was an interesting challenge to bring that out to the California desert,' says designer Roman Alonso.

very democratic—it's more compelling today than ever." Schragger is currently at work on a new hotel in lower Manhattan that will, he says, open in 18 months and be appreciably more affordable than the Gramercy Park Hotel, his much-heralded property at the base of Lexington Avenue. He is also at work on an affordable (\$200 or less) hotel in Miami Beach, which has been designed by London architect John Pawson in collaboration with New York architect Calvin Tsao.

Similarly, André Balazs, owner of the Chateau Marmont in Los Angeles and the Mercer in New York City, among other hotels, is busily expanding the Standard, his more affordable brand. With two outposts in Los Angeles and one in Miami Beach, Balazs is now completing a sleek-chic new Standard in New York City that straddles the High Line park adjacent to the Meatpacking District (see the "It List," page 180, for more). And architect David Rockwell is working for Starwood Hotels on Aloft, an international chain that will stretch from Beijing to Rancho Cucamonga. With 500 Alofts planned by 2012, Rockwell's sprightly reinvention of the affordable roadside motel is worth note: the public spaces are colorful, lively, and populated, and the rooms have been designed to steer clear of the soul-killing fluorescents and polyester that were once the norm. "I have a fascination with motels," says Rockwell, describing the design challenge to "take advantage of every square foot—the closet, the safe, and the mini-bar are all built in"; and to introduce more natural light by using large windows.

Among the other hoteliers committed to the cause are Eric Goode and Sean MacPherson, known for the Bowery Hotel, the Maritime Hotel, and Lafayette House, all in New York. At the moment, MacPherson and Goode are in the process of completing a restoration of the 200-room Jane Hotel, situated at the westernmost edge of Greenwich Village.

Built in 1907 as a sailors' haven, the Jane went on to become a quirky residential hotel before Goode and MacPherson turned up to transform it into "a unique micro hotel for young travelers with more dash than cash." (Quips MacPherson: "Our ideal client is a 19-year-old runaway.") Billed as "the least expensive hotel in lower Manhattan," the Jane offers 150 minuscule, 50-square-foot rooms with shared baths for \$99. Inspired by luxury train cabins, the wood-paneled rooms are fitted out with single beds, flat-screen TV's, and Wi-Fi. For the more flush (or claustrophobic) the Jane will soon offer 50 more rooms that are 250 square feet and have private baths, for about \$250. "So many young people have a romanticized notion of bohemian New York, but have trouble finding it these days," says MacPherson, who is convinced that the problem has now been solved.

Meanwhile, in Paris, a block away from Père Lachaise, the storied cemetery in the 20th Arrondissement where Marcel Proust and Jim Morrison are buried, Philippe Starck (who designed the Paramount for Schragger all those years ago) has completed a hotel of his own: Mama Shelter, a 172-room property where overnight accommodations with a private bath will run you \$105. (Or, if you would prefer a suite, \$344.) Working with architect Roland Castro, Serge, Benjamin, and Jeremie Trigano (son and grandsons of the founder of Club Med), and "philosopher" Cyril Auizerate, Starck tore down a former parking garage and built a very contemporary hotel. "Mama Shelter is first and foremost a place of freedom and creativity; a place for young people, artists, students, and people not interested in material goods," reads the manifesto. "Our ambition was not only to create somewhere to spend the night, but to establish a modern kibbutz, a laic monastery." Materialistic or not, each room is equipped with a 24-inch iMac and a kitchenette. There is also a 160-seat restaurant, a 40-seat bar, an eight-person foosball table, and a yoga room. True to Starck's winsome ways, the bedside lights are covered with plastic Halloween masks.

AS FOR ACE'S COMMITMENT TO THE NEW-AFFORDABLE-chic-Bohemian-Hotel cause, it dates back to 1999, when Calderwood and two friends, Wade Weigel and Doug Herrick, made their debut as hoteliers with the Ace Seattle, a 28-room hotel in a former halfway house downtown. The idea, at the time, was not to become the next Ian Schragger or André Balazs, but to provide affordable accommodations for the *(Continued on page 184)*

THE NEW BUDGET HOTELS

PALM SPRINGS
ACE HOTEL & SWIM CLUB
701 E. Palm Canyon Dr.;
760/325-9900; acehotel.com; singles from \$89.

NEW YORK CITY
ACE NEW YORK
20 W. 29th St.;
212/679-2222; acehotel.com; doubles from \$169.

NEW YORK CITY
THE JANE
113 Jane St.;
212/924-6700;
thejanenyc.com; singles from \$99.

PARIS
MAMA SHELTER
109 Rue de Bagnole, 20th Arr.;
33-1/43-48-48-48;
mamashelter.com; doubles from \$105.



California Casual Clockwise from above: Towels by the pool at the Ace Hotel & Swim Club; ceramist Stan Bitters's igloo-shaped fireplace in a ground-floor room; the hotel lobby; taking the hotel's free bikes out for a spin around town.

