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Tiki Oasis: Make Mine Paradise

10/31/11 **Kastle Waserman** | specs+spaces Reporter, Dunn-Edwards Corporation

When your life gets crazy, wouldn't it be great to know you can escape to your own little paradise? That is the allure of Tiki design, and not since the original boom of Tiki-themed restaurants in the 1950s and '60s has the call to go primitive been so strong.

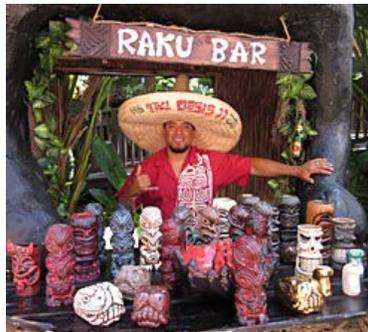
We uncovered an entire movement of Tiki culture in three parts: we talked to a celebrated Southern California Tiki artist who explores the colorful esthetic of mid-century modern inspiration; we took an intimate look at Tiki-style for the home, and spoke with an author who wrote the definitive guide.

But first, we started with the biggest annual gathering of Tiki-philes: **The Tiki Oasis!**



Once a year in San Diego, under the sunny skies and ocean breezes, they come. Wearing Polynesian-print "Aloha shirts" and wrapped in floral dresses with bright-colored hibiscus blossoms in their retro-bombshell rolled hairdos, they enter the **Crowne Plaza Hotel** through giant carved Tiki statues to a world that is a pure hideaway of like-minds who love what is known as "Tiki Culture." It's an all encompassing lifestyle that includes design, home décor, art, fashion, music, food and cocktails, based around the 20th-century theme, formerly only used in Polynesian-style restaurants and clubs that began in the 1930s and lasted to the mid 1960s.

At Tiki Oasis, Tiki-philes journey from all parts of the country to celebrate the Tiki life, a complete getaway from reality where it is mandatory to get a fruity cocktail, (preferably in a Tiki mug) and dive into the weekend of events that happen pretty much around-the-clock – with a poolside shopping marketplace and convention-style symposiums on Tiki history and lifestyle by day, live bands, burlesque shows and room parties by night. Hotel bookings are sold exclusively to Tiki Oasis ticket holders to create full emersion in an all-Tiki world filled just with Tiki lovers for the duration of the event.



And it is like an island paradise. Pinup-style girls lounge by the pool, a DJ plays tunes to groove by while go-go dancers keep the energy lively. Everyone is clad in some sort of Polynesian or retro outfit, which some take to extremes for comic effect such as loud Hawaiian and tapas print shirts paired with plaid shorts and leopard-print fez hats. They hang out and chat, many know each other from the Tiki scene in their hometown and past Tiki Oasis events, or they've connected online through Tiki community websites or competing for choice Tiki items on eBay and other collector sites. It's a very social and friendly environment, even to newcomers who will get a full lesson on "what is Tiki" by asking any of many vendors on hand at the Tiki Oasis marketplace, where attendees can discover a whole world of Tiki items to take home from mugs to furniture, art, clothes, jewelry and wooden Tiki statues carved on the spot. There is a wealth of items to deck out your home – and trust us, you'll want to start your own Tiki bar or room by the time you leave!

By night, it's all about the show – at this year's event, bands **Los Straitjackets**, a surf rock instrumental band who wear Mexican wrestling masks and HERB, a Herb Alpert cover band, entertained the crowd while burlesque beauties showed off a few Polynesian hula-inspired moves, dressed in fabulous costumes as the whole crowd danced and cheered them on.

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We spoke with Tiki Oasis founder Otto von Stroheim. (pictured here on the right with Tiki carver "Crazy Al" on Tiki Culture, how Tiki Oasis got started and how its evolved. "The beginnings of Tiki Oasis are rooted in an annual backyard party that I started in the mid-1980s. I had a roommate who was an architect and we wanted to have a party that was styled somehow," says von Stroheim. "We decided on Tiki style, so I ran out to thrift shops looking for Hawaiian stuff and I started having Tiki parties for about 10 years in my backyard."

The public event Tiki Oasis as we know it today began in Palm Springs in an effort to save the [Caliente Tropics Hotel](#), part of a chain of Tiki-themed hotels that had fallen into disrepair. "They originally wanted an event that was Mexican-themed but I told them if they did Tiki, all these Tiki people would come out and spend money. I knew they would because I had published [Tiki News Magazine](#) and I had over 2000 subscribers!"



The annual event did indeed grow, so much that von Stroheim later moved it to San Diego's [Crown Plaza Hanalei Hotel](#), and now sells out all 400 rooms of the hotel accessorized in Tiki style in the dining and atrium areas. As for the esthetic appeal of creating a whole world of Tiki, von Stroheim explains why it works, "Tiki is a design style. It's defined by the look and the accoutrements. It touches all aspects from home décor to food and drinks."

So what's the one thing an aspiring Tiki-phile needs to start? "It's mandatory that you have to have some sort of Tiki mug collection," says von Stroheim.

So it's a good thing they sell souvenir Tiki mugs at the bar at Tiki Oasis, as well as at the many vendor booths. And once you have your fruity Tiki cocktail, bought your Tiki memorabilia to start your collection, rocked out to some infectious tunes and met some of the fabulous people who are there because they love the party atmosphere of this little self-made paradise, it's hard to leave and go back to reality. And that's just what Tiki Oasis is all about – a friendly little escape where Otto points out, "anyone can walk in a be welcome, you don't have to prove you are cool, just that you want to have fun!"



See the photos from this year's Tiki Oasis:

Photos by Kastle Waserman

For more about Tiki Oasis, visit www.tikioasis.com

Read the rest of our series on Tiki Design:

[Part II: The Art of Shag](#)

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