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This Mission Inn Hotel & Spa is a slice of real California history.

WHERE THE LIGHT IS

Veteran band tour manager Rick Marino drives us to **RIVERSIDE** for the Festival of Lights at the Mission Inn.

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I have been driving back and forth from Los Angeles to Palm Desert at least twice a month for the past 10 years. All this time I had no idea that Riverside has been hiding a one-of-a-kind National Historic Landmark visited by presidents, celebrities and barons of industry. I highly recommend making a staycation of this month's road trip. Located off the 91 and 60 freeways, the Mission Inn Hotel & Spa is a slice of real California history. I learned of it a few years back when my mother she asked if I had ever been the Festival of Lights there in December. I looked at her, puzzled, as I had no idea what that was. Well, on my way back to the desert one day, I found out what all the hub bub was about.

My first stop is to check-in to the hotel, smack dab in the middle of downtown. It looks like a Mediterranean oasis, lush with palm trees and bougainvillea-filled courtyards. Walking up a brick-lined path under the bell tower toward the entrance to the lobby, I am in awe of the architecture and layout. There are balconies and alcoves of stone, stained glass, statues, hand-carved railings, and hallways filled with artifacts and antique furniture. Taking advice from the front desk clerk, I make my way to the fourth floor. It feels like

I'm in Europe! One of the wings looks like Italy, another like Spain, then some France and Belgium, maybe even north Africa?

The hotel's restaurants and bars are worth a visit themselves. At Mission Inn Restaurant, you can sit inside or dine al fresco on the Spanish patio. Las Campanas has great margaritas as well as classic Mexican dishes served on a lush, jungle-like courtyard. And the hotel just opened a new tequila bar with well over 100 choices. For dinner, Duane's



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Prime Steak & Seafood Restaurant is known for steaks and seafood. I get the tomahawk with lobster mashed potatoes – yum!

Finally, Bella Trattoria is located on the main street promenade and feels like Bologna as I sip a midday espresso. In the lobby is the Presidential Lounge, where many presidents have drank. Richard Nixon even got married here! They have live music, too. Speaking of which, 54° at Duane’s wine bar has a jazz singer that gets folks to dance while I’m there. They have at least 28 wines by the glass, including some from the inn owners’ Oregon winery. Pinot, anyone?

The best way to see the hotel and learn its storied history is to visit the museum and take the walking tour offered daily for \$13. It’s about 75 minutes, and worth every penny. You go to areas not available to the public and learn about the architects, art on the walls and incredible collections of artifacts, including the Tiffany stained glass panels in the chapels. Also worth a visit is Kelly’s Spa, which looks like a Tuscan villa. It is one of the nicest spas I’ve ever been in, with five-star luxury offering something for everyone.

The hotel’s most famous event, the Festival of Lights, takes place every year on the day after Thanksgiving. It’s covered in more than 5 million lights, with holiday window displays, and breakfast and brunch with Santa. Kids can

even be tucked in by a real elf with present-filled stockings! Keep in mind this a very busy time of year for the inn and anyone is welcome, but if you plan to stay or eat during the holidays, it’s best to make reservations before you do.

Downtown Riverside is full of history, too. It goes way back to 1873 when the first navel orange trees were planted. This launched the citrus industry that made California famous – for oranges, at least. At the turn of the century, this boom plus the warm weather brought lots of folks from the East Coast and inspired the demand for a grand hotel in the area. Despite its namesake, the hotel is not actually a mission at all. Funded by railroad tycoon Henry Huntington in 1880, it was inspired by the California mission tourism and Mission Revival style. This architecture can be seen all around town, and it actually reminded me a bit of Santa Barbara. One thing I enjoyed was how easy it is to walk around and admire the buildings.

Across the street is a giant antiques store, and in the basement is the Hideaway Cafe for a drink or Molinos Coffee. A block away, the historic Fox Performing Arts Center is where national touring bands and musicals can be seen. Next door, the Riverside Food Lab is food court with a bar and craft beers, and about a dozen different food stalls. I tried Monty’s Good Burger, a vegan cheeseburger (yes you read that right), and it was damn good!

Also, there is a funky place called Tio’s Tacos a few blocks away that is sort of an outside garden museum, built around an old Victorian home, with displays made from bottles and statues. I would grabbing an agua fresca. I know I am always talking about food, and there are plenty of places for that, but make sure you also check out the Riverside Art Museum, Riverside Historical Museum and Riverside Historic Courthouse.

If you feel like it, head down to Fairmount Park, where you can rent a paddle boat or just stroll around the willow and palm tree-lined lake. Or take a hike up Mount Rubidoux Trail, the only hill downtown. Plus, there’s the California Citrus State Historic Park to learn about the Sunkist years as well as the University of California – Riverside’s California Museum of Photography.

Passing by, I never thought this was more than another random part of Southern California. But there’s so much to do and see, not to mention a legendary, luxurious hotel that’s part of California’s golden history. It just goes to show that in our backyard, there is always something cool to learn about. After all, it’s just a road trip away!

Follow Rick Marino’s travels on rickmarinotravels.com or on Instagram @ [rickmarinotravels](https://www.instagram.com/rickmarinotravels). You can also write to him with questions at rickmarino@att.net.