

# Hacienda Del Sol



## *History in the Foothills of Tucson*

**T**he history and culture of the southwest can only be challenged by the natural beauty and warm hospitality of its people. It is a region that holds lore and legacy that still pulls wanderers and searchers regularly. But one town that stands out perhaps more than most also happens to be one of the oldest inhabited cities of the U.S., Tucson, a destination that still carries the nickname Old Pueblo. In this region, Mexican and Indigenous heritage is mixed with the

American Frontier, plus a touch of the Wild West. In the Catalina foothills, a particularly interesting piece of history can still be found, and it is still accepting visitors today.

The late 1800s popularized Tucson as a destination for travelers seeking to improve their health. This reputation further solidified when author Harold Bell Wright stayed through the winter of 1915 in an attempt to cure his tuberculosis with time in the Arizona outdoors. He was cured, and the story became a national sensation with the popular article “Why I Did Not Die,” about his experience and the health benefits of the climate. Soon, the foothills area was booming with new guest ranches and schools to accommodate the increase in tourism. In 1928, investor and developer John Murphey settled in the area and noticed the trend, deciding to build a girls’ school that would cater to this new market. Thus, Hacienda Del Sol was established with the help of his wife, business partner, and talented designer Helen Murphey.

The girls’ school attracted names of the upper echelon like the Kelloggs, Campbells, and Vanderbilts. With tuition that exceeded the average annual income at the time, Hacienda was an upscale institution with an elite enrollment – the Murpheys wanted to keep the roster to twenty-five or fewer girls. Hacienda advertised its concentration on outdoor activities, especially horseback riding. Each girl would have their own horse at the ranch. Its brochure called for “girls who like to don chaps, sombrero, and boots.” Hacienda embraced the culture and style of Tucson and gained a reputation for offering an “authentic” experience of the region. The Arizona Daily Star even published an article in 1933 about Hacienda entitled “Society Girls ‘Go Native’ at School.”

Despite a structure fire in the 1930s, Hacienda continued to develop under the direction of notable architect (and friend of the Murpheys) Josias Joesler. His signature style remains at Hacienda Del Sol today, noticeable in the oversized brick fireplaces, vast picture windows facing the northern mountains, and spacious, open communal areas. World War II



brought on hard times and the school closed its doors. Two of the school’s students would go on to serve in the war themselves. Shirley Slade, who during her days as a pupil talked of being a jockey in the Kentucky Derby, ultimately went on to become one of the first pilots in the U.S. WASP (Women Airforce Service Pilots) program. Fellow alum Mary Jo Wymond went on to serve in the war with the American Red Cross assigned to the 486th Bomber Division.

The school never reopened after the war, and the Murpheys sold the property to another Tucson couple, Howard and Rita Morgan. The year 1945 brought a new beginning for Hacienda Del Sol when it was converted into a guest ranch. Most of the original design elements contributed by the Murpheys and Joesler were maintained and the new Hacienda Del Sol quickly became an attractive destination for the elite of classical Hollywood. In 1946, the property was used as the set for the film *Duel in the Sun*, featuring Gregory Peck and Jennifer Jones. Stars like John Wayne, Clark Gable, and other Hollywood icons found respite at the ranch. Howard Hughes owned a film studio nearby and was a frequent guest. Spencer Tracy and Katherine Hepburn sparked their romance with secret getaways at a casita on the ranch which now bears their namesake, the Tracy-Hepburn Casita Grande.

This seemingly forgotten piece of early Hollywood nostalgia was revived yet again by a group of local investors who purchased the property in 1995. A thoughtful renovation in 1999 greatly increased the capacity of the boutique hotel, while ensuring that the historical qualities of Hacienda Del Sol were preserved, and new additions recreated this same southwestern authenticity. One of the hotel’s current owners, Tom Firth, explained that they, “just had a vision for something grander. But we’ve really tried to honor and maintain the architecture over all these years.”

Today, Hacienda’s Spanish-Colonial style transcends time with its adobe walls and arched doorways. Its spaces are adorned with furniture handmade in Mexico. Modern amenities have brought Hacienda Del Sol back to its luxury status, and the beauty of the Catalina foothills is as much of a draw now as in the ranch’s hey-day. Hacienda Del Sol is listed in the National Registry of Historic Places in Arizona as well as the Historic Hotels of America and Historic Hotels Worldwide for its cultural and historical importance. Off the beaten path, perhaps, but a must-see inclusion to any trip exploring the heart of Americana along Route 66.