

Reimagined vintage motels offer a retro road-trip option

BY NECEE REGIS

Who says roadside pit stops have to be boring? This summer, road-trippers looking for stylish accommodations that won't break the bank, something between upscale luxury and side-of-the-highway corporate chains, are discovering a new trend: neglected mid-century motels that have been transformed into affordable, hip places to stay.

Goodbye, beige palettes and vending machines; hello, disco balls and lounge bars with craft cocktails!

Motels, also referred to as motor lodges, evoke an era of optimism when gas was cheap and families piled into cars and hit the open road. Indeed, nostalgia and wanderlust seem to be — ahem — driving the trend to develop these properties.

"Nostalgia evokes a simpler time, a time of Polaroid cameras and memories of what it's like to be a kid," said Krista Stokes, the creative art director who spearheaded the project to transform the Lodge on the Cove in Kennebunkport, Maine.

The 30-room renovated motel is outfitted with mid-century furniture whose clean sculptural lines complement new bold colors and energetic whimsy. The main building is an airy glass-encased octagon reminiscent of old Howard Johnson rest stops. A swimming pool with poolside light fare and a cocktail bar keeps parents happy, while kids can enjoy a clubhouse, bonfires, yard games and ping-pong.

"When you drive up to a motor lodge, you can't help but feel like you're in a different era. It's a place to daydream," Stokes said.

Daydreaming was a vital pandemic activity for Rob Blood, founder and president of Lark Hotels, who — while isolating at home — experienced a compelling urge to get out on the road. Blood's memories of summer vacations in his parents' Grand Wagoneer led him to create a sister brand, Bluebird by Lark, a midpriced collection of motels, surf shacks and ski lodges inspired by road trips of bygone days.

"Driven by social isolation after the past year, people are looking for spots to go to spend quality time together. Places that are family-friendly, friend-group friendly," Blood said.

Bluebird's first offering, Spa City Motor Lodge, transformed an iconic 1950s roadside motel into a stylish destination in Saratoga Springs, N.Y. Inspired by old-school Americana, the 42 guest rooms and suites offer flashes of color and eclectic artwork within the streamlined architectural style of the two-story original motel. Rooms face an interior courtyard outfitted with chairs, lounges and a communal coffee bar.

Two more Bluebird properties will debut this summer (Parker Beach Lodge on Cape Cod and Tälta Lodge in Stowe, Vt.), with more to follow.

"Providing beautiful spaces to use as waypoints makes the journey as important as the destination," said Blood, adding, "It feels of this moment."

Jayson H. Seidman, founder and managing partner of the Drifter Hotel in New Orleans, also remembers staying in motor lodges on family road trips. Even as a kid, he loved the social aspect of seeing people coming and going. After spending most of his adult life "traveling all over the world," he confesses,



BEN FITCHETT



NICOLE FRANZEN/DESIGN HOTELS

TOP: Nashville's Dive Motel brings back 1970s disco in a rehabbed '50s-era motor inn. Each room is outfitted with a disco ball. ABOVE: The pool at The Drifter Hotel in New Orleans, which hosts a Swim Club where locals and hotel guests can mingle.

"motels are my passion."

The Drifter is the second of three motel conversions that Seidman has undertaken within a larger hotel development portfolio. (The other motels include the Thunderbird in Marfa, Tex., and the Ranch Motel, in development in San Antonio.) Located in a rapidly growing mid-city neighborhood, the Drifter sits at the end point of the old Highway 61, known as "the Blues Highway."

"Everyone in town thought I was crazy to open on the outskirts of town," Seidman said.

Nevertheless, he was drawn to develop the property, a continuously operating hotel since the '50s, and named it as an homage to the Beat Generation of post-war America.

During the year-long project, Seidman ripped out carpeting, put in tile floors, retiled bathrooms, beautified finishes and added new bedding in all 20 rooms. In the former lobby, a stunning terrazzo floor underneath a 1980s renovation "revealed itself."

"I'm into preservation more

than renovation. There are so many great stories in those walls," Seidman said.

To "shake things up a bit," Seidman removed concrete and converted parking areas into a tropical landscape. He excavated the dirt-filled swimming pool and brought it back to life, creating a Swim Club where locals and hotel guests can mingle while enjoying specialty coffee, Japanese beers and sakes, cocktails, and international cuisine from local food trucks. The result is an atypical New Orleans experience, designed to "remind people of other places they have traveled."

During South Florida's period of rapid growth in the 1950s, Biscayne Boulevard was described as "The Motel Capital of Miami." A drive today from 50th Street to 77th Street in the designated Miami Modern Historic District — known locally as MiMo — still offers glimpses of the flamboyant and optimistic postwar architecture.

In addition to the renovated 1953 Vagabond Motel, listed on the National Register of Historic

Places, the strip is home to the sprawling Selina Miami Gold Dust. Retro signage, tropical neon and playful decor capture the spirit of the original 1957 Gold Dust Motel, a location poised for popularity when Hugh Hefner opened his first satellite Playboy Club directly across the street in 1961.

"We wanted to stay true to its origins as historical landmark on Biscayne Boulevard, combining iconic retro vibes from the past with today's cultural diversity that looks to the future," said Victoria Winter, the "experience director" for Selina hotels in the United States.

Utilizing the existing space and structure, Selina (a company that operates more than 70 hotels around the globe) did a full property rehab, including changing the layout of the pool. Room types, from shared community spaces to private suites, are designed to accommodate many varieties of travelers.

"It's a place where CEOs can meet backpackers from South America while sitting at the pool," Winter said.

A revitalized dining space with a river view, helmed by Miami chef Matt Kush, retains a funky vibe while serving diverse bistro dishes such as croque-monsieurs, Kush classic burgers, chicken and waffles, and key lime pie. Signature cocktails, international wines and local brews can be had below the cafe at Don's 5 Star Dive Bar.

In Nashville, a 1956 motor inn collides with 1970s disco and romantic nostalgia in the Dive Motel, a 23-room eye-popping wonder where each uniquely designed accommodation might contain any of the following: '70s wallpaper, vintage furniture, shag carpets, wood paneling and soaking tubs in a variety of bright Pantone hues.

The one thing all rooms have in common is a custom-made disco ball — crafted by Yolanda "Yo Yo" Baker, famous for her work for Studio 54 — that spins to the tunes of "Dive Radio," offering four channels: sex, drugs, rock-and-roll and sleep.

"The design is anything goes, with decor from all eras. It doesn't have to make sense as

If you go

WHERE TO STAY

The Lodge on the Cove

29 South Main St., Kennebunkport, Maine
800-879-5778
lodgeonthecove.com/

Family-friendly resort with 30 rooms and swimming pool in rehabbed classic motor lodge, nestled in a wooded cove in Kennebunkport. On-site bar and restaurant. Rates from \$389.

Spa City Motor Lodge

413 Broadway, Saratoga Springs, N.Y.
518-306-4063
bluebirdhotels.com/hotels/spa-city

Bluebird by Lark's first offering, with 42 airy rooms and suites in transformed iconic motor lodge on main drag of Saratoga Springs. Interior courtyard lounge and coffee bar. Rates from \$179.

The Drifter Hotel

3522 Tulane Ave., New Orleans
504-605-4644
thedrifterhotel.com/

Modernized nostalgia in updated mid-century motel with 20 rooms, a five-minute drive from French Quarter. Pool, private gardens, food trucks, snazzy cocktails and Swim Club. Rates from \$104.

Selina Gold Dust

7700 Biscayne Blvd., Miami
305-985-4764
selina.com/usa/miami-gold-dust/

Mid-century 57-room landmark motel with splashy updates in Miami Modern district. Boasts swimming pool, Cafe Kush and Don's 5 Star Dive Bar. Seasonal rates from \$45 in community rooms; \$125 in private rooms.

The Dive Motel

1414 Dickerson Pike, Nashville
615-650-9103
thedivemotel.com/

Retro decor and disco balls in 23 uniquely designed rooms in rehabbed '50s-era motor inn. Vibrant pool scene with Swim Club, taqueria and cocktail bar. Rates from \$150.

N.R.

long as it's fun," said Lyon Porter, owner and designer of the property.

Porter, who also founded and operates the Urban Cowboy portfolio (with hotels in Nashville and the Catskills), discovered the run-down motel in an area of town undergoing transformation while looking for a place with a pool.

"A motel means different things to different people. Guests in their 80s say, 'Oh, I remember staying in motels.' In their 40s, it means something else. And people in their 20s may never have stayed at a motel," Porter said.

Because of the pandemic, it is the first full season that the pool and Swim Club are open for swimming, partying and dancing. The just-launched Dive Taqueria features meat and vegetarian tacos, quesadillas, tamales, pupusas, ceviche, and frozen and classic cocktails.

"Nashville is the capital of a good time in the U.S. After the pandemic, it's the Roaring Twenties again," said Porter, who expects a busy summer season. "Everyone is excited to be alive right now."

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The best sites for staying up to date with foreign coronavirus regulations

On Mondays at 2 p.m., the Travel section staff hosts Talk About Travel, an online forum for reader questions and comments. The following is an edited excerpt from recent discussions.

Q: What are the best sources of information on foreign covid regulations for U.S. travelers?

A: For the most current and comprehensive information on European Union countries, check the Re-open EU website (reopen.europa.eu), which is run by the E.U., and the State Department (state.gov), which provides links to covid-related FAQs compiled by its embassies and consulates. Country and city tourism offices are also invaluable, especially during the planning stage. For a broader scope, travel companies and organizations have created interactive maps for the entire world, such as Sherpa (apply.joinsherpa.com), the International Air Transport Association (iata.org) and Kayak

(kayak.com), the online travel agency. — *Andrea Sachs*

Q: I know many airlines have eased penalties for cancellations, but what about canceling an award flight? Do they charge to repost points after canceling?

A: In the past, airlines have charged redeposit fees for canceled award tickets. But like other fees, they were relaxed during the pandemic. It really depends on the carrier and the circumstances. — *Christopher Elliott*

Q: Is travel to Iceland in July or August a realistic option? Is it likely to be overrun with tourists and what's the best way to travel around and the best spots to hit on a seven- or 10-day trip?

A: Do you mean July or August 2022? No one knows what's going to happen in a year's time, but travel experts anticipate a busy summer in Europe, since 2021 didn't turn out as anticipated. If variants don't interfere with

reopenings and travel, Iceland could very well be crowded next summer. The most efficient way to travel around the country is to follow the 825-mile Ring Road. It's an amazing circuit; I have driven a portion of it. Icelandair has some great packages. — *A.S.*

Q: We're thinking of traveling to London the week after Christmas. Is it a good time to go? Will the weather be okay and is there a lot to do, especially for our 13-year-old?

A: The weather is iffy that time of year, but there's plenty to do for you and your daughter. As an added benefit, it's the offseason, so hotel and vacation rental rates should be affordable. — *C.E.*

Q: Do you have any recommendations besides Airbnb and Vrbo for renting a flat in London? We're looking for a two- or three-bedroom rental for about 10 to 14 days next summer.

A: Check out Plum Guide (plumguide.com) or HomeLike (thehomelike.com). Avoid unregulated sites like Facebook groups and Craigslist. You don't want to get scammed. — *A.S.*

Q: Will the proposed improvements to Amtrak actually have any benefits to us regular train travelers? Is Amtrak seeing increased traveling these days like the airlines and airports are?

A: Yes, ridership appears to be up for all modes of transportation, including rail. But based on experience, it's doubtful that the money the government is throwing at Amtrak will make much of a difference. This is not Europe. — *C.E.*

Q: I live in the D.C. area and am finding that my usual go-to Delaware beaches are booked through, in some cases, October. What are the workarounds for procrastinators who still hope to

get in some beach time this summer?

A: Have you tried the Outer Banks, especially the southern area? (Ocracoke Island is my favorite beach destination.) I imagine some people might cancel last minute, so check back on rentals often. You can also stay in, say, Dover and drive to the beach. Not as fun but at least you will get your ocean fix. — *A.S.*

Q: We (two couples) had planned a Canadian Rockies trip for June 2020 and would like to rebook for next year, before we all get too old to hike. When do you think we should make our reservations?

A: I would wait until Canada reopens. Then you can book. — *C.E.*

Q: We're going to Europe next July for between 10 and 14 days. We're going to a wedding in Amsterdam, but would like to visit a couple of other countries

or cities. We love everything including food, cities and nature, but we don't want to spend all of our time in transit. Do you have any recommendations?

A: If you can catch a river cruise from Amsterdam, I think that would be my number-one choice. Maybe a Viking cruise down the Rhine and Danube. It's a great time of year. — *C.E.*

Q: I'm vaccinated and planning a trip to Italy in mid- to late October, but right now the American embassy is discouraging tourist visits there. Is there any cancellation insurance out there that would allow me to purchase a ticket and then cancel/reschedule if the situation doesn't improve over the next couple of months?

A: Yes, you can get a cancel for any reason insurance policy. It's a little more expensive than a standard "named perils" policy — it costs about 10 to 12 percent of the cost of your trip. — *C.E.*

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