

Introduction

It was something the amusing travel writer Bill Bryson wrote about America's iconic curbside lodges that inspired me to want to stay in one. "I love everything about motels. I can't help myself. I still get excited every time I slip a key into a motel room door and fling it open", he says in his 1998 book *Notes from a Big Country*. I wanted to know what he found so exciting.

I'd always been intrigued by motels but until this point, I'd never considered checking in to one. Growing up in England, my only references were of them as seedy dives I'd seen on screen in three of my favourite films, Alfred Hitchcock's 1960 classic *Psycho*, Ridley Scott's 1991 *Thelma & Louise*, and Quentin Tarantino's 1994 *Pulp Fiction*, and more recently 2015 TV comedy series, *Schitt's Creek*. They fascinated me as much for their edginess as they did as symbols of freedom and anonymity, but mostly for their wood-panelled interiors and buzzing neon signs; so much cooler than the average chintzy British bed and breakfast.

Shortly after reading Bryson's book, I took off on my first USA road trip spending four weeks driving around California, Nevada and Arizona – one I couldn't have afforded had I not stayed in motels. Aside from ticking off big-ticket sights in each state, half the fun for me was to pull off the road at the end of each day, check into a motel and fling open the door – the whimsical Madonna Inn on California's Central Coast being a highlight (see page 28). Whenever I go on a USA road trip, I always make a point of staying in a motel, returning to the Madonna Inn when I can.

As I found out recently, not much remains of the world's first motel that opened nearby in San Luis Obispo, in 1925, exactly half-way between Los Angeles and San Francisco. The Milestone Mo-Tel was designed and opened by Chicagoan architect, Arthur Heineman, who accidentally coined the term 'motel' in the process – the nineteen-letter 'Milestone Motor Hotel' name was too long for his rooftop sign, apparently. It set a new standard in roadside accommodation catering to the growing trend in auto tourism, offering luxurious rooms with private garages, hot showers and laundry facilities.



It marked the beginning of an industry that boomed after the Second World War when motels opened in the thousands. By the mid-1960s, over 60,000 dotted America's roads until air travel took off and the Interstate Highway System was introduced, diverting away from these charming standalone spots that started fading into history, unable to compete with franchised motels near Interstate exits. By the 1970s and 80s, many were either abandoned, demolished or had become seedy settings for crime.

Fast-forward a hundred years, however, and America's historic motels are witnessing a renaissance, a trend that began a decade ago and shows no signs of slowing. Some retain their original features like dazzling neon signs and kidney-shaped swimming pools that tell the story of their historic heyday, while others have been intentionally reimaged featuring polished contemporary interiors and chef-driven restaurants. From along California's celebrated Pacific Coast Highway and the legendary Route 66, into the folds of New York's Catskill Mountains and coastal cities of the Deep South, we've picked out forty of the best motels around the United States.



The Pacific Motel

Cayucos
California

[THEPACIFICMOTEL.COM](http://thepacificmotel.com)

A block from the mighty Pacific Ocean, the aptly named The Pacific Motel not only promises peace and tranquillity mid iconic Highway 1 road trip, but also brings you to Cayucos, a relatively over-looked spot five minutes' drive from the college city of San Luis Obispo, home to the Madonna Inn (see page 28). Often nicknamed 'California's last great beach town', it's a blissfully underdeveloped haven locals like to keep a secret with a traditional wooden pier, cool vintage shops and quaint bistros, and stunning coastal scenery.



Those not lucky enough to be staying are welcome to explore the main building alive with hand-carved pine masterpieces by a Bavarian woodworker called Alexander Zeller, from Munich in Germany, also known as Mr Chips for the piles of woodchips he amassed when he worked. This is also where one of the Madonna Inn's most talked-about features is to be found: a urinal in the shape of a rock waterfall in the men's lobby bathroom. Other highlights are the European-style bakery serving shiveringly sweet slabs of its famous pink champagne cake, the paraphernalia-laden gift shop and Alex Madonna's Gold Rush Steak House. Nowhere is pink more celebrated than at this elaborate evening restaurant with curved leather-clad booths, gilded accents, crystal chandeliers, floral carpets and a hand-carved marble balustrade from nearby Hearst Castle, America's largest and most opulent home.



It won't come as a surprise that the Madonna Inn has featured as the backdrop to fashion shoots, music videos, TV programmes and films galore. Yet despite its fame, this colourful, creative love letter to Americana remains a traditional, independent business run by the Madonna family. Although Alex Madonna passed away in 2004, his legacy lives on through the inn's enduring popularity and the unique experience it offers.

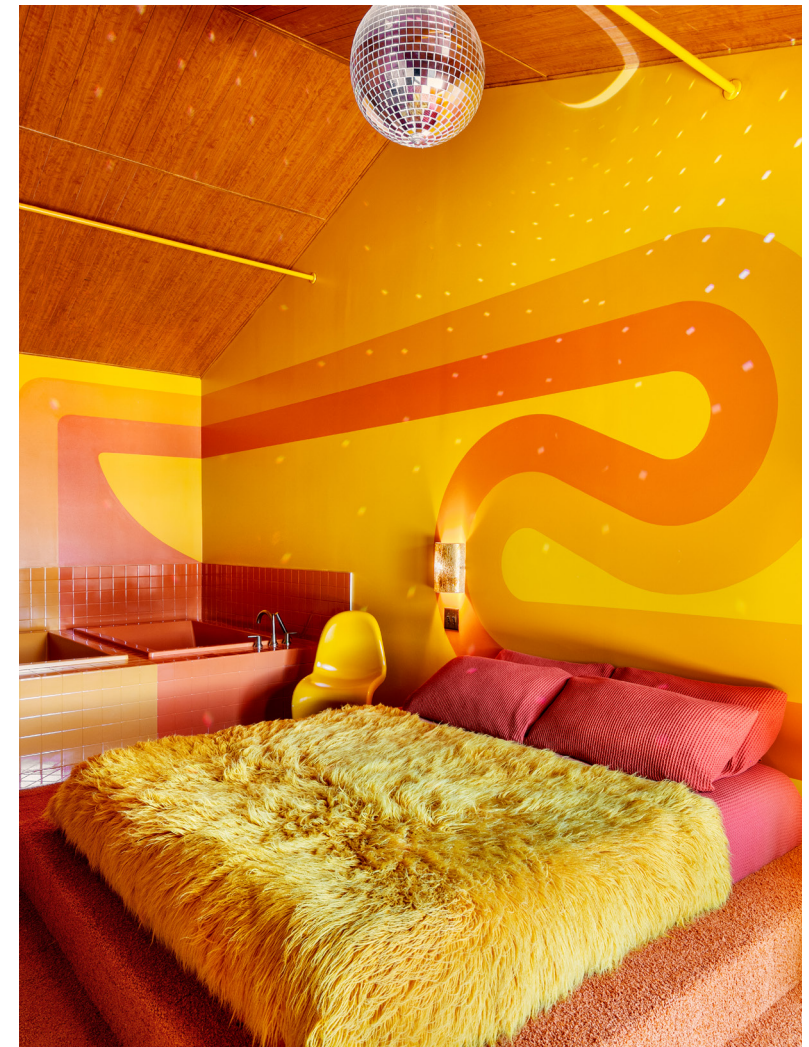


The Pearl

Point Loma
California

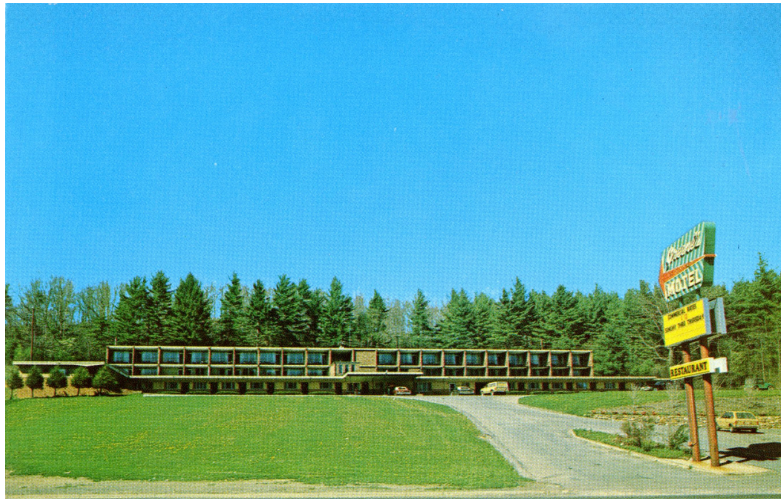
THEPEARLSD.COM

West of downtown San Diego, on the rugged Point Loma peninsula, is the laid-back coastal Point Loma neighbourhood, home to this beautifully reimagined, nostalgia-inducing historic motel complete with a gleaming neon sign, a perfect tribute to its relaxed surroundings. Looking at its perfectly preserved, mid-century modern façade, you'd be forgiven for thinking you'd arrived in Palm Springs, the sun-drenched California haven of desert cities, famous for its communities of 1950s and 60s low-slung architecture.



In 2019, hoteliers behind Brooklyn’s successful Urban Cowboy Hotel, Lyon Porter and Jersey Banks, bought The Key after decades of neglect, refurbished it and opened it as The Dive Motel and Swim Club, triggering a wave of development in an otherwise sketchy neighbourhood. It’s a location befitting of and inspiration for The Dive’s seedy 1970s motel theme, with its maximalist retro-style decor designed around furnishings of the era like shag carpet and reclaimed objects, such as vintage radios and wallpapers sourced at various vintage fairs.

Immersion into the world of The Dive starts after check-in with a walk through its world-famous Dive Bar – the only route to rooms – a wood-paneled space with a huge gold disco ball, old diner-style booths, bar stools, vintage lighting and a mirror behind the bar that once belonged to musician Hank Williams Jr. – which features the picture of a naked lady on her side.



It was constructed in 1957 by the Greene family who opened it as Greene's Court, renamed it Greene's Motel, expanded it in the 1960s and ran it until 1972. Over the following decades it fell into disrepair until a local hospitality group, LODEN Properties – behind The Longleaf in Raleigh (see page 186) – converted it into a modern boutique hotel.

Despite its lack of paint, all the conveniences of an old-school motor inn are still in place albeit with a modern twist: there are fifty-four rooms split across two levels with drive-up parking, a modern restaurant serving homespun classics and easy access to the area's famous Blue Ridge Mountains, dotted with small villages and towns and criss-crossed with hiking and mountain biking trails.







Every original building footprint and exterior wall has been retained and historic elements creatively reused, most notably the 1950s floor tiles once throughout, which now form the countertop at Eddie's, the seasonal oyster bar named after the late Eddie Jurzenia. The surrounding landscape has been restored with more than 13,000 native plants including milkweed and Autumn Joy sedum to create a biodiverse coastal habitat that supports osprey, egrets and a colony of purple martins maintained in collaboration with the North Fork Audubon Society.

Accommodations include twenty motel rooms, eight beach shacks, two two-bedroom bungalows designed by Alexander Perros, to blend mid-century charm with modern flair, and two larger beach houses designed by his wife Anna Perros. Plato's is bright and textural, with a palette inspired by the North Fork's unique light and character. Casa de Buddy embraces the daring energy of the 1970s, with bold colours, vintage pieces and playful irreverence that reflect the house's legacy as a setting for fashion shoots.

