

Amid the pandemic, motels stage a major comeback

Motels, those oft-neglected one-story destinations typically spurned by affluent travelers, are having an upswing.

They can thank covid-19. Road trippers and travelers seeking to avoid elevators, crowds and everything else that comes along with fancy hotels are now turning to motels, which haven't been this popular in decades.

Motels are typically one- to two-story properties with exterior corridors and parking lots in proximity to the 12 to 35 guest room doors, said Jan Freitag, senior vice president of Lodging Insights for the data and analytics firm STR. These properties allow guests to avoid contact with others: They typically don't feature elevators, nor do they have large common spaces, so guests have a sense of control over their environment, she said.

It's been a perfect storm of traveling issues resulting in a boom for the motel industry, essentially saving it from extinction.

Occupancy rates in early May for luxury hotels was less than 15 percent, while economy occupancy was 40 percent, according to McKinsey & Company. (Motels are nearly always economy-class properties, Freitag says.)

And the fancier, more kitschy motels in desired locations such as Door County, Wis., or Upstate New York? They're sold out.

At the Landing Resort — which looks like a motel but is technically a condo association in Door County — a “No vacancies” sign hangs proudly outside the entrance.

“We had a record July,” says Rachel Schartner, the general manager.

At Mellow Moon Lodge in Del Norte, Colo., where the lobby is closed for the foreseeable future and check-in is mobile, occupancy is up 243 percent, says Jessica Lovelace, owner of the lodge.

It's a far cry from recent years. According to the book [“No Vacancy: The Rise, Demise and Reprise of America's Motels,”](#) there were just 16,000 motels in 2012, compared with 61,000 in 1964. And as the hotels got fancier and lowered their rates, the motels continued to shutter.

“The word ‘motel’ had a bad rep for a while, but covid has reminded us all that a motel is, at basic definition, roadside lodging, allowing travelers to access their rooms without having to rub elbows or share common spaces with others,” said Nicole Dahl, creative director and general manager of Hotel McCoy, a motel created in 2018 out of an old roadside motor lodge in Tucson.

The motel boom started as soon as covid-19 arrived, and leisure travel immediately declined, said John Manderfeld, member of the Independent Lodging Industry Association's board of directors and

president of Marin Management, which owns and manages about 27 hotels.

But while leisure travelers halted their vacations, essential workers — truckers, doctors and construction, maintenance, food-processing, agriculture and government workers — didn't stop traveling.

"These types of workers were always more likely to use budget-style hotels," Manderfeld said.

Almost all group business was canceled or postponed. So, for example, a 70-room Comfort Inn lost a little of its business, but a 400-room Marriott lost almost all of its business. So now the Comfort Inn has a much higher occupancy rate, Manderfeld explained.

There's another factor. The larger hotels that remained open (or reopened) didn't reopen their spas, fitness centers, indoor dining rooms, swimming pools and other amenities.

"Yet these larger hotels have been trying to keep their room rates almost as high as before," Manderfeld said. "So travelers are asking, why should I pay \$400 per night to get the same services that I get for \$100 per night at a smaller hotel?"

Or at a motel?

Add to that the fact that the majority of people who resumed leisure travel are sticking to road trips rather than fly-in destinations — and foreign travelers are much more likely to stay at larger hotels than at small motels and hotels.

"Motels are benefiting from a snowball effect that is taking place right now," said Jeff Rosenblum, a marketing strategist with more than two decades of experience in the travel industry and co-founder of Questus, a digital advertising agency. "There is more interest in road trips, which is creating more content on social and traditional media about road trips, which is ultimately creating more people interested in road trips."

AAA predicts 683 million road trips from July to September this year. While this is a 3 percent decrease from last year (AAA would normally project 857 million trips for summer 2020), it's a great number compared with other forms of travel. AAA projects that rail, cruises and bus travel will decrease by 86 percent.

Motels had decreased in popularity in recent years because hotels became such a destination in and of themselves: People went on vacations simply to enjoy the amenities at the hotels at all budget ranges. The combination of affordable air travel and improved hotels made motels less appealing, but covid-19 changed this, Rosenblum said.

"Millions of travelers are flocking to motels and thoroughly enjoying the experience," he said.

Lynsie Zona, a law clerk in Chandler, Ariz., chose to stay at Hotel McCoy (a motel) during the pandemic after driving by it frequently and studying its social media posts about safety precautions.

"The motel layout in itself knocks out a lot of the risks," she said.

Once her cabin fever hit its breaking point, she and her husband booked a room, disregarding their nagging worry that what they loved about travel would be too complicated to enjoy at a motel.

But this wasn't the case, she said, explaining that they still appreciated fancy breakfasts delivered to their room, and local craft beer — from a social distance.

And they were surprised by how much they enjoyed their stay.

“There's something about staying in a motel that feels familiar, even if motel stays weren't a part of your childhood vacations,” Zona said.

“Right now, amid all this uncertainty, I think there's a natural instinct to find something familiar that reminds you of a more carefree time, even if you only experienced that time through a book or movie.”

Many people visiting motels may have been inspired by “Schitt's Creek,” the Netflix series with impeccable timing — managing to zoom in on life in a motel just when motels were hitting their covid-19 stride. If you want to stay in the Rosebud Motel, made infamous on the show, you're up Schitt's Creek — but there are plenty of motels that look just like that one, if you can get a reservation.

In the short term, motels should continue to see an influx of travelers looking to minimize their contact with others and exposure to common spaces, Freitag said.

There's also that nostalgic aspect that appears to be slipping into our lives, bringing us everything from drive-in movies to homemade bread.

“The prospect of staying in a motel is capturing the zeitgeist of a public captivated by a fantasy of simpler times,” says Daniel Levine, director of the Avant-Guide Institute, a global trends consultancy. “Of course, whether those trends will outlast the current environment remains to be seen.”

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