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Frontier Schooners to Flying Saucers

Arizona Motel Imagery

by Douglas C. Towne

Imagine a road lined with the architecture of your Western dreams – log cabins, wigwams, hogans, missions, forts, and haciendas. Interspersed among these historical structures are establishments with alluring names like Bali Hi, Lazy A, Rose Bowl, Old Faithful, Kon Tiki, Montezuma, and Coconut Grove. Perhaps a theme park or World's Fair? No, this unique world was formerly a roadside strip in Phoenix, AZ, overflowing with an eclectic conglomeration of Mom-and-Pop motels catering to almost any visiting motorist's whim or fancy.



It was in Sunbelt areas such as Arizona where this cottage motel industry reached a pinnacle in the 1950s, whether measured in terms of numbers or creative chutzpah. Popular as both a tourist destination and highway stopover, Arizona was fertile ground for motel construction. This was particularly true in Phoenix, where four major highways — Interstates 60, 70, 80, and 89 — met to form a roadside strip that earned the city the unofficial moniker “Motel Capital of the World.” Many travelers encountering this spectacle in the Valley of the Sun for the first time must have wondered why they ever vacationed elsewhere!

Roadside strips such as this one in Phoenix were an American fantasy where, with a little imagination, one could stay almost anywhere and everywhere. Motel signs featuring exuberant colors, varied shapes, and animated figures mirrored the optimism that energized the country after World War II. Advertising was fueled by “liquid fire,” reams of multicolor neon tubing that decorated signs and outlined structures. Using these beacons, countless entrepreneurs created motels with unique atmospheres in which middle-class America could comfortably and conveniently experience a taste of other worlds without dealing with the complexities and risks of the real McCoy. Travelers flocked enthusiastically to these accommodations perhaps because, as author Vladimir Nabokov commented in his risqué 1955 novel, *Lolita*, “Nothing is more exhilarating than philistine vulgarity.”

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Unfortunately, most of these motels have long since vanished from the Arizona landscape. Their only remnant might be a clump of unkempt palm trees casting shadows across a vacant lot.

Despite this trend there remain some stalwart Mom-and-Pop motels that have bucked changing trends in the lodging industry. A few well-kept establishments even manage to look more impressive than the day of their construction, improved by the patina of their age. Others, their allure all but vanished, struggle in a state of

perpetual disrepair, catering to a rough and transient population looking for cheap weekly rates. Many motels lie between these extremes, serving travelers looking for a bargain or perhaps in search of retro charm.

The classic Arizona motels that survive are a valuable historical resource. The aesthetic appeal of their design is important, especially since motels are a distinctly American phenomenon and advertising is considered by some to be this country's purest art form. Motel themes, which reflect and enhance a sense of place, are also a worthwhile means to

understanding a region's distinctive character. Exploration of these themes provides insight into popular culture in Arizona during the exciting pre-interstate age of auto travel in which these little monuments to individual initiative and creativity were built.

Regional Themes

Visitors to Arizona often made the journey because of the mild climate; thus the sun was a powerful image used to symbolize the state. Examples of this theme are found on motel signs throughout Arizona, such as the yellow sunbursts outlining the letters in the Sun Villa Motel sign in Phoenix, the fiery-red neon lighting the Sun Land Motel sign in Mesa, and the cool-blue rising sun of the El Sol Motel in Tucson. Sun imagery was undoubtedly an effective advertising tool for winter snowbirds flocking to the Grand Canyon State from frigid climates.

In contrast, scorching summertime temperatures required different themes to lure customers. An oasis theme was commonly employed, often symbolized by a female diver. One such neon swimmer can be found at Phoenix's Horseshoe Motel, but the quintessential Arizona "aquamaid" performs in Mesa at the Starlite Motel. Here, a neon sign spelling out "MOTEL" and stretches toward the heavens, which serves as the stage from which an animated lady named Rose captivates onlookers nightly with flawless

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swan dives. Leaping from the top of the sign, this buxom blonde descends in a series of three animated figures until diving into a splash of blue neon!

What would a trip to Arizona be without cowboys and Indians, two icons of the West? Motel imagery made liberal use of these themes, though not always in an accurate manner. Wranglers were frequent inanimate barkers enlisted to entice tourists, such as the talented cowpoke whose giant lasso forms the sign's boundaries at the Circle RB Guest Lodge in Mesa. Other establishments such as the Brandin' Iron Motel on Route 66 in Kingman, the Boots and Saddle Motel in Casa Grande, and the Corral Motel in Springerville have ranch themes but the actual wrangler is no where to be seen.

Native Americans have seen their tribes and customs interwoven and sometimes imported from far-off regions for maximum effect on motel signs. Sometimes the inaccuracy is simply in naming a lodging after a well-known tribe such as the Navajo Motel in Phoenix or the Apache Lodge in Prescott, in lieu of lesser-known local tribes. A more complex and humorous Indian faux pas is the Kiva Motel in Mesa. The name is a Hopi word denoting a ceremonial structure and, along with the vacancy sign in the form of a clay pot, better reflects Northern Arizona. But the accompanying imagery of a Native American chief wearing a full headdress apparently hitched a ride down Highway 60 from the Midwest. Even a whiff of Native American culture apparently helped draw in motel guests. Many encountering the *Se-Tay Motel* in Casa Grande, located near the Tohono O'odham Reservation, often think it's an exotic Indian greeting. In actuality, the name is the original owners of the motel — Yates — spelled backward!

The charm of Old Mexico — replete with siestas, sombreros, and saguaros — is another popular attraction for visitors. The allure is often added simply by the use of Spanish words in the motel's name, such as with the *Vista Del Sol Motel* and the *El Sahuaro Motel* in Tucson. Another establishment in the Old Pueblo, the *La Siesta Motel*, went for the whole enchilada by featuring the stereotypical image of two slumbering figures in huge sombreros beneath a giant cactus to reinforce its South of the Border atmosphere.

Mining is a popular Arizona theme, whether it's the romantic image of a solitary prospector searching for riches or the more pragmatic economic influence copper production has had on the state. The prospector theme is evident at the El Rey Motel in the mining town of Globe, as well as the Lost Dutchman Motel in Chandler, the latter evoking the famous tale of a lost gold mine in the Superstition Moun-



tains. A more animated critter forever linked to miners is found at the Burro Jim Motel in Aguila on Highway 60. Flicking his ears and swishing his tail, this neon beast of burden is quite talented at getting approaching motorists to notice the motel's name he totes on his bedroll. Celebrating the role of copper in Arizona's development, establishments named the Copper State Motel are found in the widely separated communities of Ash Fork and Mesa.

A nostalgic trip to the past is also often used to attract attention to the roadside. These include 19th century themes such as the Frontier Motel in Mesa and Tucson, or the more visually complex Western Hills Motel on Route 66 in Flagstaff. The sign for the latter features a bi-colored prairie schooner pulled by two teams of crimson horses, an attractive neon image necessary to catch the eye of the modern-day traveler who moves at a considerably faster rate than this horse-drawn wagon could ever muster! Themes of 20th-century vintage are also popular, evidenced at the El Capitan Lodge in Mesa. Here, a military figure of "El Capitan" enjoys a cocktail in a South Seas setting as what appears to be a World War II era Lockheed Hudson maritime bomber passes overhead. This piston-engine plane is passe compared to what's airborne at the Space Age Lodge in Gila Bend. Since 1963, a flying saucer has hovered over this motel, situated in an isolated desert town that is the perfect locale for a UFO



Gila Bend



Flagstaff

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Tucson



siting! A recent remodeling has unfortunately eliminated much of the details, including the Sputnik satellite-like geodesic domes that were perched along the roof, but one covering the pool pump or “Moon House” is extant.

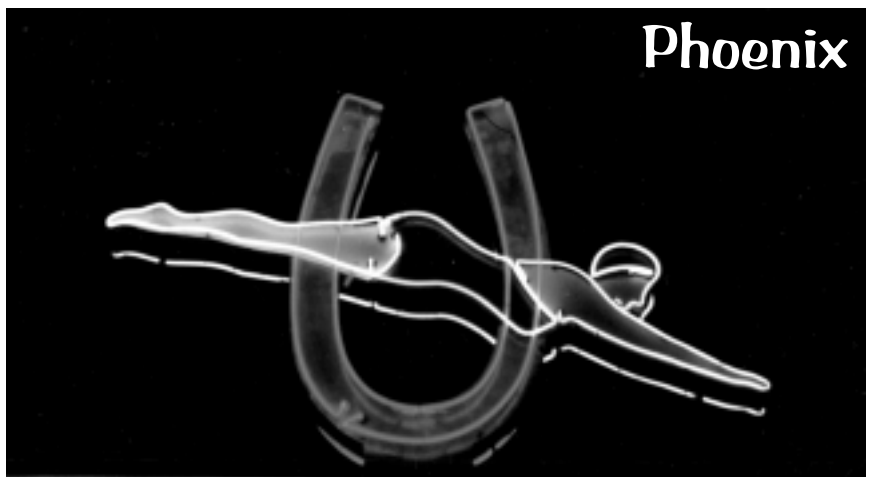
Reflections on Motel Themes

In the post World War II years when many of these mom and pop motels were constructed, there was an oft-repeated phrase that Arizona’s economy ran on the 4 C’s: cattle (cowboy), climate, copper, and citrus (farming). Of these, only citrus was not well represented in the images used to entice tourists into overnight stays. Even the more unusual citrus orchards were deemed not distinctly “Western enough” to draw in travelers, so its imagery is not in evidence. Native American and Mexican themes, which apparently provided the exotic atmosphere sought by tourists, were also popular. Although divided into categories for the purpose of this article, many motel advertisements were an amalgamation of multiple themes that accurately mirror the mosaic of actual Arizona life.

These classic motel images represent Arizona well, though valid arguments have been made that the signs sometimes used popularized images imported from other regions and stereotyped ethnic groups, while happily overlooking the complexity of the images. While acknowledging these weaknesses, it must be remembered that an escape to a motel was designed to be a passageway to an exciting and different place, a break from everyday reality. These sometimes wildly inventive conglomerations of diverse images facilitated this transition. It is also helpful to regard these motels with a sense of humor, much as how the Wigwam Motel in Holbrook is viewed by many nearby Native Americans. The motel’s units, which imitate the shelters used by Native Americans of the Great Plains, are clearly not representative of the local Navajo tribe. Yet, the motel’s owner note with pride that the establishment is a favorite overnight stop for Navajos. Apparently few are immune from the fun of sleeping in a concrete teepee!

Mom-and-Pop motels continue to influence modern development trends and appear to be the precursor to the current incarnation of Las Vegas as a global theme park. The casinos have appropriated the imagery often used by classic motels and constructed them on a much grander scale. Although more elaborate and sophisticated than their predecessors, these casinos lack their personalized touch and more whimsical assets.

Perhaps the most worrisome aspect of these independently owned motels are their rapidly declining numbers. Motel chains, in which travelers are able to locate the same branded and standardized product worldwide, now dominate the lodging industry. The quirky digs of classic motels have largely been supplanted by bland corporate accommodations.



The motel experience has been sanitized for public consumption, but a sense of place has been lost in the process. The effect of uniformity on society has not gone unnoticed by those in other fields. Historian Arnold Toynbee wrote, “Civilizations in decline are consistently characterized by a tendency toward standardization and uniformity. Conversely, during the growth stage of civilization, the tendency is toward differentiation and diversity.” These are heady thoughts indeed, when some of us only hope the funky charm of these motels don’t become just another roadside memory. ●

