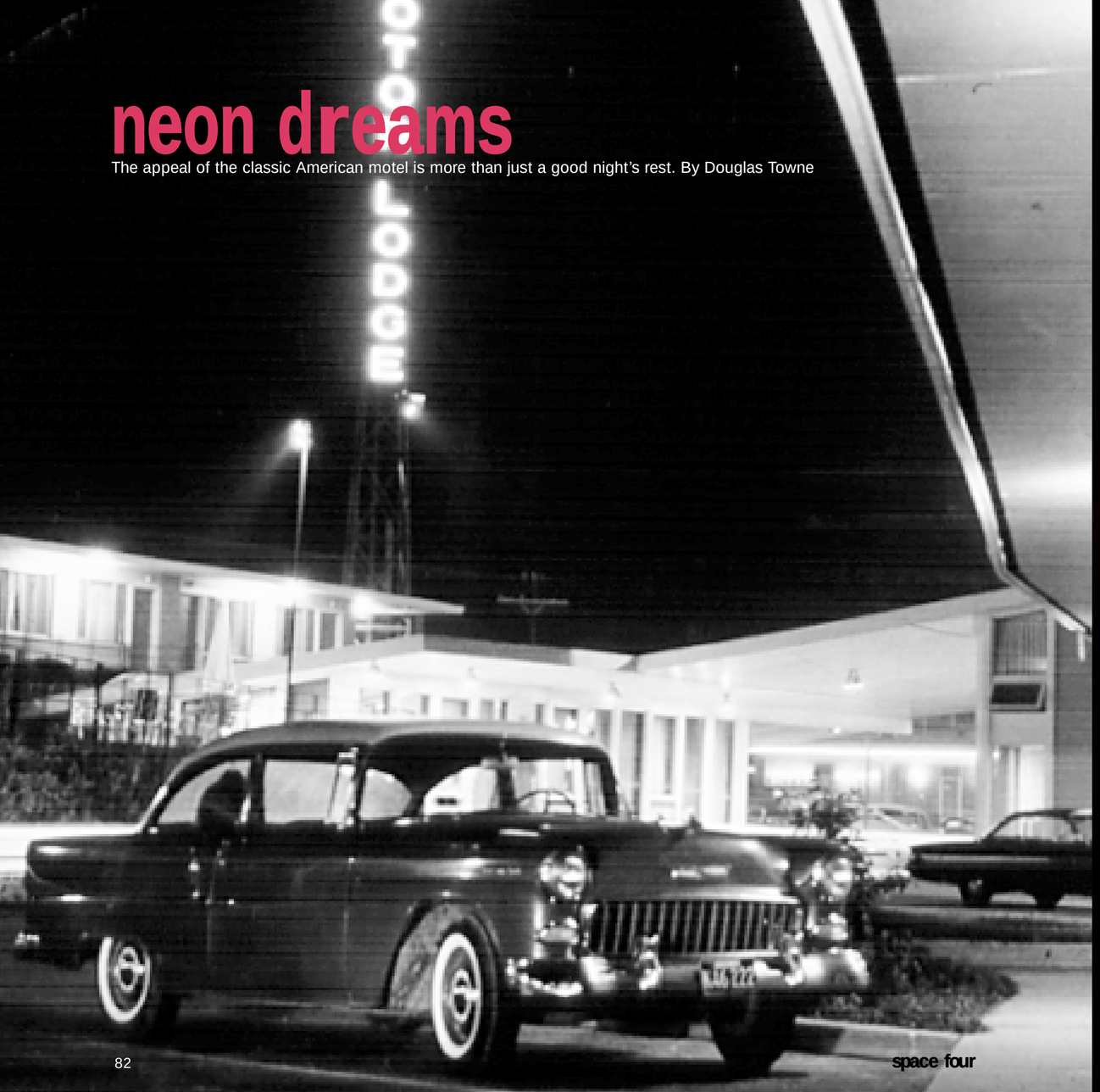
# neon dreams

The appeal of the classic American motel is more than just a good night's rest. By Douglas Towne





Beacons in the night: The friendly glow of a colorful neon "vacancy" sign meant a long-anticipated break would be fast approaching for the road-weary motorist. All the modern amenities—swimming pools, telephones, color TV—were just a few steps away from your personal room-front parking spot

To the weary motorist, the glowing “vacancy” sign of a classic motel is Americana at its most alluring. Only a sense of humor at registration is required to turn an overnight stay in a fake wigwam, log cabin or Polynesian tiki hut into a fun-filled experience. And the drawing power of animated neon figures—voluptuous blonde damsels executing impeccable swan dives and cowboys performing clever rope tricks with golden lassos—is sure to make guests feel not only adventurous, but a little larger than life themselves.

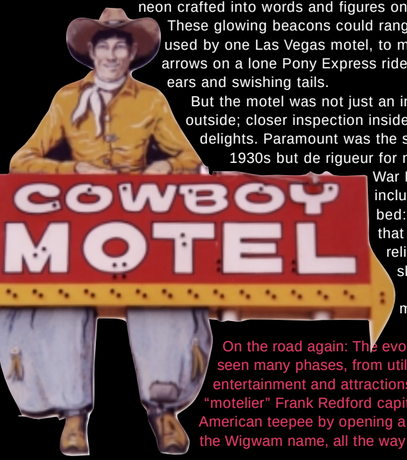
Constructed from the 1930s onwards, these so-called mom-and-pop motels developed from the demand for improved overnight lodging by a nation madly in love with nascent auto travel. When the first intrepid trekkers hit the roads, there was no Motel 6 or Holiday Inn, but in the 1920s, motorists could stay at auto camps, which consisted of tents or cabins grouped around a common bathroom area, and tourist homes, where people would rent out spare bedrooms in their houses.

The motel’s predecessor—the motor or tourist court—appeared in the late 1920s as motorists sought greater privacy. Although they offered similar amenities, motor courts tended to feature individual cottages separated by landscaping or garages, while motels typically had adjoining, or later stacked, units. Both provided the trademark parking space conveniently located in front of your room. By the 1940s, the undisputed lodging choice of a nation on the move was not the dated “court” but the more modern sounding “motel”.

The essential aim of motel design was to catch the eye of the road-weary speeding motorist—often with a humorous combination of architecture, signs and features. Some motels used refurbished wine casks and boxcars as rooms, but more often the buildings imitated historical residences like Spanish missions, English bungalows and Navajo hogans. As architecture became more standardized throughout the 1940s, establishments attracted guests with endless streams of neon crafted into words and figures on gargantuan roadside signs. These glowing beacons could range from the twirling blue angel used by one Las Vegas motel, to mounted Indian warriors raining arrows on a lone Pony Express rider, or playful burros with flicking ears and swishing tails.

But the motel was not just an inviting establishment from the outside; closer inspection inside revealed a treasure trove of delights. Paramount was the swimming pool, rare in the 1930s but de rigueur for motels constructed after World War II. Quirkier motel amenities later included the infamous Magic Fingers bed: the coin-operated massager that promised motel guests rapid relief from “tension, fatigue and sleeplessness”.

By the middle of the century, motels had evolved from mere




On the road again: The evolution of the American motel has seen many phases, from utilitarian comfort, to resort-style entertainment and attractions, to fun-filled kitsch. Pioneering “motelier” Frank Redford capitalized on his love of the Native American teepee by opening a chain of establishments under the Wigwam name, all the way from California to Kentucky


detour

**Motels soon earned a reputation as the venues of choice for couples seeking a discreet afternoon or evening rendezvous**

space four

space four


Postcards from the edge: once a quick and easy way to send a message from the road, now the epitome of retro cool

accommodation to being an intrinsic part of American culture. Yet despite being apparently upstanding establishments run by proprietors of strong moral fiber, with a Bible in each room courtesy of the Gideons, motels soon earned a reputation as the venues of choice for couples seeking a discreet afternoon or evening rendezvous. Even more scandalous were the motels characterized as “dens of vice and corruption”. In a 1940 magazine article published under J. Edgar Hoover’s name, America’s head G-man labeled motels as “...not only hideouts and meeting places, but actual bases of operation from which gangs of desperadoes prey upon surrounding territories.” Some of these stigmas prevail today, fed by motels that advertise “hourly rates” or that cater to the seamier side of today’s transient population.

Yet many motels have retained that image of wholesome reliability. Since the 1960s, the industry has been dominated by corporate giants emphasizing standardization and dependability. Most new motels built since then have been chain or franchise operations constructed along interstate highways, near airports and in downtown areas. Travelers have enthusiastically embraced these chains, which offer convenient amenities and relief from some of the uncertainties of the road. The 1975 Holiday Inn advertising jingle, “the best surprise is no surprise,” must resonate with anyone who has ever spent a sleepless night in an uncomfortable room, and highway travelers will undoubtedly continue to pull into a Days Inn or Econo Lodge for the foreseeable future, expecting and receiving no-nonsense, comfortable accommodation.

For those interested in a little adventure though, there remains the classic American motel. Nostalgia attracts some, for these roadside havens are windows to a less harried past, when chatting with gas-station attendants was a common facet of cross-country travel. For others, the allure of these quirky, sometimes garish establishments is perhaps the perfect expression of the fun of being on the open road. ■

*For a list of excellent books written on the subject of motels turn to* resources *on page 96.*

## CLASSIC MOTELS FOR A CLASSIC ROAD TRIP

Make your next journey down the two-lane blacktop more of an adventure and book a nostalgic stay off the beaten path at one of these hallmarks of vintage American motel design

Anselman’s Butterfield Stage Motel, 309 W. Pine, Deming, New Mexico (505-544-0011) The beacon drawing motorists to this roadside motel is a team of galloping steeds hauling a wildly careening stagecoach—all in glorious animated neon.

Austin Motel, 1220 S. Congress Ave., Austin, Texas (512-441-1157) www.austinmotel.com Dottie Dean’s motel not only regularly receives Austin’s “best motel” award, but its neon crimson sign is also proudly heralded as that city’s “best phallic symbol”.

Coral Sands Motel, 709 E. 9th Street, Ocean City, New Jersey (609-399-4540) This classic surfside motel in the Wildwood area of New Jersey is known for the “impossible” (i.e. fake) palm trees that “grow” gracefully along its deck!

El Vado Motel, 2500 Central S.W., Albuquerque, New Mexico (505-243-4594) Located where Route 66 meets the Rio Grande, this business comes full circle in the quirky way that only a classic motel can. Run by the Kassam family of Indian (Asian) descent, the eye-catching neon sign features an Indian (Native American) wearing a uniquely stylized headdress.

Wigwam Motel & Curios, 811 W. Hopi Drive, Holbrook, Arizona (520-524-3048) Yes, you can actually still “sleep in a wigwam!” Owned by the Lewis family since its construction in 1950, this is one of three survivors of a chain of seven motels built by businessman Frank Redford. Each well-appointed wigwam is equipped with the motel’s original hickory-wood furniture.

Wigwam Motel, 2738 W. Foothill Boulevard, Rialto, California (909-875-3005) This last motel in Frank Redford’s Wigwam chain was built along Route 66 near Los Angeles in 1953. The kitschy marquee often displays the legend, “Do it in a teepee!”

Wigwam Village, 601 N. Dixie Highway, Cave City, Kentucky (502-773-3381) Constructed by Redford in 1935 to capitalize on the nearby Mammoth Caves, this particular Wigwam motel follows the roadside marketing credo, “Make something large, outrageous and unforgettable!”

Sandman Motel, 1755 E. 4th Street, Reno, Nevada (775-322-0385) José and Dolores Machado operate this motel that features an art deco neon sign topped by a cherry-red jalopy with animated wheels that spin all through the night!