



The DRIVE-IN

PIN-UPS



Words/Delle Chan → Photography/Brian Flaherty

Motels are coming back into fashion, and nowhere more so than San Francisco. We checked into the best retro revivals

A neon “VACANCY” sign along a busy motorway, glowing like a beacon for weary travellers: the motel is quintessential Americana, a symbol of the classic cross-country road trip. Or at least, it was.

The first Mo-Tel was opened (and the portmanteau of “motor hotel” coined) in San Luis Obispo, California, in 1925, and booming car ownership after WWII meant there were thousands of them by the 1950s. Typically located near motorways, they provided convenient, no-frills lodgings in low-rise buildings with parking and utilitarian rooms – and at a low price point that helped to democratise travel.

“Motels represented freedom, both in a physical sense as well as in terms of upward mobility,” explains Deanna Ting, senior hospitality editor at travel industry source Skift, suggesting that they embodied the optimism and opportunity of the post-war years.

Over the following decades, however, motels faded from public consciousness – often driven out by bigger, snazzier chain hotels. It didn’t help that they developed a reputation as hotbeds of crime. Fugitives capitalised on their affordability and anonymity, reflected in movies from *Thelma & Louise* to *Five Easy Pieces*, not to mention *Psycho*. By the 1990s, many of them stood empty and forgotten, relics of the golden age of car travel.

Fast-forward to today and many defunct motels are undergoing a renaissance, as hoteliers marry their retro charms with modern conveniences. This is particularly true in California, the capital of US car culture, where their distinctive architecture and intriguing backstories offer an antidote to bland, cookie-cutter hotels. “Consumers value experience and choice, and increasingly, they want to be able to stay in more authentic accommodation,” says Ting. “Hoteliers are seeing the value of keeping buildings with history, and using that history to tell a story.”

From David Bowie’s favourite hang-out in San Francisco’s Tenderloin district to a drug den turned hipster pad in Santa Rosa, we hit the highway for a comeback tour of some vintage hideaways... »



From above ✓
The stairs leading up to the Phoenix's rooms; its original sign still stands; rooms have been enlivened with rock 'n' roll elements, and there's a turntable in the lobby; the pool at the Phoenix is an oasis on a sunny day



The Rock Star Favourite

Neil Young stayed here while recording *Déjà Vu* in 1969; decades later, David Bowie and the Red Hot Chili Peppers stopped by while on tour. And when Kurt Cobain died, he even had a note in his pocket scrawled on the hotel's stationery. Welcome to The Phoenix, a veritable magnet for rock 'n' roll royalty.

"The Phoenix has always been a beloved rest stop for bands because it has parking that can hold a tour bus. Plus, it's near the city's most important music venues," explains hotelier Liz Lambert. "It became this legendary place over the years, where the gritty Tenderloin became the backdrop for the rock 'n' roll scene travelling through town."

Built in 1956 as the Caravan Lodge, the motel fell into disrepair in the 1970s, but it first rose from the

ashes as The Phoenix in 1987. Last year, Lambert's Bunkhouse Group – the hospitality team behind other born-again properties, including the uber-hip Austin Motel in Texas – took it over for a second, slicker makeover.

Despite the recent refurb, the hotel nevertheless stays true to its DNA. "We wanted to acknowledge its roots and elevate the legend that it is," shares Lambert. "For instance, I've always loved tube lighting, and there was something that seemed really rock 'n' roll about using a bare bulb with a pull chain above the bed."

In the same vein, the wood-panelled lobby is inspired by a 1970s recording studio, complete with turntable, while the motel's original sign still blazes "Hotel – Restaurant – Cocktails" in night-time neon.

"Travellers are looking for a hotel that tells them the story of a place and leaves them with a sense of having been somewhere," says Lambert. "We want to carve out a little bit of soul in San Francisco."

phoenixsf.com



"We want to carve out a bit of soul in San Francisco"

DESIGN NOTES

Most motels in California were built in the 1950s and '60s, when the Mid-Century Modern design movement was in vogue - think clean, organic lines and curves accentuated by bright pops of colour, such as teal and mustard. In-room facilities might have included colour TV for a fee - or, in honeymoon suites, hot tubs and coin-operated Magic Fingers vibrating beds.



Architectural styles varied from early Art Deco examples to the space-age inspired "Googie", a retro-futurist style with building shapes that owed much to spaceships and jets, and signage that was often accompanied by cartoonish stars and planets.



Today, many rebooted motels pay homage to their roots with brightly coloured exteriors, a Wes Anderson-like attention to period detail and poolsides brightened with Adirondack chairs and the odd inflatable flamingo, (but, sadly, not many vibrating beds).



From top left: The Astro's rocket-ship sign comes complete with spinning satellite; rooms feature furniture sourced from auctions nationwide; the orange-and-teal colour scheme was dreamt up by Santa Rosa artist Sheryl Chapman; general manager Lisa Robbins



The Hipster Pad

"We're probably the coolest thing in Santa Rosa right now," laughs Lisa Robbins, manager of The Astro - and she's probably spot on. Set in the urban centre of Sonoma County, around an hour's drive from San Francisco, The Astro is a whimsical retro-modern motel that's been the talk of the town ever since it opened in January 2018.

Not long ago, that idea would have been truly laughable. Built in 1962, it was one of several Astro motels in a planned nationwide chain. When that venture failed to take off, it deteriorated into a seedy pay-by-the-hour motel.

Luckily, it's scrubbed up pretty well, thanks to the team behind popular neighbourhood restaurant The Spinster Sisters, who spent US\$10 million resurrecting the property. Today, the 34 rooms are decked out with authentic Mid-Century pieces procured from auctions nationwide - from Eames tables to Mario Sabo lounge chairs (all of which are for sale, to the delight of guests).

Bespoke touches come courtesy of local artists: Evan Shively carved headboards from native wood, while Todd Barricklow designed the LED rocket-ship sign. Even mini-bar treats are sourced from Sonoma producers. "We support local businesses where possible," Robbins declares.

Community ethos is front and centre at The Astro, from its olive and clementine trees, the fruits of which are harvested for The Spinster Sisters, to its fleet of shiny Shinola bikes, which encourage guests to explore the SoFa neighbourhood. "It's a fun, artsy district filled with a lot of makers and doers, but it's often overlooked," says Robbins. "Our mission is to help revive this colourful corner of Santa Rosa."

theastro.com



The Design Classic

San Fran's first-ever motel, Ocean Park opened its doors back in 1937. Eight decades on, not very much has changed. While it has undergone several cosmetic tweaks throughout the years, its Art Deco bones have been meticulously preserved and it still stands as a shining example of Streamline Moderne architecture, flaunting its curves with unabashed pride.

The motel is a labour of love for second-generation owners Marc and Vicki Duffett, who inherited it from the latter's father in 1975. "Back then, we both had no idea how to run a motel," Marc chuckles. "We were living hand-to-mouth for a while, but we took it one day at a time, transforming the place little by little."

Over the years, the Duffetts have made several upgrades to the property, repainting the walls and installing an outdoor hot tub, all the while retaining the original footprint of the building.

Today, while its nostalgic charm is a major draw, the Duffetts say its main USP is the human touch. "We build relationships with our customers and many of them keep coming back," shares Marc. "The care we put into running our motel - it's what we do best."

This authenticity has helped Ocean Park hold its own against bigger chain hotels throughout the decades. "In the 40-plus years we've been here, we've seen the city change so much. But our motel has a long history, and that's what has kept us going," Marc reflects. "At the end of the day, we're just a small mom-and-pop business. It's a model that works for us. It's wonderful to preserve our little piece of San Francisco." oceanparkmotel.com



"The care we put into running our motel - it's what we do best"



Clockwise from left: Ocean Park's smooth curves typify Streamline Moderne architecture; its rooms look much the same as they did decades ago; the motel's neon sign advertises its hot tub, which was installed in the 1980s; second-generation owner Marc Duffett



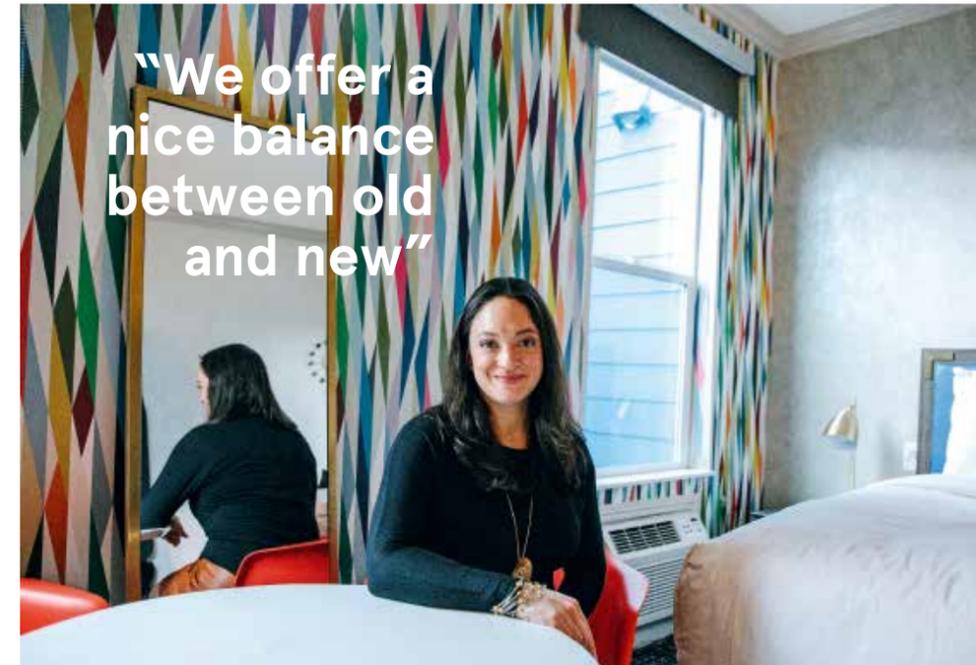
From top
The motel's striking cyan façade stands out amid its surroundings; rooms at Signature San Francisco are inspired by Mid-Century Modern design

The Ironic Chain Hotel

Motels were once rendered obsolete by chain hotels, so there's no small amount of irony that underpins Signature San Francisco – the first property in RLH Corporation's Signature franchise.

"It's ironic for sure, but it's also indicative of the market," says Amanda Marcello, senior vice president of brand strategy at RLH Corporation. "With the Signature franchise, we're able to help owners of older properties reposition their offerings through branding and design. We give them the opportunity to move from catering to the budget traveller to capturing a wider audience."

Formerly a dated motel called City Center Inn & Suites, the property was remodelled as Signature San Francisco in July 2018. RLH Corporation kept its original three-storey footprint while overhauling the guest rooms and common areas. The new-look motel takes its cues from the Mid-Century Modern »



"We offer a nice balance between old and new"

From top
Amanda Marcello is the senior vice president of brand strategy at RLH Corporation; the Signature's logo is suitably retro; the motel's small but functional lobby



PHOTOS: NICK SIMONITE, TROY CAMPBELL, THE GOODLAND

design movement: its façade is a striking shade of cyan, while rooms are kitted out with period-inspired furnishings such as scarlet Tulip chairs and gold lamps. "Everything, from colours and finishes to shapes, was selected through that particular design lens," explains Marcello, but there are plenty of mod cons – from speedy WiFi and flat-screen TVs to coffee machines.

"A lot of guests see Signature San Francisco as a way to revisit the past but at the same time, they don't want to feel like they're stuck in a time warp," Marcello says, concluding: "We offer them a nice balance between the old and the new."

redlion.com/ca/san-francisco/signature-san-francisco
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Three more new US motels



Austin Motel AUSTIN

This hip reboot of a 1930s motel still features its distinctive neon sign, which designer Liz Lambert was determined to preserve, as well as an all-day taco menu, full moon swims and burlesque bingo. austinnotel.com



Vagabond Hotel MIAMI

Once favoured by Frank Sinatra's Rat Pack, the new Vagabond mixes luxe interiors with original MiMo (Miami Modern) architecture, right down to the tiled mermaid mosaic in its pool. thevagabondhotelmiami.com



Kimpton Goodland LA

Two hours from LAX, this 1960s Holiday Inn in Goleta has been reincarnated as a breezy hideaway, complete with boho-chic aesthetic and vintage Airstream van. thegoodland.com

