

Motel America

By Andrew F. Wood and Jenny L. Wood
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Reviewed by Douglas Towne

Several pages into *Motel America*, I found myself reminiscing of a night spent in the oil town of Hobbs, New Mexico. Weary from a long day on the road, I searched for the most appealing “Mom and Pop” accommodation, eventually selecting the Western Holiday Motel. After registering with Ed Nelson, the elderly owner/manager, I spied an unlabeled photograph of a battleship on the wall. Checking the hull number I asked, “Is that the USS Iowa?”

An hour quickly passed as Ed relayed tales of his time aboard the dreadnaught. Before heading off to my room, I thanked him for the conversation. Turning to wave while departing the office, I wondered how many overnight guests Ed had entertained with his sea adventures. More than any fantastic neon sign, this encounter reminded me of the best characteristics of owner-operated motels.

The book also brought to mind another overnight stay, this time at a motel in Camden, New Jersey. On the internet, it seemed an amazing bargain compared to downtown Philadelphia hotels. Upon arrival, I encountered a different reality.

Entering the lobby, I checked in through a bulletproof, mirrored-glass partition. The unseen proprietors warned of the dangerous neighborhood but failed, however, to convey the peril elicited in merely heading to my room. Offers of various substances and services came from fellow lodgers loitering in the hallway. Once inside my room, I locked the door and gave no thought to whether the mattress was firm or the hot water worked. Instead, I unfurled my Swiss Army knife and proceeded to check the closet, shower, and under the bed to confirm I was the room’s lone occupant. All I found was a used condom.

Such is the dichotomy of Mom and Pop motels as we enter the 21st century.

These contrasting elements are perhaps best captured in print by Andy and Jenny Wood in their recent book, *Motel America*. At first glance, this seems simply like a “fun” roadside book. Subtitled, *A State-By-State Tour Guide to Nostalgic Stopovers*, the cover features a 1950s era rendering of a sleepy family checking into a quaint motor court. Opening the publication, one is greeted with an explosion of colors. No boring white pages here—five different hues alternate though the book. Each state is allotted a two-page spread (matching the format of Andy’s earlier book, *Roadside America*) containing illustrations and impressions of select motels encountered by the Woods.

The illustrations immediately seize the eye. They consist of vintage motel and roadside items along with Jenny’s photography. The memorabilia collection is truly amazing; I can picture the Woods cajoling motel clerks to check that back closet just one more time for an old ashtray. Jenny’s professional photos are wonderfully diverse. Often featuring the motel sign, she also includes images of architectural features, motel owners, and a few “artistic” compositions to boot.

Scanning the book’s images, one gets the impression that all is well with independent roadside lodges in America. Unfortunately, the text often tells a different story.

The Woods describe many classic motels that would be the vacation highlight for many SCA members. There are uplifting tales of couples bringing motels back to their former glory, of travelers inspired to poetry about their accommodations, of motel rooms in Colorado and Vermont from which you can enjoy a drive-in movie. Yet all too often, the Woods stumble upon a roadside relic only to offer the following advice: “Drop by but don’t stay long” or “You’ll find little space age wonder left”.

The sad realization is that many vintage motels haven’t responded to the increasing market segment represented by SCA members and others seeking retro roadside experiences. Often in tough neighborhoods

or run down, their clientele consists of down-and-out travelers and residents. Their transformation from flop house to alternative tourist lodgings seems unlikely. While retaining some classic features, the amenities one hopes for from a motel typically leave something to be desired.

An impressive book, I found *Motel America* hard to categorize. Rife with excellent recommendations, yet not really a motel guide. Full of insightful roadside observations, yet not really a scholarly analysis. Brimming with attractive images, yet not really a coffee table book.

What is *Motel America* then? While sitting at the computer with my hands on the keyboard contemplating this question, serendipity intervened. Amazingly, the author's voice wafted across the airwaves. Andy was interviewed by National Public Radio before a long holiday weekend. Asked to provide listeners with unusual places to stay on vacation, Andy waxed eloquently about the legendary Blue Swallow Motel on Route 66. The book's function became obvious. Packed with roadside eye candy, *Motel America* is a well-executed paean by kindred spirits. Though tremendously interesting to the converted, its larger goal is to convert the casually interested. More power to the Woods since a "No Vacancy" sign is a vintage motel's best hope to thrive in the 21st century for the enjoyment of all.

A longtime roadside aficionado, Douglas Towne's motel photography was most recently featured in the May-June 2004 issue of *Nevada Magazine*. His vintage motel recommendations, as well as a poster comprising over 50 Southwestern neon motel signs, can be found at www.neonmotel.com