

appears to have been Askins' Cottage Camp built in 1901 in Douglas, Arizona), but they were all called something else—*auto court*, *cottage court*, *hotel court*, *tour-o-tel*, *auto hotel*, *bungalow court*, *cabin court*, *tourist camp*, *tourist court*, *trav-o-tel*. For a long time it looked like *tourist court* would become the standard designation for an overnight stopping place. It wasn't until about 1950 that *motel* achieved generic status.

I know all this because I have just been reading a book on the history of the motel in America called *The Motel in America*. Written by three academics, it is a ponderously heavy piece of work, full of sentences like "The needs of both consumers and purveyors of lodging strongly influenced the development of organized systems of distribution," but I bought it and devoured it anyway because I love everything about motels.

I can't help myself. I still get excited every time I slip a key into a motel room door and fling it open. It is just one of those things—airline food is another—that I get excited about and should know better.

The golden age of motels was also, as it happens, the golden age of me—the 1950s—and I suppose that's what accounts for my fascination. For anyone who didn't travel around America by car in the 1950s, it is almost impossible now to imagine how thrilling they were. For one thing, the national chains like Holiday Inn and Ramada barely existed then. As late as 1962, 98 percent of motels were individually owned, so each one had its own character.

Essentially they were of two types. The first type was the good ones. These nearly always had a welcoming, cottagey air. Typically, they were built around a generous lawn with shady trees and a flower bed decorated with a wagon wheel painted white. (The owners, for some reason, generally liked to paint all their rocks white, too, and array them along the edge of the drive.) Often they had a swimming pool or swings. Sometimes they had a gift shop or coffee shop, too.

Indoors they offered measures of comfort and elegance that would have the whole family cooing—thick carpet,



ROOM SERVICE

Something I have long wanted to do is visit the Motel Inn in San Luis Obispo, California.

On the face of it, this might seem an odd quest since the Motel Inn is not, by all accounts, a particularly prepossessing establishment. Built in 1925 in the Spanish colonial style much beloved by restaurant owners, Zorro, and almost no one else, it sits in the shadow of a busy elevated freeway amid a cluster of gas stations, fast-food outlets, and other, more modern motor inns.

Once, however, it was a famous stopping place on the coastal highway between Los Angeles and San Francisco. A Pasadena architect named Arthur Heineman gave it its exuberant style, but his most inspired legacy lies in the name he chose for it. Playing around with the words *motor* and *hotel*, he dubbed it a *mo-tel*, hyphenating the word to emphasize its novelty.

America already had lots of motels by then (the very first

purring air conditioner, a big TV, nightstand with a telephone and a built-in radio, gleaming bathroom, sometimes a dressing area, Vibro-matic beds, which gave you a massage for a quarter.

The second kind of motels consisted of the appalling ones. We always stayed at these. My father, who was one of history's great cheapskates, was of the view that there was no point in spending money on . . . well, on anything really, and certainly not on anything that you were mostly going to be asleep in.

In consequence, we generally camped in motel rooms where the beds sagged as if they had last been occupied by a horse and the cooling system was an open window and where you could generally count on being awakened in the night by a piercing shriek, the sound of splintering furniture, and a female voice pleading, "Put the gun down, Vinnie. I'll do anything you say." I don't wish to suggest that these experiences left me scarred and irrationally embittered, but I can clearly remember watching Janet Leigh being hacked up in the Bates Motel in *Psycho* and thinking, "At least she got a shower curtain."

All of this, even at its worst, gave highway travel a kind of exhilarating unpredictability. You never knew what quality of comfort you would find at the end of the day, what sort of small pleasures might be offered. It gave road trips a piquancy that the homogenized refinements of the modern age cannot match.

That changed very quickly with the rise of motel chains. Holiday Inn, for example, went from 79 outlets in 1958 to almost 1,500 in less than twenty years. Today just five chains account for one-third of all the motel rooms in America. Travelers these days evidently don't want uncertainty in their lives. They want to stay in the same place, eat the same food, watch the same TV wherever they go.

Recently, while driving from Washington, D.C., to New England with my own family, I tried explaining all this to my children and got the idea that we should stop for the night at

an old-fashioned family-run establishment. Everyone thought this was an immensely stupid idea, but I insisted that it would be a great experience.

Well, we looked everywhere. We passed scores of motels, but they were all franchised to national chains. Eventually, after perhaps ninety minutes of futile hunting, I pulled off the interstate for the seventh or eighth time and—lo!—there shining out of the darkness was the Sleepy Hollow Motel, a perfect 1950s sort of place.

"There's a Comfort Inn across the street," one of my children pointed out.

"We don't want a Comfort Inn, Jimmy," I explained, temporarily forgetting in my excitement that I don't have a child named Jimmy. "We want a *real* motel."

My wife, being English, insisted on having a look at the room. It was awful, of course. The furnishings were battered and bare. The room was so cold you could see your breath. There was a shower curtain, but it hung by just three rings.

"It's got character," I insisted.

"It's got nits," said my wife. "We'll be across the road at the Comfort Inn."

In disbelief, I watched them troop out.

"You'll stay, won't you, Jimmy?" I said, but even he left without a backward glance.

I stood there for about fifteen seconds, then switched off the light, returned the key, and went across to the Comfort Inn. It was bland and characterless and just like every Comfort Inn I had ever stayed in. But it was clean, the TV worked, and, it must be said, the shower curtain was very nice.



HIGHWAY DIVERSIONS

My father, who like all dads sometimes seemed to be practicing for a World's Most Boring Man competition, used to have the habit, when I was a boy, of identifying and commenting on the state of origin of all the other cars on any highway we happened to be traveling along.

"Hey, there's another one from Oregon," he would say. "That's three this morning." Or: "Hey, Mississippi. Now what do you suppose he's doing way up here?" Then he would look around hopefully to see if anyone wanted to elaborate or offer speculation, but no one ever did. He could go on like that all day, and sometimes did.

I once wrote a book called *The Lost Continent* in which my father featured for his many interesting and unusual talents when behind the wheel—the uncircling ability to get lost in any community larger than, say, a small golf course; to pay repeated inadvertent visits to a set of tollbooths on a bridge to some distant offshore archipelago; to drive the wrong way

down a one-way street so many times that eventually merchants would come and watch from their doorways. One of my teenaged children recently read that book for the first time and came with it into the kitchen where my wife was cooking and said in a tone of amazed discovery, "But this is *Dad*," meaning, of course, me.

I have to admit it. I have become my father. I even read license plates, though my particular interest is the slogans—"Land of Lincoln" for Illinois, "Vacationland" for Maine, the zippily inane "Shore Thing" for New Jersey. I enjoy making quips and comments on these, so when, for instance, we see "You've Got a Friend in Pennsylvania," I like to turn to the other passengers and say in a wounded tone, "Then why doesn't he call?" However, I am the only one who finds this an amusing way to pass a long journey.

It's interesting—well, perhaps not interesting exactly, but certainly a fact—that many states append slogans that are pretty well meaningless. I have never understood what Ohio was thinking when it called itself the "Buckeye State" or Indiana the "Hoosier State," and I haven't the remotest idea what New York means by dubbing itself the "Empire State." As far as I am aware, New York's many undoubted glories do not include overseas possessions.

Still, I can't criticize because I live in the state with the most demented of all license plate slogans, the strange and pugnacious "Live Free or Die." Perhaps I take these things too literally, but I really don't like driving around with an explicit written vow to expire if things don't go right. Frankly, I would prefer something a little more equivocal and less terminal—"Live Free or Pout" perhaps, or maybe "Live Free or Bitch Mightily to Anyone Who'll Listen."

All this is a somewhat circuitous way of introducing our important topic—namely, how boring it is to make a long car journey these days. If you have been following this space closely (and if not, why not?) you will recall that last week I discussed how we recently drove from New Hampshire to Ohio in order to deliver my eldest son to a university that had

offered to house and educate him for the next four years in return for a sum of money not unadjacent to the cost of a moon launch.

What I didn't tell you then, because I didn't want to upset you on my first week back from vacation, is what a nightmare experience it was. Now please understand, I am as fond of my wife and children as the next man, no matter how much they cost me per annum in footwear and Nintendo games (which is, frankly, a lot), but that isn't to say that I wish to pass a week with them ever again in a sealed metal chamber on an American highway.

The trouble is not my family, I hasten to add, but the American highway. Boy, are highways dull. Part of the problem is that they are so very long—it is 850 miles from New Hampshire to central Ohio and, I can now personally attest, just as far back—but mostly it is because there is so little to get excited about along the way.

It didn't used to be like this. When I was a boy, the highways of America were scattered with diversions. They weren't always very good diversions, but that didn't matter at all. What mattered was that they were there.

At some point on every day, you could count on seeing a billboard that would say something like: "Visit World-Famous Atomic Rock—It Really Glows!" A few miles farther on there would be another billboard saying: "See the Rock That Has Baffled Science! Only 65 Miles!" This one would have a picture of a grave-looking scientist with a cartoon bubble beside his head confiding: "It Is Truly a Marvel of Nature!" or "I Am Quite Baffled!"

A few miles beyond that would be: "Experience the Atomic Rock Force Field—*If You Dare!* Just 44 Miles!" This one would show a man, interestingly not unlike one's own father, being violently flung back by some strange radiant force. In smaller letters would be the warning: "Caution: May Not Be Suitable for Small Children."

Well, that would be it. My big brother and sister, squeezed in to the backseat with me and having exhausted all the possi-

bilities for diversion that came with holding me down and drawing vivid geometric patterns on my face, arms, and stomach with a felt marking pen, would set up a clamor to see this world-famous attraction, and I would weakly chime in.

The people who put up these billboards were brilliant, among the greatest marketing geniuses of our age. They knew precisely—to the mile, I would guess—how long it would take a careful of children to wear down a father's profound and inevitable opposition to visiting something that was going to waste time and cost money. The upshot, in any case, is that we always went.

The world-famous Atomic Rock would of course be nothing like the advertised attraction. It would be almost comically smaller than illustrated and wouldn't glow at all. It would be fenced off, ostensibly for the safety of onlookers, and the fence would be covered with warnings saying: "Caution: Dangerous Force Field! Approach No Farther!" But there would always be some kid who would crawl under the fence and go up and touch it, indeed clamber all over it, without being flung aside or suffering any other evident consequences. As a rule, my extravagant felt-pen tattoos would draw more interest from the crowd.

So in exasperation my father would pile us all back into the car vowing never to be duped like this again, and we would drive on until, some hours later, we would pass a billboard that said: "Visit World-Famous Singing Sands! Only 97 Miles!" and the cycle would start again.

Out west, in really boring states like Nebraska and Kansas, people could put up signs saying pretty much anything—"See the Dead Cow! Hours of Fun for the Whole Family!" or "Plank of Wood! Just 132 Miles!" Over the years, I recall, we visited a dinosaur footprint, a painted desert, a petrified frog, a hole in the ground that claimed to be the world's deepest well, and a house made entirely of beer bottles. In fact, from some of our vacations that is all I can remember.

These things were always disappointing, but that wasn't the point. You weren't paying seventy-five cents for the expe-

rience. You were paying seventy-five cents as a kind of tribute, a thanks to the imaginative person who had helped you to pass 127 miles of uneventful highway in a state of genuine excitement, and, in my case, without being drawn on. My father never understood this. Now, I regret to say, my children don't understand it either. On this trip as we drove across Pennsylvania, a state so ludicrously vast that it takes a whole day to traverse, we passed a sign that said: "Visit World-Famous Roadside America! Just 79 Miles!"

I had no idea what Roadside America was, and it wasn't even on our route, but I insisted that we make a detour to go there. These things simply don't exist any longer. Nowadays the most exciting thing you can hope to get along the highway is a McDonald's Happy Meal. So something like Roadside America, whatever it might be, is to be devoutly cherished. The great irony is that I was the only one in the car, and by a considerable margin, who wanted to see it.

Roadside America turned out to be a large model railway, with little towns and tunnels, farms with miniature cows and sheep, and lots of trains going around in endless circles. It was a little dusty and ill-lit but charming in a not-touched-since-1957 sort of way. We were the only customers that day, possibly the only customers for many days. I loved it.

"Isn't this great?" I said to my youngest daughter.

"Dad, you are, like, *so* pathetic," she said sadly and went out.

I turned hopefully to her little brother, but he just shook his head and followed.

I was disappointed, naturally, that they weren't moved by the experience. But I think I know what to do next time. I'll hold them down for two hours beforehand and draw all over them with a felt marking pen. Then, believe me, they'll appreciate any kind of highway diversion.