



On The Road Again: The ‘Post-Pandemic’ Glamping and Roadside Motel Mashup

As Boundaries Blur in the Casual Get-Away Lodging Market, Who Will Be Poised To Win?



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The indie roadside motel trend and the glamping trend have been evolving over the past 10 to 15 years.

With early innovators like Liz Lambert’s Hotel San Jose and Neil Dipaola’s AutoCamp, the low barrier to entry and opportunities for creative license have continued to draw independently minded entrepreneurs with a creative bent into this hospitality model, and the market has responded. The pandemic getaway accelerated the mashup of these trends. It’s a real dust-up out on the road and a hotbed of innovation in this challenging era.

The final season of the popular TV series "Schitt's Creek" aired just after the first U.S. pandemic lockdown in spring 2020, and in a poignant twist, family patriarch Johnny Rose makes his pitch to a New York investment group about his new vision for Rosebud Motels:

“I always saw motels as a last resort, a dreaded pit stop. But I was wrong. Motels have the potential of offering a window into the unique charm of small-town life. And that's exactly what the Rosebud Motel Group plans to do. Open that window and revitalize the classic roadside motel for a new generation.”



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That first pandemic spring found many of us on Zoom calls with top hospitality tracking and forecasting firms, reviewing graphs that were sobering. Would there be a U- or K-shaped recovery? Would a vaccine show up? Was recovery really four years away? What did it all mean for travel, for our businesses and for our lives? Turns out, a lot.

As Americans hit the road for drivable getaways and embraced remote work, we saw a huge spike in travel to areas near national parks, the mountains, and coasts and beach-side destinations. We saw volume, and rates, spike for campgrounds and the small motels and hotels which serve these locations, in fact everywhere beyond the city gates.

While it seems logical in hindsight, it was unclear at the time that this growth would be so significant (or outlast summer). While boutique and soft-brand concepts were a solid juggernaut of innovation in hospitality development leading up to the pandemic, those assets tended to be concentrated in primary and secondary semi-urban markets and often faced the same pandemic-related challenges as their branded brethren.

While the old adage “location, location, location” still rings true, our 2020 refrain seemed to be “anyplace but here,” and roadside motels and glamping were in the right place at the right time to take advantage. Our team has delivered hospitality design and brand strategy for over three decades, and in 2020 we saw our project mix pivot rapidly from semi-urban boutique and lifestyle hotels to a diverse mix of innovative motel conversions and glamping developments outside the city. How did we get here?

Contemporary roadside motels and the glamping destinations often compete in the same space. Both elevate traditional lodging types and entice guests with a curated high-touch experience that is unexpected in traditional limited service properties.

The Rise of the Motel

Motel conversion projects have steadily expanded as a typology with hip (sometimes) one-off projects from coast to coast. Places like Jupiter Portland (2004), Goodland Santa Barbara (2013), Brentwood Hotel in the Hudson Valley (2016) and countless others “opened the window” to a more localized experience while offering chic design and programming. Some of these entrepreneurs grew their network of hotels, drawing investor attention (such as Standard International’s acquisition of a majority interest in Bunkhouse in 2015). Design-conscious roadside motels embraced the role of local social anchor, with music, beverage-driven food and beverage, and creative retail. I’m always pleasantly surprised when I roll into a new town and spot a refashioned motel with spirit. On the surface, what might appear to be a quaint 1930s motor court on a busy highway in Santa Fe, turns out, like the El Rey Court Hotel, to be a bastion of great art, cocktails and curated design.

Glamping's Answer

Glamping was likewise evolving pre-pandemic with incredible diversity. Autocamp expanded in recreational areas with chic Airstream accommodations anchored by a modern lodge, while Under Canvas positioned multiple "safari-lux" developments in proximity to national parks. Light-on-the-land developments like Nomadic Resorts Spirit Zion began taking shape with individual suite sites and a hydroponic lodge in the landscape a mile from Zion National Park.

Nature settings and recreational access helped glamping take advantage of popular wellness sentiments and set the stage for success when 2020 lowered its boom. Elevated guest amenities and comfort pushed glamping into upscale and luxury territory with comfortable bedding, spa-like bathrooms and custom furnishings and fixtures. Trips by flashlight to the showers and restrooms and wood-chopping were out; craft beers, entertainment, personal fire pits and design were in.

The Future

Established investors have been increasing their participation in both motel conversions and glamping in a serious way, and the blur between glamping and motel-conversion is lighting the way for a new traveler mindset. A few current American examples highlight the incredible diversity in this market:

KOA campgrounds launched a new family-friendly glamping brand into the teeth of the pandemic with Terramor — tent cabins with bathrooms, fire-pits and amenities along with a communal lodge with beer, pizza and social activity. Tilting away from the van-life hipster, they cater to the modern family (now Gen Y) looking for a car-accessible quality outpost with access to the great outdoors. When the world's largest system of open-to-public campgrounds enters the market, we're talking about the potential for broad transformation.

LOGE (Live Outdoors Go Explore) has been steadily building a portfolio of repositioned motels across the American West, with adjacency to outdoor recreation, and the brand expresses their ethos with in-room gear-walls and hammocks (hanging over plush beds) — together with a blend of indoor/outdoor social spaces which emphasize post-adventure gathering, practice climbing walls and seasonal outdoor pursuits. New developments include a 10-acre 1960s-era motel conversion in Taos, New Mexico, with a climbing-wall event space, gear lending and check-in at the adventure bar.

Waterton has recently launched a lifestyle brand focused on outdoor leisure markets called Outbound. The brand debuted with the repositioning of the Virginian Lodge, a mid-century motor lodge in Jackson Hole, Wyoming. With subsequent properties opening in Mammoth Lakes, California, and at the South Gate of Yosemite National Park, they're very bullish on this sector.

“Outbound is positioned to capitalize on a few secular trends emerging in the lodging space: the rise of alternative lodging (exterior corridor motels, individual cabins, and glamping), increased interest in outdoor destinations and the growing popularity of lifestyle hotels,” said Matt Mering, executive vice president of hospitality at Waterton. “When we develop a property, it’s really important that each asset has a sense of place and a strong point of view. We achieve this through great design, local partnerships, interesting programming and relevant F&B concepts.”

The Northern Compass Group based in Anchorage, Alaska, has been redeveloping historic natural hot-springs resorts over the past 20 years and has seen tremendous growth in visitor stays since 2020 with wellness and nature as a driver. The group is currently repositioning a mid-century motel in downtown Anchorage which will operate as a lifestyle boutique hotel with a beer-centric restaurant and event space on the starting line of the famous Iditarod race.

As the pandemic slowly drifts into the rear-view mirror, we can see the road ahead is filled with opportunities for innovative hospitality development. The shift to remote working, the great resignation and the embrace of nature have changed our perspective. Creative hosts, entrepreneurs and investors are ready to fill the gap.

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