

Australia's Early Motel Boom

By **SIMON REEVES** Built Heritage Pty Ltd

Golden Sun Motel, 3249 Gold Coast Highway, Surfers Paradise (c. 1962)



Part 2 (continued from last issue)

The establishment of Australia's first modern American-style motel at Bathurst, New South Wales (1954) was swiftly followed by counterparts in the other eastern states: at Surfers Paradise in Queensland (1955), Canberra in the ACT (1956) and Oakleigh in Victoria (1957). This marked the beginning of an intensive boom in local motel construction that would continue for more than a decade. Not surprisingly, the boom was initially concentrated on the nation's eastern side, where the number of high-quality motels

increased phenomenally from just one in 1954, to seven in 1955, thirteen in 1956, twenty-six in 1957, forty-five in 1958, and eighty by the end of 1959.

Many of these boom-era motels were independent developments, while others represented local franchises. American Motels, which had taken over the motel at Bathurst soon after it opened, went on to establish others at Dubbo, Tamworth and Wollongong. The Accommodation Australia (AA) franchise, which had been responsible for Canberra's first motel in 1956, followed suit with others at Albury, Coffs Harbour,

Glen Innes, Goulburn and Gundagai. Not surprisingly, however, it was the Gold Coast that became the country's epicentre for motel development in the late 1950s. Notable examples included the Hi-Ho Motel at Broadbeach (1958), the Jubilee Motel at Southport (1958), and, at Surfer's Paradise, the Californian (1958) and the South Pacific (1959).

The first motel in regional Victoria, which opened in early 1958, was the Mitchell Valley Motel in Bairnsdale. A collaboration between developer David Yencken (later of Merchant Builders fame) and noted

← Melbourne architect John Mockridge, the complex was lauded in the local architectural press for its simple clean modern design, distinguished from many of its counterparts by "its lack of ostentation and eye-catching frippery which seems to be the hallmark of commercial venture". This motel was followed, later that same year, by the first example in inner Melbourne: the Caravilla de Ville in Royal Parade, Parkville. This was designed by local architect Peter Jorgenson, who went on to become a significant motel and hotel design specialist.

The first RACV motel guide, issued in October 1958 as a simple eight-page pamphlet, provides a useful overview of the extent of local motel development to that time. New South Wales led the field with 26 motels across the state – of which only two or three were in the Sydney metropolitan area. There were eighteen motels in Queensland, with four in Surfer's Paradise, two in Coolangatta, and seven more scattered along the coastline between (at Southport, Broadbeach, Mermaid Beach, Burleigh Heads, Currumbin, Tugun and Bilinga). Victoria still had only six motels – those aforementioned two at Oakleigh and Bairnsdale, plus others at Craigieburn, Jamieson, Mildura and Wodonga. By contrast, Tasmania, South Australia and the ACT had only one motel each, while Western Australia was yet to gain its first.

Twelve months later, when the RACV published its second motel guide, motel figures had increased even more significantly. New South Wales still topped the list, with seven motels in Sydney and a staggering 72 others spread across fifty regional centres. Queensland then had forty motels in total; the number of examples in Surfers Paradise had doubled to eight, with three in Coolangatta and another sixteen along the intervening coast. Others, too, had sprouted up in Buderim, Cairns and Clontarf. Victoria still lagged behind with nineteen motels, although the sole metropolitan example at Oakleigh was now complemented by others at Braybrook, Parkville and St Kilda West. The number of motels in regional Victoria had also trebled to fourteen, with new complexes opening at Benalla, Hamilton, Lakes Entrance, Mount Martha, Swan Hill and Warrnambool.

The other states, however, lagged even further behind. At that time, there were only



Chalet Motel, Port Augusta, SA (c. 1964)



seven motels in South Australia, of which about half were in suburban Adelaide and the remainder in Mount Gambier, Murray Bridge and Victoria Harbour. A few more months passed before the first example in central Adelaide – the Travelodge Motel on South Terrace – opened in early 1960. The first motel in Western Australia, the Narrows Motel in the Perth suburb of Como, also opened around the same time. The early 1960s saw even more intense expansion of motels throughout the country. Another motel guidebook, published in October 1963, listed no fewer than 22 motels in the Melbourne metropolitan area, and well over a hundred in regional Victoria.

Architecturally, two parallel streams can be ascertained from the motels that were built during this initial boom period. The first is associated with those built by stary-

eyed entrepreneurs who looked directly to garish counterparts in the USA and, in order to built their own version, turned to local draftsmen or builders rather than with professionally qualified architects. Invariably, the result was a motel in the tradition of the lively and eye-catching Californian commercial architecture often referred to today as "Googie". This style, named after a celebrated coffee shop in Los Angeles designed by John Lautner in 1949, was characterised by the use of deliberately eye-catching elements such as zig-zags, chevrons, sloping glazing, jagged planes, projecting fins and bold feature walls of rough stonework or tiling. Considered most appropriate for roadside commercial buildings, the Googie style became strongly associated in the USA with automotive showrooms, bowling alleys and drive-in restaurants as well as motels.

← In Australia, the Googie style was derided by the Melbourne architect and critic Robin Boyd, who placed it under the category of "Featurism" - a word that he coined in his 1960 book, *The Australian Ugliness*, to describe the dishonest use of applied ornament and the expression of non-structural elements for mere visual effect. Writing a few years later, Boyd reflected on the current fashion for "unfamiliar curvings and twistings" and the style whereby designers "all used a sort of mad professor's geometry to catch the passing eye . . . [and] made shapes for the sake of shocking".

While the Googie style never really became as popular in Australia as it had been in the USA, a number of early local motels can certainly be considered as minor masterpieces of the idiom. This is ably demonstrated by three examples in Victoria that, not coincidentally, were all built by the same developer and, moreover, one who freely admits that he took his inspiration from American motels published in contemporary magazines and monographs. Two of these motels - the former Motel Wangaratta (now Gardenvue Lodge) and the former Motel Warrnambool (now Southern Right Motel) - were more or less identical in design. Each had a freestanding dining room at the front with a distinctive cross-gabled A-frame roof creating an eye-catching pyramidal form - a motif, incidentally, that was clearly derived from the Howard Johnson chain

of motels in the USA. The developer's third motel, the Motel Colac (later the Commodore) was distinguished by a folded plate roof of zigzag form. The distinctive zigzag roof - another textbook Googie motif - also appeared elsewhere in such examples as the Cherry Blossom Motel in Young, NSW (1960), designed by architect Bruce D Brown, and the Zebra Motel in Narrabundah, ACT (1962)

While Googie-style motels tended to be somewhat rare in Victoria, they proliferated in the more tourist-oriented parts of the country, such as Coffs Harbour, and most notably on the Queensland's Gold Coast. The Seabreeze Motel at Surfers Paradise and the Kirriwina Motel at Noosaville both had brightly-coloured spur walls that were penetrated by circular openings of various sizes, which are known in Googie parlance as 'cheeseholes'. The New Orleans Motel at Surfers Paradise and the Reef Motel at North Rockhampton had butterfly roofs - another typical Googie element. The former was further enlivened by a louvred screen of angled fins and a spur wall with the ubiquitous chequerboard pattern. However, it was the famous El Dorado Motel at Surfers Paradise that was one of the most explicitly American-style Googie motels ever built in Australia. The original complex, opened in 1955, included a skillion-roofed office block with louvred screens and abstract murals, and an elevated block with a lively red-and-yellow chequerboard facade that opened onto a

cantilevered sundeck with red-painted metal railing. Renovations, carried out a few years later, included a canted stone feature wall around the swimming pool, and a row of angled beams - a Googie motif known as the 'structural bent' - that formed a porte cochere alongside the office.

Regrettably, few of Australia's early motels in the Googie manner still survive intact today. By its very exuberant nature, the style dated very quickly, and many examples have since been remodelled or demolished. Most of those in Surfers Paradise have long disappeared, with the fabled El Dorado razed as recently as 1988. The aforementioned examples at Warrnambool, Wangaratta, Young and Narrabundah are still standing, but have all been updated to varying degrees. Other Googie motels may still remain intact, yet to be rediscovered, recorded and photographed. The present writer recently encountered two fine surviving examples in Adelaide. The Regal Park Motor Inn, in North Adelaide, is a modest but significantly intact example of the Googie style, with an undulating roof form, pebbled spandrel panels and roof-mounted neon sky-sign. Even more striking is the Sands Motel, on the city's south-eastern edge, which has a canopy made up of a row of concrete shell arches, a billboard-like front wall bearing the motel's name in a distinctive Las Vegas lettering, and an illuminated signpost on the street, with angled posts and clusters of geometric shapes.

At the opposite end of the architectural spectrum from these local Googie motels, however, are those that were designed by professional architects who had been trained in the mainstream modernist tradition. These were perhaps more sophisticated in design, if a little less eye-catching, and were typically expressed as elegant flat-roofed single-storey brick buildings with solid walls or piers that alternated with generous full-height window bays. This approach, along with the ubiquitous enclosed courtyard plan, was pioneered locally by Brian O'Connor in his scheme for the AA Motel at Canberra (1955). It then re-appeared in other motels that the same chain erected at Albury, Goulburn, Coffs Harbour and Glenn Innes (all c.1958), as well as the Caravilla de Ville Motel in Parkville, Victoria (Peter Jorgenson, 1958), the Motel Bali Ha'i at Dubbo (1959), the Prince's Motel at Bega (1960) and countless subsequent examples.





Parkville Travelodge, 539 Royal Parade, Parkville (1960)



Zebra Motel, Jerrabomberra Street, Narrabundah, ACT (c. 1962)

← The AA Motel at Coffs Harbour was otherwise significant in that it was one of the first new motels in Australia to incorporate a partial second storey. Inevitably, the first fully double-storey motels began to appear soon afterwards. One of the first was the Pan American Motel in St Kilda West (Victoria), designed by Bernard Evans & Associates in 1959. Here, the vertical expansion was actually necessitated by a very narrow site – alongside a railway line – so that the motel itself, although spread over two levels, still contained only 20 guest units. Other early double-storey motels were the Motel Capri at Bathurst, the Golden Sands at Forster, the Shoalhaven Motel at Nowra and the South Pacific Motel in Surfers Paradise (all 1959). Some slightly later but especially notable examples, all designed in the slick modernist idiom described above, included the Parkville Travelodge (now Ramada) in Royal Parade, Melbourne (Peter Jorgenson, 1960), the Kar-Rama Motel at Mildura (1962) and the Turn-In Motel at

Warnambool (1962). Miraculously, all three motels still in a substantially intact condition today, and remain vividly evocative of the motel boom of the early 1960s.

By that time, motel design in new directions was heading in new directions. There were quirky variations such as the so-called “boatel” – a lakeside motel where the car-parking bays were replaced by boat moorings – as realised at New Town Bay (Hobart) and Pittwater (Sydney) in 1960. Conventional motels became larger and grander. The ubiquitous double-storey motels were starting to be eclipsed. The Park Royal Motel in Victoria, designed by Theodore Berman in 1962, was one of the country’s first three-storey motels, and the first to incorporate a lift. That same year, Robin Boyd prepared plans for what was described as Melbourne’s first “motor inn” – a striking six-storey block on Queens Road, which effectively ushered in the new era of the high-rise motel.

The involvement of Robin Boyd in the design of motels is testament to the new respectability that the building type had achieved by the early 1960s. He was just one of a number of more prominent and well-known local architects who tried their hand at motel design at least once during the boom period. Amongst the numerous others were Guilford Bell, John Mockridge, Edward Billson, Best Overend and Bernard Evans in Victoria, Kevin J Curtin and Edwards, Madigan & Torzillo in New South Wales, Hayes & Scott in Queensland, Dickson & Platten in South Australia and Esmond Dorney in Tasmania. It is ironic, or perhaps merely fitting, that Robin Boyd – once the most vocal opponent of the Googie style that was manifest in many local motels – would be responsible for the design of what has been described as the most significant motel in Australia.

As the story goes, Boyd had expressed his admiration for the design of the Mitchell Valley Motel at Bairnsdale – to the genuine surprise of the motel’s developer, David Yencken, who promptly commissioned Boyd to design a follow-up: the Black Dolphin Motel at Merimbula. As related by Boyd’s biographer, Geoffrey Serle, the architect set out to “challenge practically everything in design that the established motels stood for”. The resulting building, which opened in Christmas 1960, stood out from all earlier motels with its rough log posts, exposed timber and stripped concrete. It was indeed an eye-catching and bold design – but in a way far removed from its Googie counterparts. The Australian motel, imbued with a new respectability, was here to stay. ■

We thank Simon Reeves for this incredible two-part study of early motels in Australia, and the use of pictures from his personal collection.

Simon Reeves is the principal of Built Heritage Pty Ltd, a Melbourne-based heritage consultancy firm that specialises in twentieth century (and particularly post-Second World War) heritage places. He has spent several years researching the history of motels in Australia, with a view to the eventual publication of a book on the subject. Simon would be pleased to hear from anyone who has special knowledge of Australia's early motel industry, or may possess any photographs, press clippings, magazines, brochures or other memorabilia relating to this. He can be contacted through his website at www.builtheritage.com.au