



South Jersey's Mid-Century Modern Motels, in All Their Neon Glory

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From the 1950s to '70s, hundreds of motels were built in The Wildwoods. Now, in the age of Airbnb, only half of them are still in operation.

The Wildwoods is the collective name for a cluster of small shore towns spread across a five-mile-long barrier island in southern New Jersey. The area first developed into a major summer tourism destination in the 1950s when brothers Lou and Will Morey, inspired by a visit to Miami's South Beach, started building motels on the island. The Jersey Shore destination got another big bump in 1957 with the completion of the Garden State Parkway, which channeled an estimated 350,000 additional cars to the region every year. By 1970, more than 300 new motels had been built in The Wildwoods, many of them owned by the Moreys.

Around half of those motels are still in operation, and they're the subject of native New Jerseyan Tyler Haughey's series, *Ebb Tide*. Haughey grew up near Asbury Park on the northern stretch of New Jersey's long Atlantic coast, so he's familiar with the culture of beach towns that fill up with tourists during the summer and empty out in the winter. "I have a strong connection to that landscape, especially in the off-season when all the tourists leave," he says. "People still live there, but a lot of these places are just kind of forgotten about."

Although he visited The Wildwoods on a family vacation as a child, it wasn't until he was attending college in Philadelphia that Haughey began developing a professional interest in the region. Once it caught his eye, he started making 90-minute drives to The Wildwoods to photograph the area's kitschy, '50s-era motels, all of which were emblazoned with names like Isle of Capri, Monaco, and Caribbean. "Developers like the Moreys named their motels after these far-off destinations that middle-class vacationers may not have been able to reach," Haughey says. The low-rise motels all looked fairly similar, using simple geometric forms and poured concrete construction individualized by tropical paint jobs and bright neon signs.

Many of the motels were at least superficially inspired by Miami's Fontainebleau and Eden Roc hotels, icons of mid-century modernism. The Moreys and other Wildwoods developers democratized the mid-century modern aesthetic by using inexpensive construction techniques to mass-produce motels catering to America's booming middle class. Although mostly ignored

by architecture critics at the time, such styles began to get reappraised thanks in part to the landmark 1972 book *Learning from Las Vegas* by architects Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour, who championed the “decorated shed”—a generic structure whose function is only identifiable by flashy signage.

Haughey cites *Learning from Las Vegas* as an important influence on his photography, which captures the beauty of modest coastal motels in the middle of winter. (The photographs are included in Haughey’s new book *Everything Is Regional*, recently published by Aint-Bad, and will be exhibited at the Sears Peyton Gallery’s booth at Photo LA from January 30 to February 2.) He chose to shoot the motels in the off-season in order to focus on the buildings themselves rather than the tourists who continue to throng the South Jersey coast every summer. Although many of the motels have been torn down and replaced by high-rise condos, the ones that remain continue to attract middle-class vacationers from upstate New Jersey and the Philadelphia suburbs, just as they have for half a century.

“There’s still a huge draw to them,” Haughey says. “The Wildwoods hasn’t gone upscale—in the summer it still attracts a lot of blue-collar families. It’s kind of great that it has managed to hold onto that identity.”