



The Historic Midcentury Modernist Motels of the New Jersey Coast

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Slate

August 19, 2016

Staying overnight at one of the more than 150 motels in the Wildwoods can feel like traveling back in time.

The Wildwoods comprise three towns—Wildwood, Wildwood Crest, and North Wildwood— along a 5-mile barrier island on the southern New Jersey coastline. They started drawing tourists looking for summer sun and surf in the late 19th century, but things really picked up in the 1950s with the completion of the Garden State Parkway. That's when middle-class motorists began arriving in droves, and motels started popping up by the hundreds over the next 20 years. Inspired by European high modernist design, they sported bright colors, angular features and distinctive, sometimes kitschy ornamentation. While about half of them have since given way to towering condominiums, those that remain are still family-owned and -operated, and little has changed about the way they look since they were constructed.

Five years ago, Tyler Haughey, then a student at Drexel University, was driving along the coast when he happened to pass through the Wildwoods. A Jersey Shore native, he'd heard about the Wildwoods but had never been to any of them before. It was February, and the motels were deserted, but he found them captivating, and so he stopped to photograph some of them.

"It felt like I'd happened upon an abandoned film set," he said.

Two years ago, he returned to photograph all of the remaining motels in the area for a series, "Ebb Tide," which he's now looking to turn into a book. He photographed the motels, he said, just like he photographs people, with an eye for the perspectives that best encapsulated their individual identities. Often, that meant a straightforward image of the front from the parking lot or a wider shot from across the street. Other times, he focused on the pool or the front office. He was particularly drawn to the motels that borrowed the iconography of far-flung destinations.

"Maybe it feels like you're in Malibu, but it only took you an hour to drive there," he said.

For more than three months every year, the Wildwoods are still popular destinations for vacationers from the Northeast and beyond. But Haughey intentionally only visited during the off season, especially during the winter. With virtually no people around, including the motel owners, he found he could better focus on the architecture. Frequently, however, his photos focused on smaller details—an overturned chair, for instance—that suggested the presence of tourists without actually showing them.

"I always felt people were kind of present through their absence in these places. They don't feel abandoned. They have a tangible recent history there," he said.