

HISTORY

No surprises with Holiday Inn in the desert

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“The best surprise is no surprise” was the highly effective slogan for Holiday Inn hotels for decades. Unpleasant surprises were the norm in the 1950s when it came to traveling by car on the new interstate highway system, especially when looking for a place to stay.

Kemmons Wilson was more than unpleasantly surprised — he was downright infuriated — on a trip from Memphis to Washington, D.C., with his family in 1951. The New York Times recalled: “On his fateful vacation, Mr. Wilson, already a millionaire home builder, was appalled at the squalor of many guest accommodations, but his anger was piqued by having to pay \$2 extra for each of his five children. He told his wife that he was going to start a hotel chain, one that did not charge extra for children. His wife laughed and asked how many motels he planned. He thought 400 for starters.”

The name Holiday Inn was given to the original hotel by Wilson’s architect Eddie Bluestein in jest. He’d written the name across the bottom of the blueprints in reference to the 1942 Bing Crosby movie of the same name which had introduced the Irving Berlin song “White Christmas.” The first Holiday Inn motel was opened in Memphis in 1952, and Wilson quickly expanded across the country.

In 1957, Wilson franchised the chain, standardizing the properties as clean, predictable, family-friendly and easily accessible from the freeways now crisscrossing the country. His formula would transform the hotel industry much the same way McDonald’s had the restaurant business. And like the golden arches that marked each McDonald’s, Wilson installed what he called the “great sign” at each location. The sign featured a changeable billboard and a large tower topped with a neon star.

The New York Times continued: “Mr. Wilson’s vision transcended mere cleanliness: there would be air-conditioning, swimming pools, ice machines in the halls, dog kennels and baby cribs. Children would both stay and eat free. Travelers were to be comforted by the promise that the best surprise is no surprise and were eventually guaranteed exactly the same thing the next night by means of the industry’s first computerized reservation system.”

The first Holiday Inn in California was built in the desert at a cost of \$1.5 million by Milt Hicks and his partners at 4200 Palm Canyon Drive. The Desert Sun reported on its opening in 1961: “One of the nation’s largest and fastest growing motor hotel chains makes its entry into the booming California travel industry this month with the opening of the 200th Holiday Inn of America in Palm Springs today. The opening includes a round of gala celebrations attended by ... visiting officials of the chain from national headquarters



The “great sign” at the opening of Holiday Inn Palm Springs in 1961. COURTESY TRACY CONRAD

... (and) leading sports and entertainment notables ... Baseball star Mickey Mantle, who operates the Holiday Inn at Joplin, Missouri, is just one of many successful franchise holders in the rapidly expanding chain and will be on hand for the opening of the new Palm Springs Inn.”

Featuring moderate rates, the new hotel was touted as occupying “spacious, exotic landscaped grounds near picturesque Araby Point along the palm-lined highway that leads in and out of this famous playground” and was complete with an expansive recreation area. The “imposing two-story structure with its curved driveway entrance to the canopied lobby” was designed by Lundgren & Maurer, AIA, and boasted a specially designed giant-sized swimming pool.

“Each spacious guest room features coordinated furnishings and decor with twin queen size beds, free TV and radio, phone service, full bath and shower with dressing rooms, free ice service, wall-to-wall carpeting, soundproofed and air conditioned, full view sliding glass doors leading onto the pool or private patio. Special services offered guests are bonded babysitters, pet care, services of a house physician, all at moderate rates.”

Soon after, Gene Autry purchased the property and transformed it into his Melody Ranch where he housed the Angels baseball team during spring training. By March of 1965, Holiday Inn moved uptown, expanding from 104 rooms to 500 by buying the Riviera Hotel from original developers Irwin and Mark Schuman for some \$8 million.

The Desert Sun followed the story with a headline

that read: “Holiday Inn Great Sign Like Iceberg.” The story continued: “the familiar green and yellow Holiday Inn ‘great sign’ going up at the corner of Indian and Vista Chino is actually like the top of an iceberg. What you’re seeing is only the indication of a huge imagination, a company that the Wall Street Journal has called ‘the General Motors of Innkeeping.’ Holiday Inn of America is far more than a parent company ...” extolling the incredible growth of the company.

In 1965 there were some 600 Holiday Inns across the country, and by 1968 there were 1,000, demonstrating the chain’s enormous appeal for people. By June 1972, when Wilson was featured on the cover of Time magazine, there were more than 1,400 Holiday Inn hotels worldwide. But the explosion of sites was only the tip of the iceberg. Standardization had caused Holiday Inn to go into related businesses of hotel management, hotel amenities for the rooms like shampoo and coffee makers and the development of a centralized, computerized reservation system.

The average traveler could depend on Holiday Inn and know what to expect without surprise. “He knows that he will stay in a room about 12 by 18 feet in size, with wall-to-wall carpeting, a TV set and laundry and valet service if needed. On the premises he will find a swimming pool, restaurant and, if state and local laws allow, a cocktail lounge. He even knows there is a kennel for his dog. These are promises made by Holiday Inns and backed up with the rigid insurance of management with integrity. ... These are just a few reasons why Holiday Inns of America has been so successful, but basically it all goes back to customer satisfaction. For after all, the traveler who recognizes the familiar great sign, whether or not he realizes its comparison to an iceberg, has helped in the building of that iceberg, through satisfaction in what he has found the sign advertises.”

The New York Times obituary of Wilson reflected on that business achievement: “Mr. Wilson, whose Southern accent was often called thick enough to confuse Southerners, had a reputation for pithy aphorisms about business. The Atlanta Constitution said ... that he gave advice on franchising to his friend Ray Kroc, who turned McDonald’s into a billion-dollar empire. For all his success, Mr. Wilson acknowledged making a mistake or two ... Mr. Wilson famously advised Sam Phillips of Sun Records, also in Memphis, to sell Elvis Presley’s contract to RCA for \$35,000, a move Mr. Phillips estimates cost him \$100 million. Mr. Phillips, to be sure, made a killing on Holiday Inn stock.”

Elvis would also come to Palm Springs, but he rent a house for his honeymoon rather than stay in a hotel. Wilson, much to his surprise, had been mistaken about Elvis’ appeal.

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