

You Can Still Stay a Night at These Grand Hotels From the Gilded Age

Those that survive today are a testament to Old World luxury



Oheka Castle, Long Island, New York (© PPNY / GSNY/Splash News/Corbis))

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"It may add years to one's life to spend a season in the mountains," crowed one 1902 brochure about America's Rocky Mountain resorts. Another extolled the health benefits of spa visits for Victorian city slickers with "weak hearts, disabled lungs, and worn-out nerves." [Colorado's pioneering role as a wellness destination](#) has left it today with a rich concentration of stately Victorian hotels, including the [Stanley](#) in Estes Park, the [Cliff House](#) in Manitou Springs and the [Hotel Colorado](#) in Glenwood Springs—plus such creative originals as [Dunton Hot Springs](#), a ghost town that has been reborn as a quirky boutique hotel property.

But Colorado's resorts were part of a broader American phenomenon. By the end of the 19th century, as taste for domestic travel flourished, every beach, mountain or hot spring across the country seemed to sprout a grand hotel offering luxuries once only seen in Europe, with rates starting at a princely \$3 a day for lavish room, haute cuisine and high tea. Housing up to 1,800 guests,

these hotels were like self-contained miniature cities, with shops, gardens, courtyards and marble driveways. One awe-struck French traveler observed in 1887 that these sumptuous resorts were destinations themselves, becoming to Americans "what cathedrals, monuments and the beauties of nature are for us."

Sadly, as holiday tastes changed, many of these plush hotels could not keep up. Some were demolished during the Great Depression, others burned to the ground (most were made of wood and went up like tinder boxes), still others were taken over by the military during World War II. Americans' tastes shifted, and most hotels that clung to their 19th century fashions went broke, unable to maintain their vast structures and grounds. "Hotels have to change with the times, or the public will pass them by," observes Chris Donovan, the official historian of the famed Hotel del Coronado (built in 1888) in San Diego. "It's not colonial Williamsburg!"

And yet, despite this Darwinian travel climate, a surprising number of Gilded Age resorts have managed to endure into the 21st century, often after pulling back from the brink of disaster or bankruptcy. These great survivors offer travelers a rare chance to immerse themselves in Old World pleasures amongst luxuries that have been updated for contemporary tastes. The following are some of the era's classics.

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Mohonk Mountain House: New Paltz, New York



(© Rose Hartman/CORBIS)

The ideal place to feel like a robber baron on vacation is [Mohonk](#), which rises like a fairytale castle above a glittering, cliff-lined mountain lake 90 miles north of New York City. The spectacular refuge, which sits on an 8,000-acre nature preserve, was opened in 1869 by twin Quaker brothers Albert and Alfred Smiley, and it is still run by their family today. The rambling alpine structure continued to expand throughout the Gilded Age, when it hosted industrialists Andrew Carnegie and John D. Rockefeller, along with a parade of U.S. presidents.

In recent decades, Mohonk has been meticulously renovated to keep its antique atmosphere intact: Many of the bedrooms boast

authentic Victorian-era wallpaper, working marble fireplaces and black and white photos from the late 1800s, where men in tuxedos and women in crinoline dresses are picnicking on the grounds. But the Smileys have also worked to avoid Mohonk becoming a relic, adding a heated pool, spa and gym, along with single-track mountain bike trails, summer cocktail parties and a new "mindfulness" program, which offers meditation, anti-stress programs and diets for modern Rockefellers.

Still, the most enduring pleasure is to simply stroll around the cliffside trail and pass by the original Gilded Age gazebos, which are made of individually carved logs and feel like exclusive tree-houses. The most spectacular of these is balanced on a knife-edge called Artist's Rock, where dozens of American painters over the last 150-odd years have scrambled to capture the vista across the Shawangunk Mountains (pronounced "Shongum," thanks to a colonial-era twisting of the Indian name; many today just call them "the Gunks"). The view toward Eagle Rock, an elegant granite fist rising sheer from the forest floor, is exactly the same as it was in 1880, when the holidaying Philadelphian watercolorist James Reid Lambdin captured it for his peers.

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