

The great American road trip

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Volante

Regardless of the nation's politics, once you get amongst the country, the US is full of gems, where tradition and down-home hospitality continue to flow, writes **Elyse Glickman**









Opposite page: The Hotel Maya as seen from the *Queen Mary*. **This page, clockwise from top left:** Hotel Maya entrance. The Maya's presidential suite. The Fuego restaurant at the Long Beach waterfront. Playa at the Maya.

MICHAEL WEBER

THE FIFA World Cup not only brought football lovers from around the world to the US, but it also compelled even the most jaded among them to realize that there is much to love within the States. Even with political turmoil and clickbait about America's decline abounding, the pure joy of their discovering the "real US" was revealed in viral videos taking the internet by storm in early summer.

Fans of all ages from the UK, New Zealand, Australia, Japan, Korea, the Netherlands, Italy, France, and other countries are shown encountering people and places that changed any preconceived notions about American life and culture they may have had prior to flying over. Many clips focused on the sheer delight of their perusing the shelves of massive Walmart stores and Buc-ee's truck stops, wrapping their minds around portion sizes at American restaurants (particularly at family-owned diners and barbecue spots in Texas and the Carolinas), and figuring out ways to transport ranch dressing home (pro tip: buy and pack boxes of Hidden Valley Ranch's powder mix, and add your own milk or buttermilk at home). It was just a small taste of what lay ahead for the visitors beyond the sports stadiums.

Whether hitting a pub in Boston, digging into brisket in Dallas, tasting legit tacos in San Diego, or grabbing breakfast at roadside diners, watching once-sceptical international travellers vow to return reminds us that there is so much to discover within our borders. Another thing that adds to a US trip are hotels designed with intention to reflect the place where they are based. Here are a few properties that show looking inward can also expand one's horizons.

California

Long Beach's Fairmont Breakers Hotel & Spa (www.fairmont-breakers.com) reopened in November 2024 after a six-year renovation with features celebrating its 100-year history. When it opened in 1926, it was regarded as a hotel ahead of its time with its exclusive boutiques, a Turkish bath, roof garden, elaborate dining rooms, and private beach entrance. Toward the end of the Great Depression in 1938, legendary hotelier Conrad Hilton decided to make it his eighth namesake







Clockwise from above: Orlando World Center Marriott. Sushi from the Marriott's lobby sushi bar. Weekly market at Lake Eola Park. The Inn on Fifth's Club Level in Naples, Fla. A bedroom at the Inn on Fifth.





hotel and invested US$200,000 (equivalent to US$4·5 million today) to reinvigorate it. The Sky Room became a popular hangout for the era's Hollywood A-listers, including Clark Gable, Rita Hayworth, Cary Grant, and Elizabeth Taylor.

When the hotel underwent its renovation, the Sky Room was brought back to its original grandeur with plush and refined furniture evoking Hollywood's Golden Age. Halo, the new rooftop lounge, is crowned with 360-degree views of downtown Los Angeles and the Pacific Ocean, curated displays of art, arches and columns framing the floor-to-ceiling windows, and a large outdoor patio made for sunshine and craft cocktails. Full-service Italian restaurant Nettuno is white-tablecloth dining, and lobby-level lounge Alter Ego pays homage to the original hotel's Jazz Age roots with live music Thursday through Saturday nights.

Across the bay, the Hotel Maya (www.themayalongbeach.com) was essential tourist lodging over its 50-year history with its proximity to the *Queen Mary* ocean liner-turned-museum, the Catalina Express ferry to Avalon, and a major cruise port. This year, it was reimagined and reopened as a colourful four-star destination property whose appeal transcends convenience.

The architecture of the 191-room, 14-acre waterfront expanse was originally designed as nod to historic Latin American culture and its influence on Los Angeles. The year-long US$10·5 million redesign, completed in June 2026, builds on that intention with mid-century furnishings and curated artwork by local artists. 'Seventies-hued accents punch up a neutral colour palette that replaces the heavy earth-toned colour scheme and further opens up the indoor spaces visually. Cultural institutions such as the Museum of Latin American Art and the Mexican Cultural Institute of Los Angeles make it a destination for locals and visitors through art shows, festivals, and events that deliver extra authenticity.

The Maya's reinvention also includes a stylish pool and cabaña rebuilt in a new location to make space for private beach and tropical landscaping. The main building is anchored by waterfront-facing Fuego Restaurant, where executive chef Luis Torres brings a wealth of culinary expertise from his experience working under celebrity chef Curtis Stone (including Gwen, his Michélin-starred Hollywood restaurant) and Montage Hotels & Resorts. Mexican and Latin American flavours and recipes are handled with a smart "less-is-more" approach with high-quality, seasonally-influenced, selections that would be right at home at a five-star property.

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Above: Boat trip in Naples. **Left:** The Inn on Fifth offers activities in their Mini Mokes.

Mainstays such as Torres' zesty Cæsar salad (made even better with the optional addition of perfectly seasoned grilled salmon), hamburger, and guacamole are memorable. The brunch programme that gained buzz right out of the gate include churro-inspired pandulce brioche French toast and shrimp Benedict topped with a zesty jalapeño hollandaise sauce on bolillo bread (a traditional savoury Mexican baguette) rather than a standard English muffin. A new grab-and-go programme, Café de Fuego, offers baked goods and beverages from local businesses such as Shelldrake Coffee and Colossus Bakery.

Florida

Orlando evolved from the ultimate Disney destination to America's most impressive playground encompassing Sea World, Legoland Florida, and the Universal Studios multiverse (Islands of Adventure, Epic Universe, Volcano Bay). Each hotel in the immediate area can call itself a base camp for this sprawling complex that is not only awash in some of the world's favourite American pop culture immersions but also conference, meeting, and executive retreat sites.

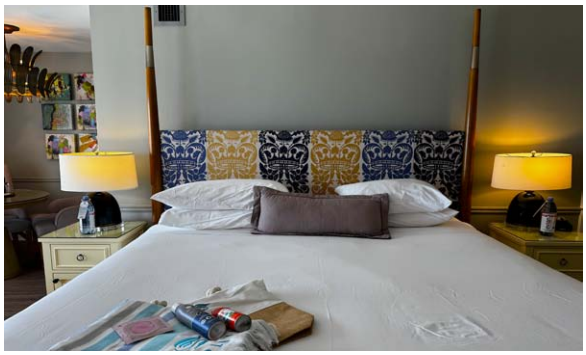
With so much competition between basic motels, branded mid-range hotels, and luxury options, management at the Orlando World Center Marriott (www.marriott.com/en-us/hotels/mcowc-orlando-world-center-marriott/) which turns 40 this year, credits its staying power to the fact it is not part of Disney or any other theme park. Better still, it can either be a starting-point to an epic trek across the assemblage of theme parks or a stand-alone resort with its own attractions built into it.

The entryway opens out into world's largest Marriott-branded hotel, with over 2,000 rooms and suites in a myriad of configurations. The resort includes an unpretentious but charming spa and dining that includes casual-chic Italian-restaurant Siro, hibachi concept restaurant Mikado, and its surprisingly exceptional lobby sushi bar. Nearly everything on these menu happens to be shareable. The amusement park spirit defining Orlando, meanwhile, comes to life in its River Falls Water Park and the Falls Lagoon Pool, which has cabaña seating and its own water park elements. There is also a glitzy sports bar (High Velocity) and a breakfast buffet at Latitude & Longitude, whose staff temporarily make you forget you are in a massive hotel.

Other cool activities include the Nomadic Jeweler, offering permanent jewellery poolside on weekends, and on-site Gatorland Animal Encounter shows every Saturday at Falls Lagoon Pool featuring snakes, gators, and other critters. There









Above: Naples' beach. **Right:** Baleen seafood platter. **Far right:** La Playa suite. **Bottom right:** Chicago's uptown.

are characters exclusive to the property, including Mingo the Flamingo and periodic and popular meet-and-greets with Mermaid Elle and Mermaid Glow Parties. There is also a secret speakeasy that can be booked for private and corporate events, with activities running the gamut from mixology classes to tastings.

Several farmers' and craft markets around town, meanwhile, prove there is more to Orlando than the hotels and theme parks. While most fall on Saturdays, Sunday morning is a great time to head downtown to visit beautiful Lake Eola Park for its weekly market, which not only allows one to support local businesses but also provides a taste of South America, from artisanal leather craftspeople hailing from Brazil to foods from Brazil, Colombia, Venezuela, and other countries.

Residents of Naples proudly refer to South Fifth Avenue as the Rodeo Drive of their state or even the east coast, and their assessment is well founded. The stretch features high-end stores, stylish restaurants and cafés, art galleries, a playhouse, and top-end autos slowly cruising along. A few minutes away, a four-block stretch of Third Street combines historic landmarks, and its own unique mix of

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stores, including the magical Books on Third, a large Lily Pulitzer location, and restaurants made for outdoor dining and people-watching. In the opposite direction, savvy shoppers head to Second Street (a.k.a the Trail of Treasures) for fashion, décor and jewellery finds in its cluster of thrift and consignment shops. Inn on Fifth (www.innonfifth.com) lies at the heart of this mix of status, style, food, and culture.

Designed to appeal to globally savvy modern travellers, the downtown property's foundations are rooted in local history. The original location is a former bank built in 1948 that was reconfigured into a boutique hotel in the late 1990s. Directly across Fifth Avenue, the hotel added its Club Level Suites, rendering it in an architectural style hotel staff describe as 'old Naples neo-Mediterranean'. Between 2025 and 2026, it expanded into an adjoining 1970s bank building, adding 11 premium suites, bringing the upgraded room count to 32 and the overall room total to 119.

The centrepiece of the Club Level is a cozy lounge with plush seating offering a substantial "continental" breakfast that happens to have hot dishes like buttery scrambled eggs and thick-cut bacon along with fresh fruit, pastries, tea, and coffee. There is also a DIY Bloody Mary station, snacks offered all day, and hot hors d'œuvres during happy hour. While it doubles as a comfortable workspace during non-meal times, the true stars of the premises are the concierge staff—particularly Armand—who clearly love their jobs as they recommend their favourite restaurants and attractions.

Inside the main building, guests will find an immaculately maintained fitness room and Spa on Fifth, a pocket-sized space with a steam room, sauna, small relaxation area, retail space, and a concise but customizable menu of massages, body treatments, and facials. Under the direction of Nicole Morrissey (who also manages SpaTerre at sister beach resort property La Playa in North Naples), the team of practitioners do a fantastic job of making a guest feel fully restored by the end of a session.

Since 1968, sister property La Playa Resort & Golf Club (www.laplayaresort.com) has been a gateway to Naples' beach scene. The opening of its Gulf Tower in 1983 expanded the resort to 189 rooms and suites with a "coastal modern" æsthetic in a fresh pastel colour palette, punctuated with darker gold and blue shades. Gulf Tower accommodations feature private balconies and bathrooms outfitted with backlit vanity mirrors and silver accents. Newly installed terrazzo flooring serves as a canvas for luxe chandeliers, decorative painted console tables, dramatic wicker lounge seating, sculptural floor lamps, side tables, and custom bedding and textiles.

Baleen serves a highly creative 'sea-to-table' menu where 'new American' and steakhouse favourites are updated with delicious global twists. The modular design and mix of indoor and outdoor spaces nicely parallel the casual eclecticism of the food and beverage menus. Breakfast and brunch earn high marks with locals and visitors ,with selections like the lobster eggs Benedict and croissant waffles in high demand. Dinner fare reflects the kitchen's creativity and sense of adventure: lobster bucatini blackened Gulf grouper with a crab and charred corn truffle cake; roasted wild mushroom truffle risotto; and beet and butternut squash salad with pomegranate thyme dressing.

The food and drinks available at the casual Tiki Bar restaurant and beach service is just as sharp and menu items delicious. Its 4,500 ft² SpaTerre at La Playa features a more extensive menu of traditional spa therapies and restorative rituals than its Inn on Fifth counterpart, inspired by global practices that allow for personalization. Beyond the resort, one can book pontoon excursions, eco-tours, and sunset dinner packages with BoatNaples Excursions whose guides provide colourful insights on wildlife and local history.

Illinois

Chicago is enjoying a cultural moment in 2026, thanks to the recent opening of the Barack Obama Presidential Library and a new starting point for Route 66 (a.k.a. America's 'mother road') at Navy Pier on its 100th anniversary. However, it also enjoys a legacy of astute urban planning and architecture. The 2,032-room Hyatt Regency Chicago (chicago.regency.hyatt.com) with 240,000 ft² of meeting space, and the nearly 100-year-old Hilton Chicago (www.hilton.com/en/hotels/chichhh-hilton-chicago) counting 1,544 rooms and 235,000 ft² of event space are bona fide examples of how architects throughout the city's history have responded to

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Clockwise from above: The Cambria Hotel Nashville Midtown's lobby. A second view of the lobby. The Cambria Hotel Nashvillle Downtown's pool. Records on display at Downtown's lobby. A Cambria Downtown suite.



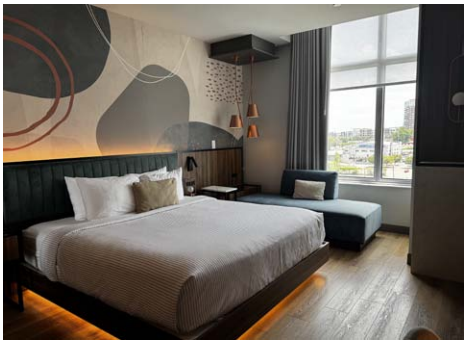




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Top: Lunch at Puckett's, Nashville. **Right:** Food at the Rux at the Cambria Midtown. **Far right:** A Cambria Midtown suite.

its growth. Its newest boutique hotels, meanwhile, are responses to cultural evolution and changing tastes. The trendy Fulton Market neighbourhood is now home to the Pendry Chicago (www.pendry.com/chicago), built into the historic art-déco Carbide & Carbon Building), the Emily Hotel (emilyhotel.com/destinations/chicago/) and the Hoxton (thehoxton.com/chicago/).

From all of these venues, visitors can easily access the bike and walking paths along the 26-mile Chicago Riverwalk and world-class museums such as the Art Institute and Field Museum of Natural History. Chicago Architecture Center River Cruise's boat tours along the Chicago River remain an ideal first-day activity to learn more about the city's layout and historic touchstones.

The food scene also continues to percolate with nationally recognized Girl and the Goat, Avec, and Carver's. Anybody visiting Chicago can check out the Choose Chicago website for the latest on its famous neighbourhood food festivals that promise an authentic eat-like-a-local experiences in the warmer months and indoor cultural events in the winter. Other hubs for culinary innovation include the West Loop and Lincoln Park, restaurant destinations for decades. Bronzeville, River North, and Logan Square have emerged in recent years as "it" destinations. Pilsen and Chinatown have undergone glow-ups with new restaurants and chefs adding to their historic Mexican and Asian food landscapes.

Tennessee

The Cambria Hotel Nashville Downtown (www.cambrianashville.com) is a microcosm of Nashville, down to the smallest details. An old-school Victrola record player and a classic country record can be found in every guest room. A floor-to-ceiling shelf adorned with cowboy boots, a lamp with a life-sized horse base, and vintage album cover-lined counter tops accent the party barn-styled lobby on the fifth floor. Just beyond the check-in desk, music is served up nightly in the True Music Room & Bar alongside Chef Al-



Above: Entrance to the Grand Ole Opry.
Below: Shopping on 12th Street, Nashville.

fredo Pérez's southern-inspired comfort food and a relaxed lounge atmosphere. This ensures that even if clubbing is not your thing, you are still getting the full-on Music City experience.

However, the rooftop pool area, with its map-like skyline view of the city centre, may tempt one to get outside the comfort zone. Anybody hankering for more activity will find SoBro's music clubs, the Country Music Hall of Fame, and the fantastic National Museum of African American Music (NMAAM) a few minutes from the front door. The same is true for big shows playing at the Bridgestone Arena, Ryman Auditorium and Music City Center. Popular country music-inspired food establishments (including the Diner, Puckett's, and buzzy food court, the Assembly Hall) are also an easy jaunt from the front door. Everything you can see from the rooftop pool area illustrates why some Nashville locals proudly refer to the city as the 'new Las Vegas'.

The 159-room sister property Cambria Hotel Nashville Midtown (www.cambriamidtown.com) is conceived as a mellow *pied-à-terre* for Nashville exploration with a décor scheme offering a different but equally vibrant sense of place. Architect Nicola de Pellegrini, founder of Venezia-based Anidride Design, fused Americana with Italian æsthetics to create interiors that complement the more easy-going neighbourhoods near Music Row and Vanderbilt University. The lobby is made up of airy seating areas anchoring its new Church & State grab-and-go concept. Just like the icon-filled mosaic murals along several walls, the staff members are bright, cheerful, and exude Tennessee hospitality.



The Rux, the hotel's indoor–outdoor full-service rooftop restaurant, combines a conversation-starting down-home accents, downtown skyline views, a photo booth, lounge seating, and tables that accommodate huge share plates. While the menu at first glance reads as a "greatest hits" of southern fare, the owners slipped in Indian and European influences that give them a cosmopolitan flair. The Heritage Board is the kitchen's signature twist to a charcuterie board, with hot honey-glazed ham, pimento mousse, pickled okra, peach preserves, sorghum butter, and cornbread blini. The expressions of shrimp and grits, the Rux burger, and salted caramel banana pudding also impress.

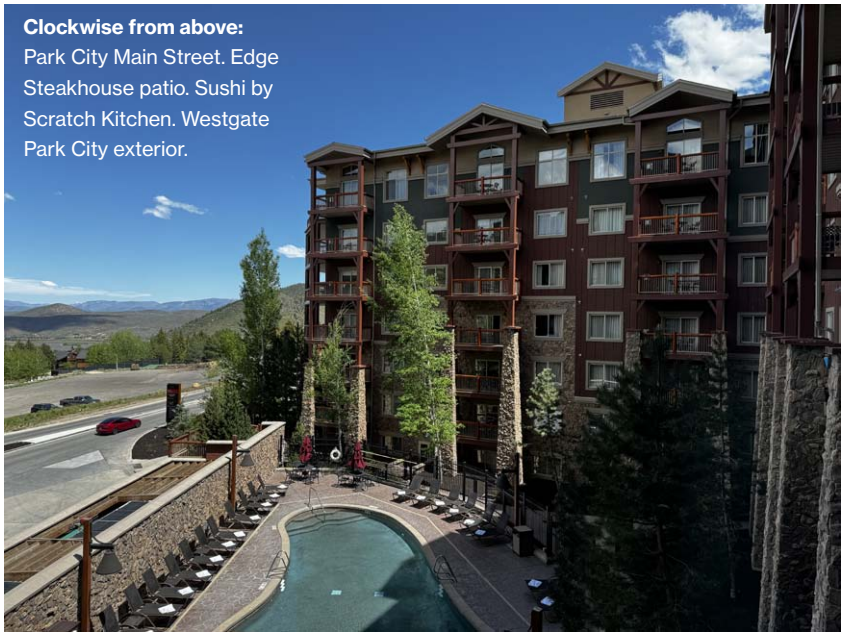
Restaurants walking distance from the Midtown, including the Row and the Midtown Café, deserve your attention and reservations. While the former is known for both its solid barbecue and performance schedule, the latter is a family-owned bungalow adorned with bright art canvases, exceptional and original breakfasts, and a large swath of the menu dedicated to Julia Child's southern favourites.

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Clockwise from above: Park City Main Street. Edge Steakhouse patio. Sushi by Scratch Kitchen. Westgate Park City exterior.

While shopping abounds downtown, both hotels are an easy ride-share to the Gulch and 12th Street South, "it" enclaves supporting the city's most innovative (and non-corporate) restaurants, coffee houses, and fashion boutiques. The Grand Ole Opry, home to the longest running radio broadcast in the US, is well worth the trek. The now 100-year-old institution still delivers a mix of performances by country veterans, future stars, comedians, and other entertaining tastes of Americana.

Utah

The Sundance Film Festival may be moving to Boulder, Colorado in 2027, but with the Winter Olympic Games returning in 2034, Park City is once again getting ready for its closeup. A myriad of five-star luxury hotels have or are in the process of springing to life in Deer Valley, including the Four Seasons, Waldorf Astoria, the Pendry, and Grand Hyatt Deer Valley (home to the unforgettable sushi-meets-speakeasy destination Sushi by Scratch Kitchen). Main Street, meanwhile, has headed in a more posh direction with higher-end retail.

The Westgate Park City Resort (www.westgateresorts.com/hotels/utah/park-city/westgate-park-city-resort), at the heart of Canyons Village at Park City Mountain Resort, in contrast, is described by its management as a 'middle ground between luxury and four-star practicality'. It checks the boxes for travellers opting for convenience, a down-to-earth vibe, and easy access to local dining, shopping, and recreation. Other built-in on-property advantages include ski-in, ski-out access to the Canyons Village, ski valet, lockers, a storage area with a private elevator access, indoor–outdoor water park, and community events such as concerts and festivals. It also boasts Utah's largest indoor-outdoor pool and a kids' club and arcade.

The 30,000 ft² full-service Serenity Spa is also elevated and standalone, earning it Best of State status since 2017. The attentive staff administer customized sports and relaxation massages, facials, body–skin treatments from its extensive menu. However, exclusives like the 110-minute Signature Serenity Facial (combining its popular Tranquil Custom Facial and Purifying Back Facial) and immersive Chakra Healing Ritual (a gentle massage with medical grade essential oil blends applied with the enhancement of crystal stones and handmade Tibetan singing bowls followed by a hydrating foot wrap and our coconut milk hair and scalp treatment) bring together value and pure indulgence. There is also a heated yoga room and classes.

Westgate's two restaurants, Drafts Burger Bar, a sports bar with imaginative comfort food and a cheeky menu, and multi-award-winning Edge Steakhouse, live up to their hype. Under the direction of executive chef Wayne E. Christian, the Edge's kitchen team is wholly committed to making classic steakhouse appetizers, sides, main courses, and desserts delightfully unpredictable. Highlights include wagyu tartare and steak sashimi on wasabi mashed potatoes; lobster dumplings in lobster bisque; creamed corn brûlée with butter, parmesan cheese, caramelized sugar crust and a dusting of savoury spices; black and white truffle mac-and-cheese with Utah Irish cheddar in its cheese blend; and honey sriracha Brussels sprouts. The dining experience is further elevated by booking one of its Alpenglobe outdoor dining pods for special celebrations. •