



PERIOD CHARM

From grand hotels to log cabins, guests can enjoy a slice of American romance and nostalgia in comfort and style

WORDS BY **PETER ELLEGARD**

They're as all-American as apple or pumpkin pie. They are the iconic, original hotels, lodges, and other traditional accommodation that you find all over the US.

And for clients heading across the Atlantic, they offer the chance to experience a slice of Uncle Sam and soak up its history and culture in a way they could never get by staying at a standard hotel.

According to operators, original hotels and accommodation are becoming more popular with clients. From log cabins and B&B guesthouses and inns to historic hotels and plantation houses, they are increasingly being demanded by clients who want to stay somewhere different. Typically they are older clients with the money and time to ensure they

get what they want.

"At Gold Medal we notice that clients do like real experiences, where as well as comfort there is history and heritage, offering a unique holiday experience," says Matt Appleby, USA product manager for Gold Medal.

It's a view backed up by Philip Read, managing director of accommodation specialist Bluebookonline. He says: "We have always seen regular demand for American inns, B&Bs and the iconic American log cabin.

"This demand has been increasing in the last three years as more and more experienced travellers seek lodging experiences that are unique and completely different from the inevitable blandness of the hotel chains."

STAYING AT A PLANTATION HOUSE

WORDS BY PETER ELLEGARD



I gazed down the quarter-mile avenue of live oaks which provide a graceful, arched entrance to Litchfield Plantation and gently rocked in my high-backed rocking chair.

The evening chorus of marsh critters was reaching a crescendo, almost drowning out the rhythmic creaks of the first-floor balcony's wooden floor and the gentle tick-tock of the old, long-case clock in the downstairs study.

It felt like a scene from *Gone With the Wind*, and the elegant furnishings of the plantation house's Ballroom Suite just inside the shuttered windows and double doors would have suited Rhett Butler perfectly. All it needed was Scarlett O'Hara to come sweeping up the grand staircase to complete the image.

America's Deep South is dotted with beautiful, old plantation homes built as ostentatious displays of the wealth created by crops such as cotton and rice. A number of them have now been turned into hotels or have accommodation on site so that guests can imagine what life was like as lord of the manor, American-style.

Litchfield Plantation is on Pawleys Island, South Carolina. One of the oldest rice plantations on the Waccamaw River, it dates back to 1740 and now operates as a luxury country inn set in 600 acres. Four suites are in the old mansion building, the pick of them being the Ballroom Suite. More rooms are in other buildings.

Not all accommodation in plantations is in historic buildings. Middleton Place was one of South Carolina's oldest and largest plantations but the mansion was burnt down by Union troops in the Civil War. Today, the Inn at Middleton Place offers accommodation blocks set under live oaks on a river bank, allowing guests to explore the extensive grounds and America's oldest landscaped gardens while enjoying the comforts of a modern hotel. From my windows I could look across the Lowcountry marshes to a grove of trees where bald eagles were raising chicks in a nest.

Louisiana has one of the highest concentrations of plantation houses, lining the Mississippi. One of the grandest is Nottoway, a magnificent white-columned palace where paying guests can stay in elegant splendour and gaze across Old Man River from the first floor veranda.

The Greek revival-style building, completed in 1859, stands on the edge of sugar cane fields near Baton Rouge in grounds with towering live oaks draped in Spanish moss. It has 15 guest rooms, in the main house, two adjoining wings and the Overseer's Cottage.

Guests can tour the mansion's ornate original rooms which include the White Ballroom and Music Room.



FROM LEFT: the Litchfield Plantation, its Ballroom Suite and the first floor balcony

Unlike standard hotels, such accommodation can involve more effort on the part of the agent because it may not be listed in a brochure or even on a website.

Read adds: "Because all these properties are, by their nature, completely different from each other, even down to size, decor and bedroom capacity and have very limited room inventory, we do not include them in our online stock. But we are, and have always been, happy to quote and book them on request."

But going the extra mile to satisfy a demanding client whatever their choice of accommodation will help keep their loyalty and earn future bookings from them.

These are just some of the original accommodation options available:

PLANTATION HOUSES

These grand houses were once the centre of huge working estates, often employing hundreds of slaves.

They can be found throughout the Deep South from Louisiana to South Carolina and up to Virginia, and a number of them offer accommodation, either in the original mansions or in purpose-built blocks or outbuildings.

America As You Like It managing director Maggie Smit says: "More people are doing plantation houses, not necessarily as a total package but as part of a package.

"The service is great in most of them - it is more personal and people get to talk to the owners and experience

a little of living in a house of bygone times."

Sample package:

America As You Like It features a seven-night Louisiana tour including two nights accommodation at Nottoway, two nights each at Oak Alley and Madewood plantations, and one night in New Orleans, from £985 per person, including flights and one week car hire.

In South Carolina, three nights at the Charleston Historic House and three nights at Litchfield Plantation costs from £826 per person including flights, car hire and one night in Atlanta. All accommodation is room-only.

HISTORIC CITY-CENTRE HOTELS

► Many of America's most iconic and historic hotels are in its cities. One of the best-known is New York's Waldorf Astoria. When it opened in 1931 it was the largest in the world, with 2,200 rooms. It was built from the proceeds of the sale of the original Waldorf and Astoria which were demolished to make way for the Empire State Building.

The hotel claims to have been the first to introduce room service, and New Year's Eve TV broadcasts from the hotel's Starlight Roof became an American institution.

Many old hotels have been reborn as boutique hotels, sometimes keeping the historic exterior but offering chic, avant-garde interiors. Others have preserved the historic look with period decor and antique furniture. Among them is the Mills House Hotel in Charleston. Originally opened as a hotel in 1803 and later used as a courthouse, it has welcomed guests since 1853 under its current guise. American Civil War's hero Robert E Lee and President Theodore Roosevelt were among resident VIPs.

Sample package: Seligo offers the Waldorf Astoria from £102 per person per night on a room-only basis on selected dates throughout July, August and September.

RANCHES

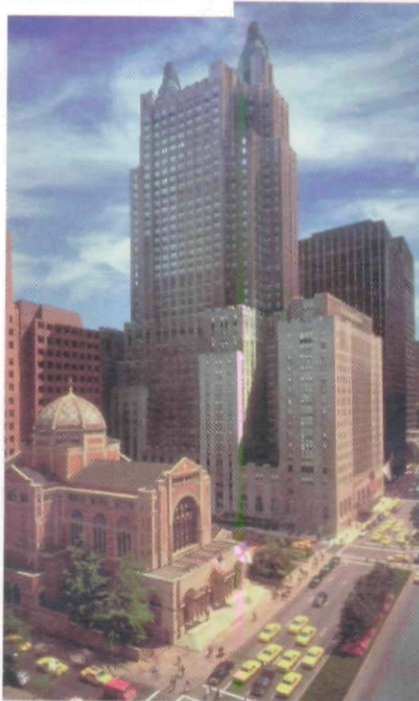
A stay on a ranch offer clients a taste of life in the Wild West. Many are working ranches which put up guests to supplement their income, with accommodation sometimes as basic as a room in the ranch house or a bed in a bunkhouse. Clients can also stay in guest ranches, where they can improve their riding skills, at dude ranches, which also offer a range of leisure activities or in refined luxury at resort ranches.

Nigel Selby, American Round-Up managing director, said: "This type of holiday is becoming more popular every year as more and more people realise what great value for money it represents."

Sample package: American Round-Up offers the family-run 63 Guest Ranch in Montana's Absaroka Mountains. It dates back to 1863 and is on the National Register of Historical Places. Activities include horse riding, fishing, swimming and evening entertainment. Open June to September, a week's stay costs £951 per adult and £840 for



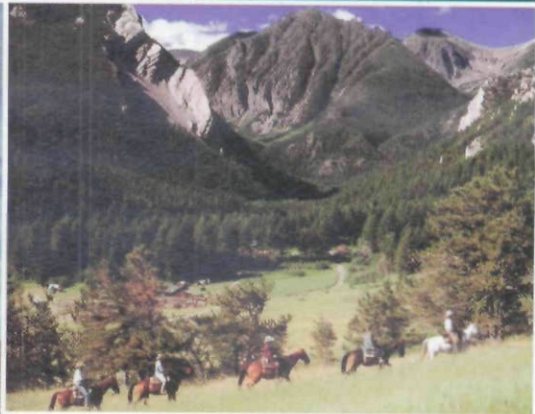
CLOCKWISE from top: The Breakers in Palm Beach, ranch life and New York's Waldorf Astoria



children aged five to 11. Return transfers from Bozeman are \$75 per car. Flights are extra.

GRAND DAME HOTELS & RESORTS

The opening up of new resort areas at the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th century sparked the building of some of America's grandest hotels. Railway pioneer Henry Flagler not only drove the railway down Florida's East Coast as far as the Florida



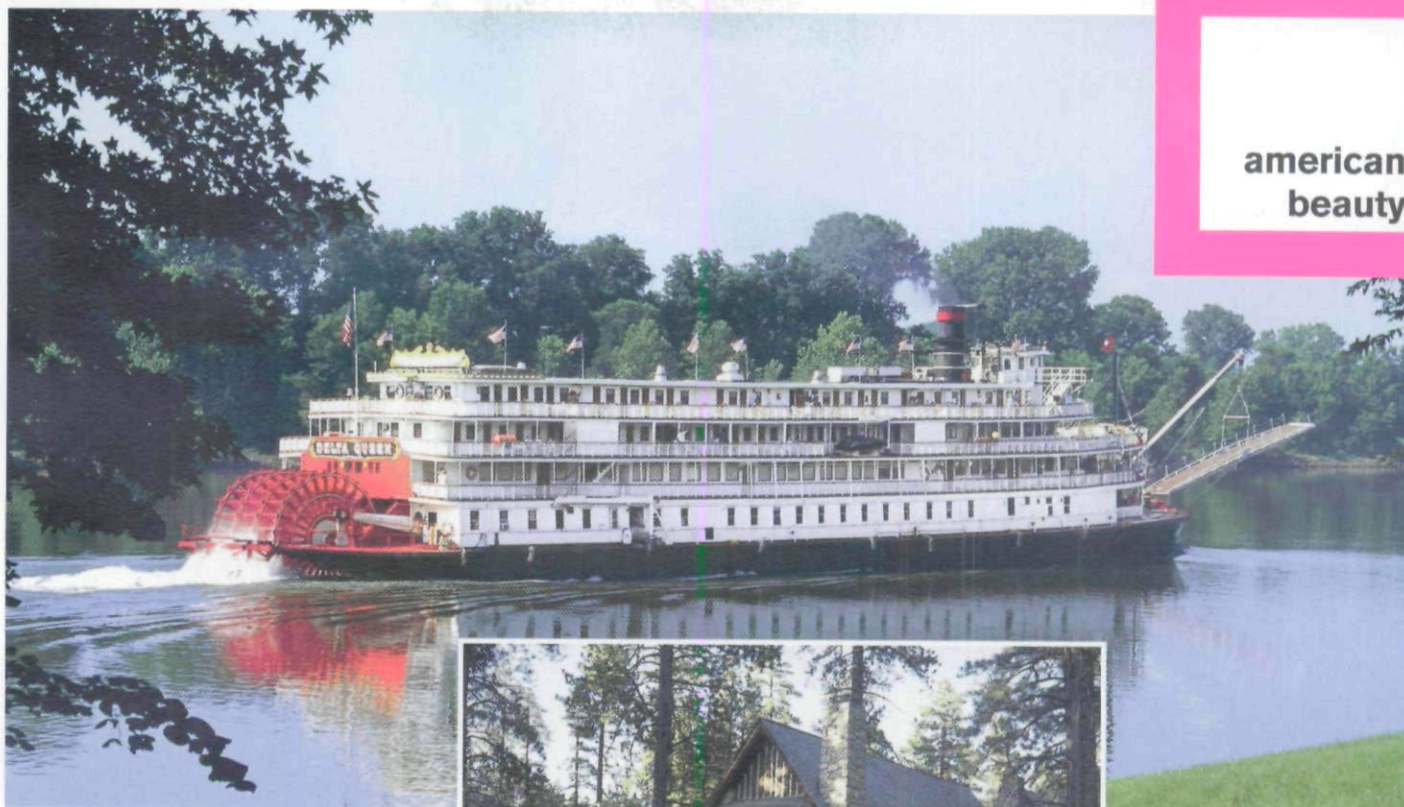
Keys, he also built a series of imposing resort hotels.

One of the finest was the Palm Beach Inn, which was renamed The Breakers in 1901. Other grand hotels can be found along both East and West coasts, and include The Boca Raton Resort & Club and the Don CeSar Beach Club in Florida and San Diego's iconic Hotel Del Coronado.

Steve Silver, product and marketing manager of Funway Holidays, says: "It's a chance to wallow in the romantic nostalgia of a more gracious age. They offer superb facilities, five-star service and that elusive touch of class you can't always find in a contemporary hotel." ►

Sample package: Funway has seven nights at The Breakers from £1,099 per person, including flights to Miami, room only accommodation and seven days' car rental.

american
beauty



TOP AND BOTTOM:
Cruising down the
river on a Delta
Queen steamboat
LEFT: the Stowe
Inn in Vermont

RUSTIC LODGES AND CABINS

► Clients who prefer the rustic option can also opt to stay in a traditional log cabin or wooden lodge.

According to Bluebookonline's Phil Read, log cabins are mainly found in lakes and mountain regions. They are popular in areas such as the Great Lakes, New York State and the Smoky Mountains in Tennessee. Because they are so individual, they are not included in the operator's online stock but can still be requested and booked.

Rustic does not necessarily mean basic, either. The Creekside Log Cabins in the Smoky Mountain foothills in Tennessee offer two bedrooms and come equipped with dishwasher, microwave, fridge, central heating, phone and hot tub on the porch.

National Parks often have accommodation in wooden lodges, set in pristine natural locations.

Sample package: Bluebookonline features the Creekside Log Cabins from £90 per cabin per night including commission.

INNS AND B&BS

The personal touch is what makes inns and bed and breakfast guesthouses so appealing.

You find them all over the US, but they are especially popular in New England, the Capital Region, the Carolinas and California.

They come in all shapes and sizes,

from tiny guesthouses with just one or two guest rooms to traditional inns.

Gold Medal US product manager Matt Appleby highlights Stowe Inn in Stowe, Vermont, as a typical example of a traditional New England Inn.

"People are looking for more authentic experiences and you cannot get more authentic than the Stowe Inn, built in 1825 and still retaining the warmth and character of bygone days, whilst still being equipped with all the modern comforts," he says.

Sample package: Gold Medal offer a one-night stay at the Stowe Inn for £48 per person per night room only.

RIVERBOATS

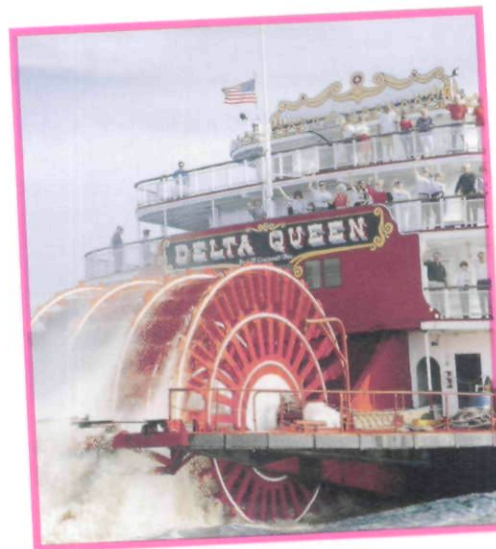
For a quintessentially American experience, nothing beats a cruise on a stern-wheel riverboat. These graceful queens ply the Mississippi and Ohio rivers, operating cruises taking in cities including New Orleans, Memphis, St Louis, Cincinnati and Pittsburgh.

According to Julian Lawman, senior product manager at Travel 4, they appeal to older clients looking to experience the region's history, scenery and culture, and to capture something of the *Huckleberry Finn* and *Gone With The Wind* atmos-

phere of a bygone era.

"They provide a form of cruising that harks back to the golden era of cruising and is a relaxed, stress-free way of seeing large tracts of the river and its surrounding countryside," he says. ■

Sample package: A three-night cruise on a Delta Queen Steamboat vessel in low season costs from £849 per person with Travel 4 including stateroom accommodation, all meals, a captain's welcome reception and dinner, on board entertainment and activities.



Copyright of Travel Trade Gazette UK & Ireland is the property of United Business Media and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.