

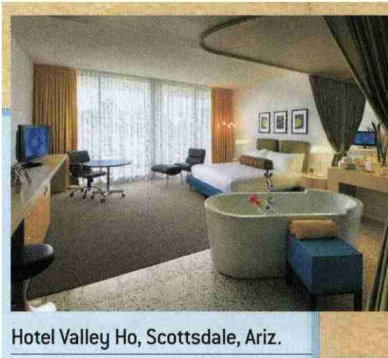
BATTLE OF THE OLDEST

There's a certain cachet to saying you're the "oldest hotel in the U.S." Yet there's no obvious heir to this coveted throne.

For one thing, the very definition of hotel is murky. Back in colonial times, travelers shared beds in taverns, some of which later became hotels—but they didn't start out that way *per se*. Because of how long ago many properties were built, there is also confusion about the exact dates certain properties debuted. And then there's the issue of the many incarnations old hotels often go through—can a hotel be the oldest if it shut down for a while, or operated for periods of time as something else?

This gray area has led many hotels to qualify their claim to be the oldest. According to Michael DiRienzo, sales director for Historic Hotels of America, the oldest hotel in the U.S. is not in any of the 50 states. It's Hotel El Convento in San Juan, Puerto Rico, inaugurated as a convent in 1651 (and now a member of Small Luxury Hotels of the World)—but it hasn't been continuously operated. In the continental U.S., DiRienzo says The Red Lion Inn may take the cake, though it, too, hasn't been continuously operated. The DeSoto House Hotel has claimed to be the oldest operating hotel, but not continuously, since it closed for renovations in the 1980s. Both the Palmer House Hilton in Chicago and Beekman Arms & Delamater Inn in Rhinebeck, N.Y., say they're the longest continuously operating hotels, but due to a debate over dates, the score is unsettled. And the Boston Omni Parker House Hotel has thrown down the gauntlet as the "oldest continuously operating *luxury* hotel in the U.S."

Another question that often comes up is what qualifies a hotel as historic in the first place. For its part, Historic Hotels of America abides by the standards put forth by the Secretary of the Interior and National Park Service for the National Historic Register—a minimum 50-year lifespan. Some of the newbies on its list include the Caribbean Motel in Wildwood, N.J. (which opened in 1957) and Hotel Valley Ho in Scottsdale, Ariz. (which opened in 1956). DiRienzo says these properties have been included to "preserve the recent past." Unfortunately, the more distant past is harder to nail down.



Hotel Valley Ho, Scottsdale, Ariz.

