

Caribbean Motel
New Jersey Coastal Heritage Trail
5600 Ocean Avenue
Wildwood Crest
Cape May County
New Jersey

HABS No. NJ-1186

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WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20013-7127

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

CARIBBEAN MOTEL

HABS NO. NJ-1186

Location: 5600 Ocean Avenue, Wildwood Crest, Cape May
County, New Jersey

Present Owner: Gary and Ann Montalbano

Present Use: Motel

Significance: Well-preserved Wildwood motel with distinctive original 1950s architectural features: "levitating" concrete ramp, lean in/lean out glass walls on second-floor lounge, colorful lighting, C-shaped swimming pool, and a large neon sign which required liberalizing town ordinances. The first owners also claim to have originated fake palm trees in the Wildwoods.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: The building was constructed in 1958, except for the west wing, which was built in 1959. (The west wing had been in the original plans, but was postponed for financial reasons).¹ The first portion was designed to contain 21 motel units and one apartment, while the west wing contained 7 motel units.
2. Architect: Although Wildwood's only architect (Gregory Ogden?) approved the construction documents, according to original owners, local builder Lou Morey actually designed the motel.²
3. Original and subsequent owners: Dominic and Julie Rossi, original owners, sold the property in 1985 to Gary and Ann Montalbano.
4. Builder: The motel was constructed by Lou Morey. Today the Morey family continues to impact the area

¹ Dom and Julie Rossi, personal interview, Wildwood Crest, 7/28/1992.

² Dom Rossi, personal interview, Wildwood Crest, 7/28/1992. Rossi has forgotten the name of the architect who signed off on the plans.

through its residential developments and its development of the piers. "Stubey," a Vineland engineer, designed the concrete ramp. Allied Signs, responsible for much of the neon in the Wildwoods, designed the sign. The Rossi's claim that they explained to Harry Lanza of Allied what they wanted, he presented them with four choices, and they selected their favorite.

5. Original plans and construction: The Montalbanos own a 1958 survey of the motel (see page 10).
6. Alterations and Additions: The Montalbanos have made an effort to maintain the motel close to its original appearance. They replaced the "Caribbean Motel" sign in 1991 with an exact duplicate; Allied Sign located in Wildwood used the original blueprints. The last 12' of the first floor's west wing, which originally accommodated parking, now holds a laundry room. The Montalbanos replaced the slate patio with "patio pavers," and covered over with siding the originally louvered openings beneath the room windows. They have also completely renovated the office.

B. Historical Context:

The Wildwood Historical Society has hundreds of late nineteenth and early twentieth-century photographs of the resort's early years--its "Victorian" heritage. Yet when local businessmen approached the Mid-Atlantic Center for the Arts (MAC) in Cape May to begin to promote that history, MAC consultants recommended instead that Wildwood turn to its commercial architecture--its motels, diners, and movie theaters of the mid-twentieth century. The resulting "Back to the '50s" Trolley tour highlights what Wildwood's promoters are calling "Doowop" styles--"Blast Off!," "Pu-Pu Platter," and "Phony Colonee." Architectural features include "Jetson Fins," "Boomerang Rooflines," "Tomorrowland Ramps," and "Levitating Rooms/Signs."³

Beneath the promotional hype lies the point that although the Wildwoods have an earlier architectural heritage, particularly its rooming houses, similar to numerous shore towns--the boom of the late 1950s and 1960s transformed

³ Andy Cripps, Communications Director, Mid-Atlantic Center for the Arts, Press Release "'Back to the '50s' Trolley Tour Returns to the Wildwoods for Summer of 1992," January 14, 1992.

these boroughs. Night is perhaps the best time to understand how the motel architecture dominates the streetscape; the blocks and blocks of mesmerizing neon lights, the spectacular colors, and outrageous designs. Not surprisingly, the architectural boom of the 1950s-60s corresponds to what many regard as the Wildwoods' "heyday"--the club years when performers such as Lionel Hampton, Chubby Checker, Johnny Mathis, Liberace, and Connie Francis entertained the crowds. This concentration of surviving motels is unusual, but a more provocative question might be why these fantastic motels were built in the first place. The Northeast was generally more conservative in its adaptation of 1950s car culture styles, which had its origins in Southern California. This conservatism, according to one architectural historian, particularly applied to structural elements; where the east coast might experiment with more superficial decorative elements, Southern Californians innovated with the buildings' structure.⁴ Why, then, did Wildwood take the direction that it did in the 1950s and 1960s?

One important factor in considering the architectural development of the Wildwoods is the spread and imitation of locally-created design elements. This underlines the influential role of local businesses as builders, and in neon sign and balcony design.⁵ One company, Allied Sign, was responsible for much of the town's lighting designs, as one welding company, Mitchell Welding, designed most balconies. Builders were often responsible for plans, only getting sign-offs from (the town's only) architect, and plans were frequently reused. A closer look at such companies and their designers would explain a great deal about the motels; in these cases the role of the architect is quite diminished. For example, in the Wildwoods one is struck by the prevalence of a distinctive bowed metal balcony shape; Harry Mitchell claims to have created that

⁴ Alan Hess, Googie: fifties coffee shop architecture, (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1985), p.27.

⁵ A tension has existed throughout the shore's development between the impact of big-city suppliers from Philadelphia, Camden, or New York, and the role of local businesses. In the nineteenth and early twentieth century many resorts depended upon the metropolitan suppliers.

design.⁶ In fact, many of the private homes have this style balcony, and other "motel" designs.⁷

The Rossi's were active during the early years of Wildwood's motel boom, and claim to have innovated certain common features. Dom Rossi, a police officer in Vineland, and Julie Rossi, were drawn to Wildwood by Julie's brother (a future mayor) by the prospect of the three going into business together. In 1954 they opened the Wildwood Diner, an important turquoise landmark, which has been expanded since its original construction.⁸ They kept the restaurant open 24 hours, and had difficulty keeping the employees from quitting because of the fast pace of the diner's new service style. The diner was an immediate success (though it still closed in the winter for lack of business), but Julie's brother found the work especially stressful; his doctor advised giving up the business. Because of this and probably other reasons, they sold the diner to their accountant (another future mayor), and the Rossi's decided to build a motel.⁹

Julie Rossi asserts that she had control over many of the design choices--showing the sign artist, for example, "what she had in mind." As for the motif, she was influenced by trips to Florida. The Rossi's claim that their artificial palm trees (inspired by Florida) were the first on the Wildwoods; their first specimens consisted of actual dead palm trunks, topped with a styrofoam ball painted green, which was stuck with fake palm leaves. It was their sign which resulted in the changing of the town ordinance, permitting the much larger, illuminated motel signs so

⁶ Phone interview. Mitchell began in autobody work in 1949, but after a major 1950s fire he built fire-escapes. This extended to balconies and amusement ride repairs.

⁷ During the years of heaviest tourism, many private homeowners turned portions of their houses into rental spaces, commonly the garage.

⁸ According to Dom Rossi, they bought the diner from "Mahoney diner" in New Jersey for \$60,000, and got an architect's approval. Personal interview, 7/28/1992.

⁹ This and the following paragraph are based on a personal interview with Dom and Julie Rossi, 7/28/1992.

common now.¹⁰ They also believe they were one of the first to heat their pool. The Rossi's intended to create an attraction--the colored lights, the neon sign, the C-shaped pool, the lounge's slanted walls--but they were still surprised when people drove by just to gape at their new motel.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: Two-story motel with many details typical of this era in Wildwood motel construction. Features such as the levitating ramp and lean in/lean out glass walls of the second-floor lounge demonstrate the time's preoccupation with "futuristic" effects, while the fake palm trees and C-shaped pool are examples of the motels' pursuit of exotic vacation themes. The design shows a particularly creative use of neon and other night lighting--angular roof moldings are embedded with multicolored lights. The plan is an example of the new functional solutions in 1950s car-oriented buildings, accommodating parking into the design. Extensively-used plate glass emphasizes the era's design preoccupation with making ambiguous distinctions between inside and outside. The building's outrageous decorative elements enable the building itself to be a road sign, in the days when customers sped by at forty m.p.h..¹¹
2. Condition of fabric: The motel is in very good condition.

¹⁰ The ordinance change indeed occurred on April 28, 1958, which coincides with the motel's construction. The original 1950 sign ordinance restricted signs in the residential/hotel districts to a maximum of 16 square feet, while giving total flexibility in the business district. The 1958 amendment provided much more detail on the regulation of illuminated hotel signs, and increased the maximum size to 100 square feet. The amendment created a "Sign Commission" to evaluate all permit applications. Wildwood Crest Ordinances No. 154 and No. 226, Borough Clerk's office.

¹¹ See Alan Hess, Googie: fifties coffee shop architecture, (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1985) for an analysis of car culture architecture.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Overall dimensions: Located on an irregularly-shaped property, the motel's envelope would be approximately 75' x 187', except that the west wing angles inward towards the east wing. The main section is about 22' wide, the west wing is 23' wide, and the east wing is 17.6' wide.
2. Foundations: The motel rests on a cement block foundation. The building has a 3' crawl space to elevate the structure above potential floods.
3. Walls: The motel rooms have frame construction with cinderblock walls.
4. Structural system, framing: Wood framing with cement block walls; deck supported by steel columns; ramp supported by steel braces discreetly connected to triangular steel columns--which gives the ramp the illusion of floating. The ramp marks a graceful sweep from the second-floor deck to the inner court.
5. Porches: The inside courtyard on the first and second floors are lined with 6' wide open porches. The second floor porch has a simple, open iron railing, with three horizontal rails, and vertical posts spaced several feet apart. Most of the other motels (not the Caribbean) used Mitchell Welding, now of Burleigh, NJ, for the railing design.¹² The Caribbean's simpler railing does not detract from the building's other features. In addition, the second floor lounge has an extended seating area, with an interesting see-through canopy.
6. Chimneys: None--except for the boiler system's vent pipes.
7. Windows: The motel rooms have plate-glass windows which comprise the entire wall facing the inner court. The lower portion of these windows were originally louvered to allow for air circulation, but have now been covered with siding.

¹² Phone interview, Harry Mitchell, 7/1992.

8. Roof:
 - a. Shape, covering: Flat built-up roof, recently renovated with rubberized covering.
 - b. Cornice: Angled roof moldings with embedded lights described above.
9. Lighting: At night the Caribbean takes on an a different dimension because of the main sign, the multi-colored lights embedded in the roof and porch moldings, the glow of the pool, and the original office sign advertising "hi fi." According to the Rossi's, there used to be even more lights.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans:
 - a. First floor: The east wing contains parking, the southeast corner has the office, the southern block has motel units, and the west wing has motel units and a laundry room. At the center of the "U" is the swimming pool.
 - b. Second floor: The east wing has a lounge, the southeast corner and south block, and west wing have motel units.
2. Stairways: There are no interior halls in which to house stairways; the open stairways are along the motels exterior. A "levitating" concrete ramp is used in lieu of a stairway to access the second floor of the motel from the pool area.
3. Flooring: The floors are of 2' x 12' plywood boards.
4. Wall and ceiling finish: Cinderblock walls have a stippled plaster finish. Bathrooms have original tiles in four color schemes.
5. Decorative features: The motel's "decorative" distinctiveness lies in its external details; the room interiors are intentionally sparse or unornamented.
6. Lighting fixtures: Although the external lighting is extraordinary (described elsewhere), current indoor lighting is recently modeled. However, an early brochure owned by the Montalbano's shows tear-drop light fixtures in the second-story lounge.

D. Site:

1. General Setting: At the time of the motel's construction, there were no buildings on the other side of Ocean Avenue.¹³ Now another hotel has blocked the Caribbean's ocean view. Interestingly, the motel is oriented so that even initially very few of the guest rooms had ocean views; instead most rooms face the interior court and pool. Although this might be related to the restrictions of the lot's shape, the builder could clearly have made ocean views from the guest rooms more of a priority, and chose not to.
2. Landscape features, enclosures: The motel encloses three sides of an inner court (approximately 115' x 53'), while the fourth side, along Buttercup Road, is defined by a retaining wall and parking spaces. Distinctive features of the court include: the C-shaped pool, a built-in shuffleboard court under the second-floor lounge, a patio area, a natural grass lawn (one of few in the Wildwoods' motels), and fake palm trees. Also of note is the way in which parking was incorporated into the site's design. Many potential first-floor motel units are sacrificed to allow for on-site parking. The intimacy of the cars, particularly their proximity to the pool, is typical of the car-culture innovations of the 1950s.¹⁴ Old photos show that there were originally more shuffleboard courts between the pool and the west wing.

Prepared by:
Alison Isenberg
HABS Historian
Summer 1992

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

A. Old views: The Wildwood Historical Society has an excellent collection of photographs, including many taken by the city's press office in the 1950s and 1960s. The Montalbano's own an early brochure, which contains several photographs.

¹³ Rossi interview, 7/28/1992.

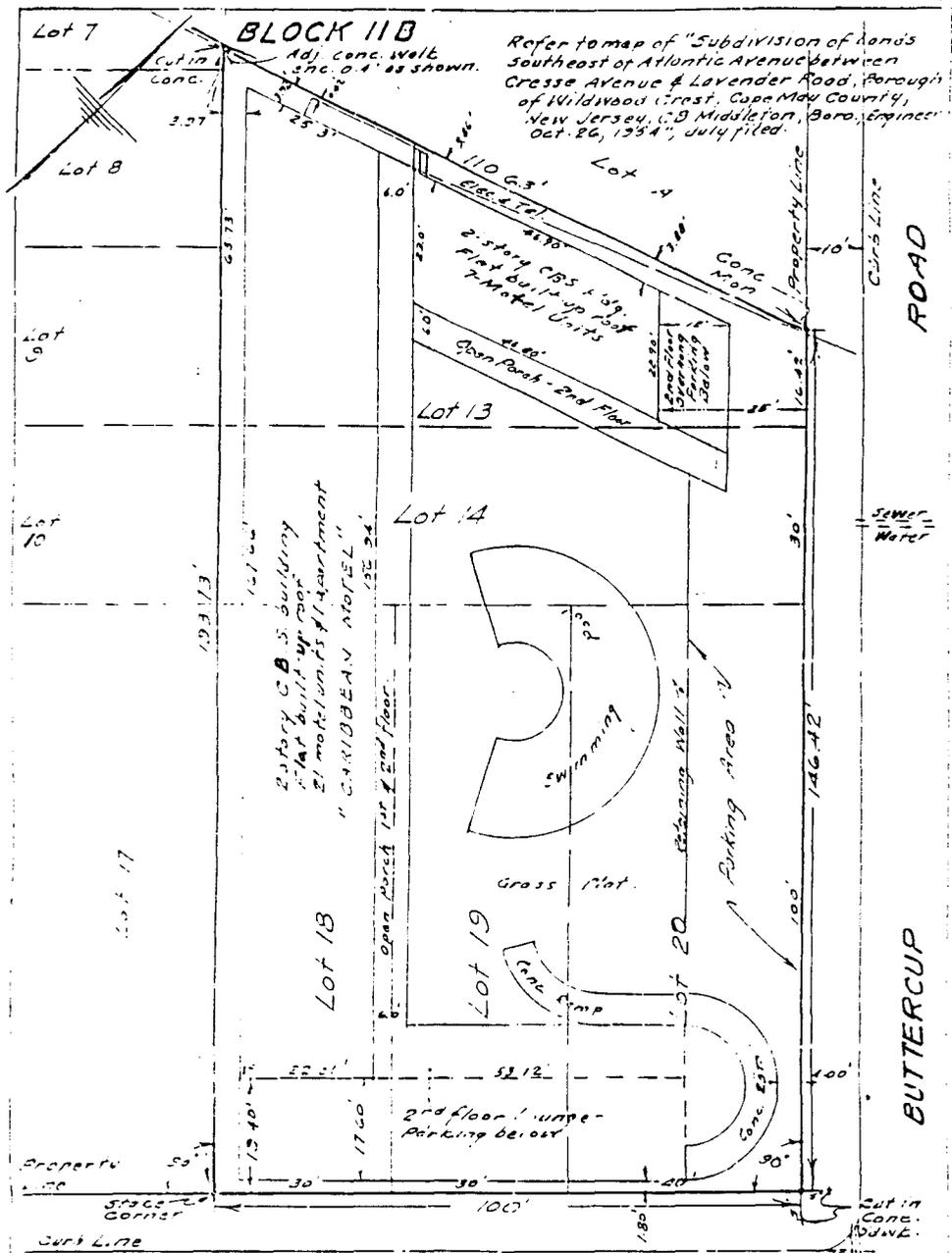
¹⁴ Hess, Googie, p.68.

B. Primary and unpublished sources: The motel's original owners, Dominic and Julie Rossi live next door to the motel during the summer, and in Vineland during the winter. Data pages 11-14 are from the 1988 Caribbean motel brochure. See also:

Sebold, Kimberly, and Sara Amy Leach. Historic Themes and Resources within the New Jersey Coastal Heritage Trail: Southern New Jersey and the Delaware Bay. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of the Interior, 1991.

PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

The project was sponsored by the New Jersey Coastal Heritage Trail (NJCHT) of the National Park Service, Janet Wolf, director. The documentation was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS), Robert Kapsch, chief, under the direction of Sara Amy Leach, HABS historian. The project was completed during summer 1992. The project historian was Alison Isenberg (University of Pennsylvania). The photography was produced by David Ames, University of Delaware, Center for Historic Architecture and Engineering.



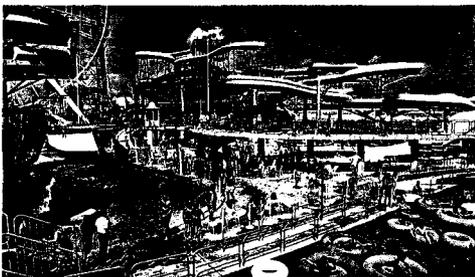
OCEAN AVENUE
SURVEY OF
LOTS 13-14-18-19 & 20, BLOCK 11-B
SUBDIVISION OF LANDS
SE. OF ATLANTIC AVE. BETWEEN
CRISSE AVE. AND LAVENDER ROAD
BOROUGH OF WILDWOOD CHEST
CAPE MAY COUNTY - NEW JERSEY
SCALE: 1"=20'

I hereby certify this plan to be in accordance with survey made January 1, 1958.

C.B. Middleton
C.B. MIDDLETON
CIVIL ENGINEER & LAND SURVEYOR
N.J. LICENSE NO. 3217

Revised in accordance with plans May 23, 1958
C.B. Middleton
C.B. MIDDLETON
CIVIL ENGINEER & LAND SURVEYOR
N.J. LICENSE NO. 3217

"Survey of Lots 13-14-18-19 & 20, Block 11-B"
1958 survey of the Caribbean Motel
courtesy of Gary and Ann Montalbano scale 1"= 20'



WILDWOOD CREST, N.J.

Caribbean
MOTEL

Ocean Ave. at Buttercup Rd.

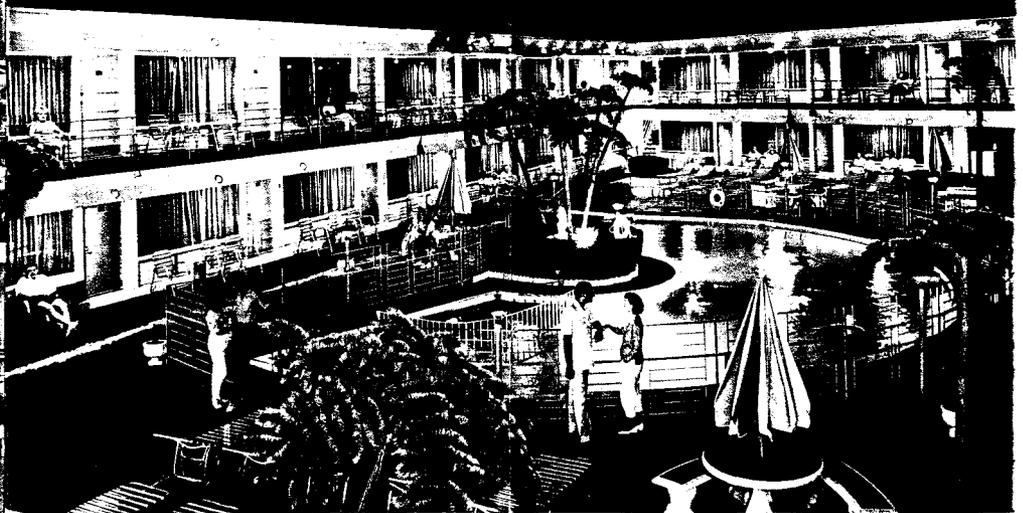
The
Perfect
Resort for
Your Dream
Vacation

WILDWOOD CREST, N.J.

Caribbean
MOTEL

Ocean Ave. at Buttercup Rd.

A
Caribbean
Holiday on
the Jersey
Cape



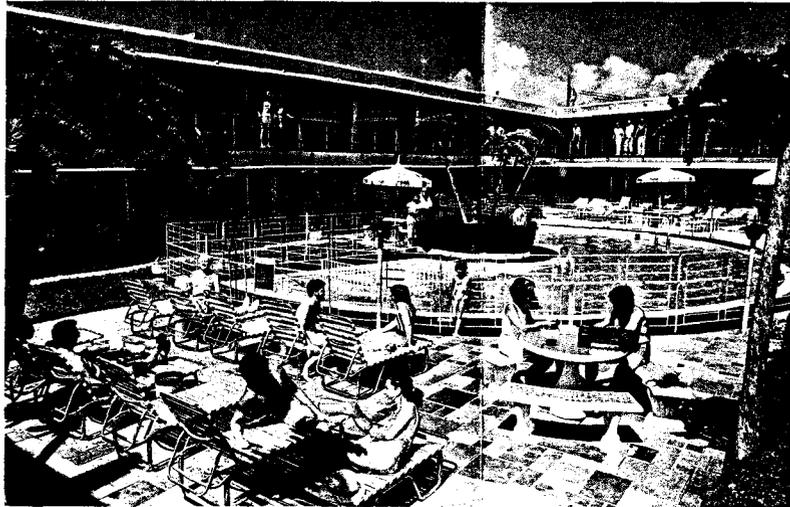
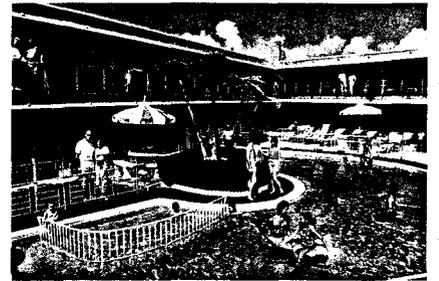
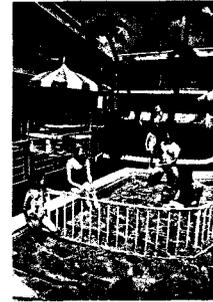
"Caribbean Motel," brochure printed by Aladdin Color, Inc., 1988.
courtesy of Gary and Ann Montalbano

The Glamorous
Caribbean
MOTEL

*A Tropical Paradise
on the Jersey Cape*

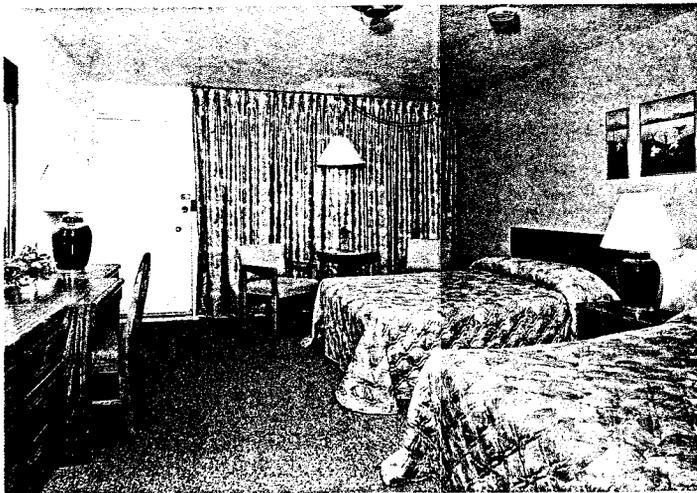
An exciting new holiday idea will be your discovery when you arrive at the elegant Caribbean Motel where the languid, soothing atmosphere of the tropics blends happily with the gaiety and fun of New Jersey's world famous Wildwood. We extend a warm invitation for a restful vacation in our spacious, deluxe rooms where we offer the finest in comfort, convenience and luxury. Whatever your special whim may be...beachcombing, summer sports, barbeque parties, movies, boardwalk attractions, superb dining at fine restaurants or just relaxing ...they're all here for your holiday enjoyment.

Enjoy the palm-shaded splendor of the private Caribbean pool and patio. Swim in the clear, filtered water of our heated, crescent shaped, 100 ft. pool. Step out onto the sundeck for a stroll and a magnificent ocean view.



The safest, friendliest ocean in the world beckons you to come and play. The waters of the blue Atlantic meet the sweeping, white expanse of the world's finest free beach just 200 feet away. Romp on the beach, tussle with the breakers, go in for some memorable boating and fabulous fishing.

"Caribbean Motel," brochure printed by Aladdin Color, Inc., 1988.
courtesy of Gary and Ann Montalbano



Deluxe Motel room. Ocean view and poolside, second floor.

Luxurious
Caribbean
Accommodations

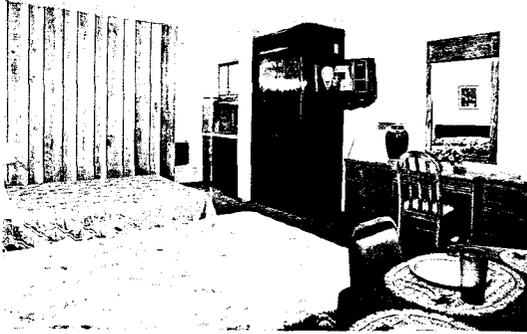
Your dream vacation will focus on the heavenly relaxation of your handsomely designed and luxurious motel rooms, or fully equipped efficiencies. Beauty and comfort blend tastefully in all rooms which feature wall-to-wall carpeting, phones, refrigerator, a full size ceramic tile bath with glass enclosed tub and shower, free cable color TV, free coffee in rooms, large closet areas and a grand view of the pool, patio and ocean. An excellent restaurant next door caters to guests who have worked up a hearty appetite. (Cribs and babysitters available.)

Our bright, new game room should put you in fine fettle with a few turns around the pool table...or try the pin ball machines or ping pong and shuffleboard for added fun. Chat and play a few hands of cards with new friends or just enjoy the soft, sea breezes on the patio.




Mobil Guide Rated

"Caribbean Motel," brochure printed by Aladdin Color, Inc., 1988.
courtesy of Gary and Ann Montalbano



Deluxe one room efficiency. Ocean view and poolside, first floor.

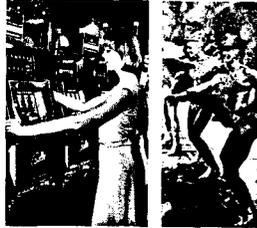


Extra large deluxe efficiency. Facing Ocean and poolside, second floor.



Deluxe motel room facing ocean and poolside, first and second floors.

Caribbean rooms and efficiencies are provided with individually controlled air-conditioning or heating as you choose. Daily maid service, guest laundry facility on premises, and free off-street parking.

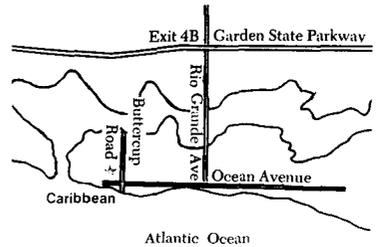


ONLY MINUTES TO FABULOUS SHOWS AND GAMBLING

Exciting Wildwood Pleasures
What ever your interests from shuffleboard to swimming, bicycling to bowling, surfing to sailing you'll find that your holiday is in the right key at the Caribbean Motel and Wildwood. Dance to, thrill to the nation's leading entertainers in smart supper clubs ...fish the blue Atlantic, enjoy golf at a nearby golf course. Choose from the incredible array of attractions on Wildwood's fabulous boardwalk...Beauty Pageants, Kiddie Parades, Fishing Tournaments, Sailing Regattas, and Band Concerts, to name just a few. Nearby attractions include exciting Atlantic City, Historic Smithville, Victorian Cape May, the bird sanctuary at Stone Harbor and interesting Wheaton Village. And most important, you'll be relaxing in pure luxury at Wildwood's most enchanting resort motel.

EASY TO REACH

You don't need a boat or plane to get to the Caribbean...Just drive south on the Garden State Parkway, turn off at Exit 4B. Turn right at Rio Grande Avenue and drive to end. Turn right on Ocean Avenue, drive to Buttercup Road and suddenly you've arrived at the beginning of your most memorable vacation!



Make your reservations today.
CARIBBEAN MOTEL
Ocean Ave. at Buttercup Rd.
Wildwood Crest, N.J. 08260
Phone: 609-522-8292
Your Hosts:
Gary and Ann Montalbano

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"Caribbean Motel," brochure printed by Aladdin Color, Inc., 1988.
courtesy of Gary and Ann Montalbano

ADDENDUM TO:
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Wildwood Crest
Cape May County
New Jersey

HABS No. NJ-1186

HABS
NJ
5- WILLOWC,
1.

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
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