

# The New York Times

## So You Want to Open a Hotel? Now?

Some new hotels and inns are thriving during these trying times by doubling-down on the local market, creating escapist atmospheres and employing other, almost unheard-of tactics.



For the June Motel Sauble Beach, the key to success so far has been government support paired with a slate of virus safety measures, a doubled-down approach to attracting locals and a cool, escapist atmosphere. [The June Motel](#)

**By Sarah Firshein**

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Before the pandemic began, the second location of [The June Motel](#), a 24-room boutique hotel in Sauble Beach, Ontario, was set to open late last spring. To be fully ramped up for Lake Huron's 2020 beach season was the goal.

Construction stopped in mid-April, however, leaving the property's restaurant with half-installed floor tiles and guest rooms that hadn't yet been coated in cheery blush-colored paint. April Brown and Sarah Sklash, the June's co-owners, weighed three scenarios: not open at all; open as a rooms-for-rent Airbnb model without amenities; or push the opening until Labor Day.

"A lot of it came down to: Can we financially wait three months to open?" Ms. Brown said of their decision to delay. "The reason we were able to do that is that we got a lot of subsidies. We got grants; we kept several employees on payroll. There was a lot of support from the [Canadian government](#) for the tourism and hospitality sector."

Over the past decade, tourism destinations around the world saw record hotel development. In 2019 alone, a global construction binge [increased](#) the number of hotel rooms by 8 percent compared to the year before. But in 2020 — and, now, 2021 — the lodging industry has faced almost unbelievable challenges: increasingly [complicated](#) restrictions on [domestic](#) and [international](#) travel, [virus safety protocols](#) that require resources and training, and strict [testing mandates](#) and [quarantine requirements](#) for travelers.

Which leads any rational person to wonder: Is it wise to open a new hotel during a pandemic? According to a recent report by [Lodging Econometrics](#), which tracks the lodging industry, more than 900 hotels opened in the United States last year — more than 100,000 new rooms. This year, another 960 new hotels are expected to open.

The owners and operators fueling these projects are going beyond hiring bartenders and housekeepers, ordering linens and signage, and establishing booking systems and marketing plans. They must also implement disinfection protocols, enforce distancing and mask wearing, and figure out how to make the numbers work in a climate that isn't all that favorable to travel.

For Ms. Sklash and Ms. Brown, the government support was a game-changer, but their success during the pandemic also relied on a slate of virus-safety measures, a doubled-down approach to attracting locals and a cool, escapist atmosphere. Others in the industry have echoed similar tactics — and have even found some unexpected perks during these unprecedented times.

“When you open a new place during Covid, you get to say, ‘This is the experience you get,’” Ms. Brown said. “You’re not saying, ‘This is the new experience.’ It’s just the experience. There was nothing comparable to what we used to do, which can be a benefit.”

## ‘It was down to the bitter end’

Delaying the opening gave Ms. Brown and Ms. Sklash time to create new policies and determine their new priorities. They implemented a shift-coverage system, should a staffer awaken with a fever, and tinkered with personal touches — in-room canned wine, for example, served as a good stand-in for a glass that would have otherwise been poured for a guest at check-in.

When reservations opened in July, Ms. Brown and Ms. Sklash hit their fall financial target in a day, thanks, in part, to organic marketing efforts on [Instagram](#), where the June’s page is a frothy expression of beaches and pastel hues. Within 30 minutes of releasing rooms for Labor Day Weekend, the entire hotel sold out for the three-night minimum.

“The independents aren’t going to be backed up by an extensive brand and marketing program and an enormous customer database,” said [Kate Walsh](#), the dean at Cornell’s School of Hotel Administration, contrasting the opening of smaller hotels to that of larger chains. “So they’re going to have to really double down on how they convey what that experience might be and why.”

Ms. Brown and Ms. Sklash also shifted funds earmarked for the restaurant to the patio, which they kitted out with string lights, stylish furniture and greenery. But two weeks before opening, another outdoor space — the pool deck — was only partially finished.

“Home construction projects were up — everyone wanted to renovate,” Ms. Brown said. “Our contractor went to the hardware store twice a day for at least 10 days before we had the wood we needed. It was down to the bitter end.”



For the Marriott Virginia Beach Oceanfront, procurement of cleaning wares was initially an issue. Gold Key | PHR

Procurement was also an early issue at [The Marriott Virginia Beach Oceanfront](#), a 305-room hotel that opened in May.



At first, the housekeeping team serviced rooms upon request only and left newly vacated rooms empty for at least a day before cleaning them. That strategy worked fine until peak season hit in June, driving occupancy above 50 percent.

“No problem; we’ll buy commercial electrostatic sprayers and sanitize the room,” said Glenn E. Tuckman, the chief operating officer and managing director of the Cavalier Resort Complex, the \$350 million, mixed-use complex that includes the new Marriott. “Problem was: No one had them. The airlines bought them all before the hotel industry realized their value. We found ours on eBay, but we paid for it.”

## ‘There was no playbook’

As hotel owners and operators have confronted the challenges of the pandemic, Dr. Walsh said, safety has emerged as the biggest priority.

“Safety is paramount — it’s the essential part of bringing the guests back,” she said. “And the challenge for hotels is showing that they are safe and secure.”



From tweaking the wellness activities to removing the pens and ice buckets from guest rooms, the Miraval Berkshires made significant changes for its opening during the pandemic. *Miraval*

[Miraval Berkshires](#), the 100-room spa resort in Lenox, Mass. — where this writer spent two nights over Christmas after shelling out tens of thousands of World of Hyatt points — was about 90 percent complete when the pandemic hit. Construction stopped until June 1; the opening was pushed from Memorial Day weekend to mid-July.

Management spent the downtime developing an [enhanced slate of cleaning and safety protocols](#). Pens and ice buckets were removed from guest rooms. Public seating was halved. Extra heat lamps arrived, ready to brave fall and winter in New England. Wellness activities — most of which are included in the room rate — were tweaked for social distancing and vibe; a seminar on resilience was designed with the pandemic in mind.

“There was no playbook for opening a hotel during a pandemic,” said Susan Santiago, the head of lifestyle and Miraval operations at Hyatt, which owns the hotel. “We essentially had to write it and think about how to put it into action at the same time.”

Since the hotel opened, most weeks have sold out at the occupancy limit of around 50 percent, a Miraval spokeswoman said.



The Lytle Park Hotel opened in June. Establishing new protocols upfront allowed it to come out of the gate with fully functional, if slimmed-down, dining. The Lytle Park Hotel

## ‘We wanted to be very cautious’

[The Lytle Park Hotel](#) was on track to open in Cincinnati on March 19. Three days earlier, plans were postponed. Ninety percent of the newly trained staff was furloughed.

The small group that remained established a Covid plan using guidelines from various sources, including the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. When the 106-room hotel, which is part of Marriott’s Autograph Collection, opened on June 3, it did so with about 50 percent capacity in the restaurant, bar and rooftop lounge. Even cocktails got a pandemic spin.

“Garnishes were served on the side instead of in the drink,” said Brett Woods, the hotel’s general manager. “We wanted to be very cautious as we opened into this new environment.”

Mr. Woods said that establishing those protocols upfront allowed The Lytle Park to come out of the gate with fully functional, if slimmed-down, dining. That strategy has been good for business: The socially distanced rooftop bar, he said, quickly became a hit with Cincinnatians angling for drinks and views this summer. Weekend wait times sometimes exceeded two hours.

“Most hotels were doing the opposite: not having any food or beverage,” he said. “Since we were a brand-new hotel, we didn’t want to open without having certain services available to people who would be experiencing this hotel the first time.”



After procuring hand sanitizer in bulk this spring, staff at The Pearl Hotel in San Diego designed custom refillable glass bottles that matched the existing bath amenities. Josh Cho Photography

## ‘It’s been exciting to connect with locals’

After a soft opening in February and nearly immediately shutting down, [The Pearl Hotel](#), in San Diego, reopened in June with Covid-friendly bells and whistles like [Zingle](#), a real-time texting service that allows guests to correspond with hotel management before and during their stay.

“Guests are able to limit physical contact while checking in, but they also get personalized service and they feel they’re being taken care of,” said Carolyn Schneider, president and partner of [Casetta Group](#), the hospitality management group that operates the 23-room boutique hotel.

After procuring hand sanitizer in bulk this spring, Ms. Schneider worked with Casetta’s creative director to design custom refillable glass bottles that matched the bath amenities.



Rooms also feature sealed boxes of sanitized high-touch items, including hairdryers — a detail not lost on Jessica Bender, 51, who has visited The Pearl nine times since July.

“Everything’s clean; there’s sanitizer everywhere,” said Ms. Bender, who works in the film industry in Los Angeles. “They even figured out how to have movies by the pool — I’ve watched ‘Dirty Dancing’ out there.”

As the Casetta Group gears up to open [Casa Cody](#), a 30-room boutique hotel in Palm Springs, Calif., in early March, Ms. Schneider is reflecting on what she calls a “silver lining” at The Pearl: “It’s been exciting to connect with locals we wouldn’t necessarily meet otherwise,” she said.

“A new independent hotel has the opportunity to build a customer base from scratch,” Dr. Walsh, of Cornell University, said. “It might’ve been harder to attract locals before, when people would have gotten on a plane.”



“The expectations from guests when they come to a luxury hotel has not changed,” said Lubosh Barta, general manager of the Four Seasons Hotel Bangkok. “They expect the highest possible level of service.” Ken Seet

## ‘When we come out of this, we will be far more agile’

The luxury market segment, meanwhile, has reckoned with how to extend hospitality and high-end flourishes in the absence of, say, the ability to shake guests’ hands.

At the new [Four Seasons Hotel Bangkok at Chao Phraya River](#), a kids’ club is off-limits for now, but children can play with individually sanitized toys that have been arranged in their rooms. The private setup might also include a personalized play tent bearing the child’s name.

“The expectations from guests when they come to a luxury hotel has not changed,” said Lubosh Barta, the hotel’s general manager. “They expect the highest possible level of service. Despite what is happening around us, they expect it even more.”

The opening of the 299-room Four Seasons was delayed from May to December; during those months, management live-streamed trainings to keep staff engaged from home. Mr. Barta said his team adapted in ways that would have been inconceivable in the Before Times — say, positioning lights based on the recommendations of a consultant working from more than a thousand miles away.

“No one knows how long this will go on, and we’ve learned to operate in an environment that has been unseen, untested in our life span,” Mr. Barta said. “But as a positive, when we come out of this, we will be far more agile and lighter in the way we do business.”