

Turning in to the Turn In Motel...



The iconic Turn In Motel was the first motel built in Warrnambool during the 1950s and it has traded ever since. We take a look inside....

Words and pictures: Carol Altmann

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #A02F2F;"] I [/dropcap]t is without doubt Warrnambool's oldest and most iconic motel: a genuine throw-back to the 1950s when the motor vehicle created a whole new form of accommodation for travellers.

The Turn-In Motel sits on what was once the corner of the Princes Highway and Simpson St, with its red, illuminated sign (that originally said only 'motel') a beacon to those arriving into the seaside town from Melbourne.

The highway has since been diverted, and there are now far more motels in Warrnambool, but although the Turn In has

halved in size, it has never gone out of business and still attracts a steady stream of loyal guests.

"We don't do any real advertising, apart from the RAA website," says current owner **Ken McRae** who, with wife **Merrin**, has managed the Turn In for the past 16 years.

"The same people just keep coming year after year, they just keep turning up, and the only time they don't turn up is when they have died: we have lost a couple," he says.

Indeed at the time of our visit, there was a French couple who were on their third visit and this time they bought some friends from China along as well.

"If we were to go on (the online booking site) Wotif or that sort of thing, we would be over-run I reckon," Ken says, laughing.



The foyer retains its original reception desk and crazy-paving planter boxes typical of the era.



The staircase once led to an in-house restaurant, since converted into a family apartment.

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[/dropcap]isitors are attracted to the budget pricing (\$70-100 per night for a couple) and the homestyle feel of the motel, which has retained some of its original fittings from its earliest days, although much has changed.

“When we bought the place, it was in a very bad way. All of the shower stalls had to be replaced, all of the carpets had to be torn up, it was a real mess,” Ken explains.

The motel once had 51 units (it now has 15) and the in-house restaurant is long gone. Even the much-photographed, much-admired Turn In Motel sign is not the original: it disintegrated in the salt air, but the McRae’s invested \$10,000 in an identical replacement.

Ken is unsure who built the motel (can anybody help?), but it has the tell-tale crazy paving detail on planter boxes inside the foyer that suggest it may have been the work of **Tag Walters, Bruce Auty** or **John Downie**, who specialised in American-inspired designs.



Manager Ken McRae with the original timber filing cabinet used to record bookings. It is still in use.



One of the heavy glass retro bathroom mirrors that several guests have wanted to buy...but a motel is attached.

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[/dropcap]he foyer also features the original timber reception desk, together with a set of thin, sliding wooden drawers that keep track of the paperwork for bookings: the McRaes still use it. The original phone switchboard, where calls were manually put through to each room, is also intact, but no longer functional.

One – actually two – precious items that remain in two of the 15 motel units is an art-deco style bathroom mirror made from thick blue and clear glass, with working lights on each side.

Not surprising, Ken says he has had offers from a number of people keen to buy them.

“I say, ‘sure, but they come with a motel attached’,” he laughs.



An advertising brochure from the early days of the Turn In Motel. Note the sign says only 'motel'. Single units were \$6 per night, including breakfast. John and Pamela Bowker were the in-house managers.

**We at the TURN IN MOTEL Welcome you to our 51-unit
Brick Motel, with parking at your own door.**

Each Luxurious Unit contains —

- ★ HEATING
- ★ REFRIGERATORS
- ★ WIRELESS
- ★ T.V. AT NO EXTRA CHARGE
- ★ TEA AND COFFEE MAKING FACILITIES
- ★ BED AND BREAKFAST TARIFF
- ★ RESTAURANT
- ★ WALL TO WALL CARPETS
- ★ FULLY TILED BATHROOM IN ALL UNITS
- ★ KITCHENETTES AND FULL BATHS IN SOME UNITS

The newly-opened Turn In offered all the latest features, including the original form of 'wireless'!

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #A02F2F;"] A
[dropcap]nd the motel is for sale, with Ken and Merrin keen to retire, although they will continue to live in the house next door for at least the short-term.

"We have done 16 good years. Most motel managers average around five years," Ken says.

Because of the hard work and around-the-clock availability required, Merran has actually talked some people *out* of buying the place, which doesn't sound like a fast track to retirement.

"It has to be the right person: someone who knows what they are getting into, rather than dreaming about what it might be like," Ken says.

The perfect buyer, perhaps, would be a realist with a penchant for retro who could turn the Turn In back to its full, mid-century self.

Interested?



The sun is setting on another chapter at the Turn-In Motel: what will its future hold? Image reproduced courtesy of Lisa Gervasoni.

[box] Did you know the word ‘motel’ is a hybrid of motor and hotel? The Turn In Motel is on the corner of Simpson and Verdon sts, Warrnambool. You can contact Ken and Merrin on 03 5562 3677. [/box]

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