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10 AMAZING CASTLES OF AMERICA

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LAUNCH SLIDESHOW

Eclectic palaces in our own back yard

When the poet G.K. Chesterton wrote, "There are no rules of architecture for a castle in the clouds," he may just as well have been speaking about our nation's castles. From palaces that rival Europe's finest to whimsical abodes, America's castles come in a variety of shapes and styles that reflect our rebellious history as much as our I-can-top-that legacy.

The archetype of the classic Euro-style palace is best found in the Northeast, where a legacy of wealth reigned not so long ago. From Newport, R.I., famed for its mega-mansions, down through the Hudson Valley and across Long Island's fabled Gold Coast, Vanderbilts, Roosevelts and even fictional Gatsby's once put down roots, but few of their homes still stand, due to a lack of historical interest in earlier times.

See our slideshow of America's Amazing Castles.

As grand as they were, many of the structures played to their owners' caprices and passions. Among Newport's grandiose "cottages," **Belcourt Castle's** eccentricities stand out against its neighbors' more austere origins. August Belmont's love for his horses can be seen in the building's layout, with a chunk of the first floor devoted to 30 stables and two main carriage entrances.

America's Gilded Age of the late 1800s saw many behemoth homes go up, the largest of which was **Biltmore**, in Asheville, N.C. One of the nation's few large estates that's still family-owned, Biltmore was commissioned by George Vanderbilt with the idea of recreating a European working estate, a promise it fulfills to this day with its many on-site enterprises, such as wine-making. Visitors can stay at the Inn on Biltmore Estate.

"Most of America's castles were built in the 1920s, before the income tax, when the rich had untold wealth," said Kathryn Farrington, Vice President of Marketing of the Newport County Convention and Visitors Bureau. "Americans are always looking to supersize everything. But the difference between American and European castles is that European castles don't feel very inviting. When you walk into an American castle, you feel as if you've walked into someone's home."

Of all the varieties of American castles, there's only one that can claim a royal pedigree—Hawaii's **Iolani Palace**. "The building is the most significant symbol of the monarchy period," said preservation architect Glenn Mason, "even though it was primarily a ceremonial building." King Kalakaua, a world traveler who wished to expand his nation's international reputation, envisioned Iolani as a grander idea of what his kingdom could be. He did not foresee that Queen Liliuokalani, Hawaii's last monarch and Kalakaua's sister, would be imprisoned in Iolani Palace after the nation's government was overthrown.

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Not all American castles were built on bank accounts. Some, such as **Wing's Castle**, in Milbrook, N.Y., rose out of obsession, or pure will. When Peter Wing returned from his tour in Vietnam in 1969, he was penniless. With recycled materials such as bits of barns and railroads, Wing began construction of a fortress that looks like it's straight out of the 12th century—but adorned with such whimsies as a fireplace situated in the middle of a Buddha's belly and tongue-wagging faces extruding from the stone walls. Almost four decades later, the structure still isn't complete. "I want it to be over with," says Wing, a self-described obsessive-compulsive castle-builder, "but I'm not going to walk away from it."

A similar obsession-fueled castle builder is Edward Leedskalnin used the coral from his Florida land in 1923 to begin what would become known as **Coral Castle**, a monument to the 16-year-old girl who left him the day before their wedding. For 28 years, the Latvian immigrant toiled to create towers, giant rocking chairs, stunningly accurate sundials, and even a nine-ton revolving gate—all of which he claimed to have made himself. To this day, engineers are unsure how Leedskalnin accomplished some of his masonry feats.

For a nation that gave the boot to monarchy, America seems to have enough castles dotting its landscape to please most any palate—from regal to renegade, classic to quirky. With such a wealth of variety (and with the dollar having taken a nose-dive), travelers can be satisfied with postponing a European voyage in favor of exploring the bounty of regal treasures found on their own soil.

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