

Forbes

10 Best Hotels Of The Year 2015

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As 2015 winds to a close, I'm taking this final week to reflect on the past 12 months in all things travel. Over the past two days I looked at general changes to air travel and then critically reviewed specific airlines to recap the "Year In Flight." Today I am revisiting the 10 best hotel experiences I had in 2015. Many of these were new or importantly renovated properties, but some were time tested classics – what they all had in common was that I stayed and critically experienced their charms firsthand. Also, because the luxury hotel boom has gone on unabated, last year I launched two new resources to make it easier for travelers to find critical info, Great Urban Weekend Getaways and Hotel Test Drives.

As a professional travel writer, I have traveled a great deal over the past 20-plus years, and typically stay in 75-100 different places annually. Because the publications I write for skew towards luxury, the hotels I stay in reflect this and are pre-qualified to the degree possible. Nonetheless, more often than not these so called "luxury" hotels are cookie cutter and fail to impress. In many cases, developers think endless expanses of marble or designer staff uniforms make up for service deficiencies and poorly conceived room layouts – note to these hoteliers, they do not.

Today my focus is on just the very best hotels I stayed in this year that impressed me enough so that I would recommend them, regardless of price point. Many were properties I visited for the first time, but a few were repeats. Some I have covered here before in one way or another, and in those cases, I have provided links to past stories for more detail.



The view from the balcony of a hotel room at Big Cypress Lodge is like no other on earth – the hotel is set within the world’s 6th largest pyramid.

Big Cypress Lodge, Memphis, TN: This was the most memorable hotel opening of the year, if only for the sheer audacity and bizarreness of the undertaking. Built as a sports arena in 1991, the Memphis Pyramid is the world’s sixth largest pyramid and once hosted the NBA’s Grizzlies, but has been an empty eyesore along the Mississippi since 2004. When Bass Pro Shops founder and owner Johnny Morris, one of the nation’s wealthiest billionaires, went fishing nearby he saw it and immediately recognized its potential. Known as the “Walt Disney of retail,” for his interactive, elaborately themed and decorated giant stores, Morris is an equally passionate, hands-on, and detail oriented hotelier, running the very impressive Big Cedar Lodge resort outside Branson, Missouri, in the heart of the Ozarks, a property I have been wowed by on my visits. Morris spent more than \$190 million converting the pyramid into a giant retail store, attraction and boutique hotel. The result is simply mind boggling and hard to fathom without experiencing, but the pyramid now contains a huge Bass Pro retail store complete with in-water, indoor marina boat center, the Ducks Unlimited Water Fowling Heritage Center museum, a bowling alley, shooting and archery ranges, restaurants, and the hotel, all linked by a cypress “swamp,” with 600,000 gallons of water features, 2,000 fish, alligators, and very realistic faux cypress trees 100 feet tall that drip faux Spanish moss. The Vegas-style architectural wonder is a puzzle of ponds, streams, tanks and aquariums, all spanned by footbridges. In the center Morris installed the world’s tallest freestanding elevator, which rises to a new penthouse restaurant and outdoor observation deck overlooking the Mississippi. The hotel itself, the Big Cypress Lodge, has a separate elevator lobby and rings the second floor atrium, with rooms, many of them in the form of rustic cabins, some on stilts, overlooking the swamp and retail space, with rocking chair adorned balconies. When staying here, it is very easy to forget you are inside, and especially bizarre at night, when the store closes and only hotel guests are in the vast pyramid. Much of the hotel design is borrowed from Morris’ larger Big Cedar Lodge, and all rooms have hand-hewn beams, virtual fireplaces, plenty of animal mounts, jetted oversized tubs, huge walk-in showers, coffee makers, fresh turn down cookies, and a generous welcome baskets of free snacks. The location is not the best for visiting Memphis, but the experience is so over the top it cannot be missed.