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## Inn-credible

Once slated for demolition, the historic **Simpson House Inn** is now the only AAA Five-Diamond bed and breakfast in North America

By Matt Alderton

**Thanks to its temperate climate, Spanish Colonial architecture, and well-to-do townsfolk,** Santa Barbara, California, is often called the "American Riviera." But before it was a Mediterranean escape for the rich and famous, Santa Barbara was a cowboy town beloved by gamblers and bandits during the California Gold Rush. Unfortunately, a major earthquake destroyed most of the city in 1925, leaving few traces of early Santa Barbara—save for a few surviving landmarks, like the Simpson House Inn.



Built in 1874 by Scottish merchant Robert Simpson, the property was saved from demolition in 1975 by current owners Glyn and Linda Davies, who turned it into a European-style boutique hotel after a 10-year restoration and renovation. Thus, the Simpson House Inn opened in 1985 with 15 guest rooms on nearly an acre of private English gardens.

Soon after, the Davies changed their focus: originally concerned with preserving the property's past, they began thinking instead about building its future. "We had to figure out how to support our large overhead, and we felt that defining ourselves uniquely in the marketplace would do us a lot of good," Glyn explains. "We've always been somewhat upscale, but we looked at the market in Santa Barbara and realized there were no Five-Diamond accommodations of any kind here. We recognized that we could really be unique if we got to that level."

Though it's been inspecting hotels since 1937, rating them since 1963, and giving them "Diamonds" since 1976, AAA didn't begin rating bed and breakfasts until 1991, when Glyn approached the organization on behalf of the California Association of Bed & Breakfast Inns, asking it to start rating boutique accommodations. When AAA agreed, the Simpson House Inn received a Three-Diamond rating, and soon after became one of the first two AAA Four-Diamond bed and breakfasts. The Davies' goal, however, wasn't three diamonds, or four. It was five. The couple quickly established a five-year plan for achieving their fifth diamond.

Working hand-in-hand with AAA, the Davies implemented a series of strategic changes, starting with the property itself, which they transformed with authentic Victorian furnishings and \$17,000 worth of period fabrics and wallpapers per room.

Mostly, though, the Davies focused on customer service. "Service is what separates a Five-Diamond establishment from a Four-Diamond establishment," Glyn says. "We call it 'understated elegance.' You have to remember guests' names. You have to greet them at their cars. You have to carry their luggage. They can't want for anything. It took us a while to learn that and change our corporate culture, but we did it."

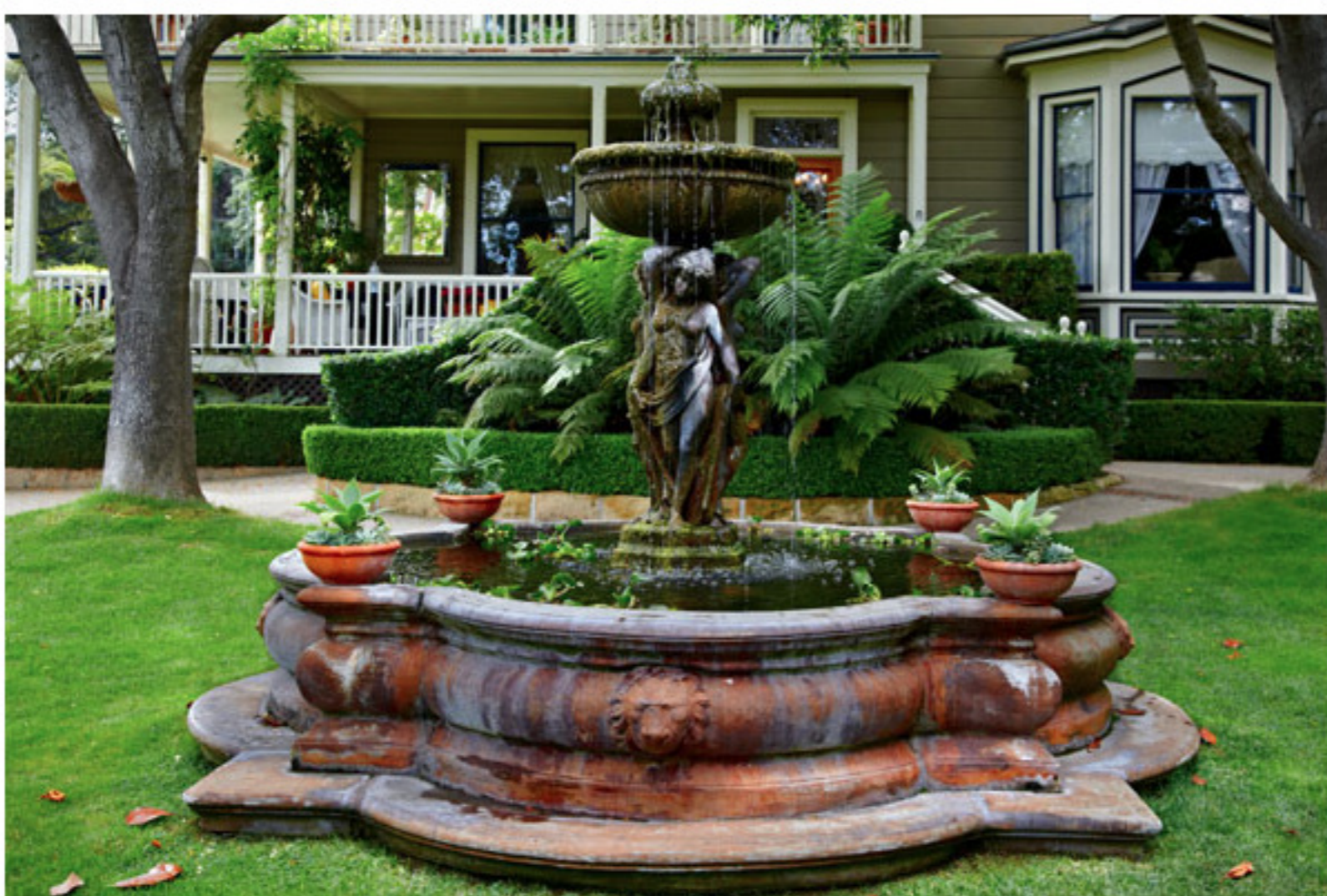


In 1996, the Simpson House Inn became the nation's first AAA Five-Diamond bed and breakfast. The inn has retained its rating every year since, thanks in large part to high-performing vendors, such as Ablitt's Fine Cleaners, who handles the inn's laundry. "Ablitt's and every other vendor associated with the Simpson House is part of a Five-Diamond chain," Glyn says. "If there's a link in the chain that's not Five-Diamond, the whole chain's broken."

Savvy marketing also has been important. In 1997—the early days of the Internet—the Davies launched the inn's website, ahead of most major hotel brands. "We can't afford to spend \$20,000 for a spread in Travel + Leisure, but on the Internet we can look as remarkable as we're allowed to be," Glyn says.

Because it lacks the marketing budget of a Four Seasons or Ritz-Carlton, the Simpson House Inn relies mostly on word of mouth to reach high-end travelers. For the last 15 years, the Davies have been hosting travel writers at the inn; collecting email addresses from their guests, who they remain in constant contact with online; and leaving comment cards in guest rooms, encouraging guests to leave feedback, refer their friends, and write online reviews.

"If you want to build your business," Glyn says, "having a good reputation is the most important thing."



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