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Journey

The Only Game in Town

In hotel lobbies across the country, the old-school table game of mahjong is making a comeback (again). **By Kinsey Gidick**

THE PALMETTO CAFÉ at the **Charleston Place** (doubles from \$415) was packed with women in Lowcountry-casual sundresses chatting over glasses of Prosecco and lining up vibrant green and pink acrylic tiles. The luxury property, like resorts across the U.S., has added the 19th-century parlor game to its list of amenities, and the society set had turned out for the hotel's first-ever Mahjong Night.

The **Ace Hotel New York** (doubles from \$209), in Manhattan, led the way when it started hosting mahjong nights back in 2022, in partnership with Asian lifestyle boutique Chop Suey Club. In Fort Worth, Texas, the new **Bowie House, Auberge Resorts Collection** (doubles from \$439) hosts open-play mahjong evenings in its Billet Room. At the **Thompson Dallas** (doubles from \$300), the spring and fall series of Mahjong & Martini Mondays are so in-demand they're by reservation only. And in Austin, the all-inclusive **Lake Austin Spa Resort** (doubles from \$1,812) makes a point of teaching guests the basics of the game.

"It's beyond popular," says Cindy Present, director of marketing and wellness at the property. "I had no idea that so many guests would choose mahjong over fitness classes."

Martini and mahjong at the Thompson Dallas.



It's not the first time a craze for the game has swept the country, according to Annelise Heinz, a history professor at the University of Oregon and author of *Mahjong: A Chinese Game and the Making of Modern American Culture*. Mahjong was born in China's Yangtze

Delta in the mid to late 1800s, but it first appeared on the international stage in the 1920s, when American consumers were captivated by what they viewed as an exotic pursuit. President Warren G. Harding was one devotee, and Hollywood stars who picked up the game also bolstered its appeal.

In 1937, the National Mah Jongg League, which uses an alternative spelling of the name, standardized the rules of what is now commonly known as American Mahjong. That version, one of around 40 variations worldwide, remains to this day the most widely enjoyed in the U.S.

For Rebecca Hubbard, managing director of the Charleston Place, hosting games is another way to connect visitors to the city—and each other. "Mahjong encourages participants to disconnect from technology and engage in meaningful face-to-face interactions," she explains.

That's a key element of game nights at the Ace Hotel New York, which began as an effort to bring together Asian American and Pacific Islander creatives, says Jenna Price, a spokesperson. "These evenings are a special hub for AAPI New Yorkers to celebrate their heritage through a contemporary lens."

It's just another phase in the evolution of the game, explains Chop Suey Club founder Ruoyi Jiang. "Mahjong has always been about socializing, people supporting each other, and exchanging information," she notes. "Having the ambience of a hotel really adds to that experience."