

The Biltmore Hotel, Coral Gables, Miami

Art lovers may only know it for one weekend of the year, but the home of Art Basel Miami Beach has a lot to show beyond the art By Victoria Charters

The Biltmore Hotel, Coral Gables, Miami has lived many lives over its 80-plus years. Despite maintaining its status as a historic landmark and one of America's most unique and celebrated buildings, the Biltmore is a fully-functioning luxury hotel with all the modern conveniences of a world-class operation.

Built in 1926 by visionary developer George Merrick and his partner John McEntee Bowman along with New York architects Schultze and Weaver (of Waldorf Astoria fame), The Biltmore was intended as a landmark for the community of Coral Gables. Its magnificent spire—an homage to Spain's Giralda tower—was designed to give the Coral Gables community a taste of European flair and sense of luxury. However, the hotel's life as a chic, luxury resort was short. At the onset of World War II, the building became home to



Owner Gene Prescott & Ana Navarro. Courtesy Biltmore Hotel, Coral Gables, Miami.



The Biltmore's grand tower with its world-famous pool in the foreground. Image courtesy Biltmore Hotel, Coral Gables, Miami.



Prescott with the Dalai Lama at the hotel. Courtesy Biltmore Hotel, Coral Gables, Miami.

the Army Air Force's regional hospital and would later be converted to a Veterans Administration hospital before it was abandoned and deeded to the City of Coral Gables in 1973.

And so the building sat, idle for the better part of two decades. It wasn't until the 80s, when investment tax credit began making the aged hotel an attractive proposition for developers, that the Biltmore was gradually brought back to her former glory.

And doing so was no easy task. The project manager of the renovation, Joseph Herndon, describes his first venture into the derelict vacation destination as more of a safari than a site survey. "My flashlight drew a narrow



A dapper colonnade flanks the surroundings of the Biltmore's lush atrium. Image courtesy Biltmore Hotel, Coral Gables, Miami.

bead down the old hallways, once graced by Gatsby-era socialites, validated by healing soldiers, but for the last 20 years, humbled by a population best defined by a naturalist's wildlife manual," he recalls.

Barry Berg, the architect behind the hotel's renovated interior and also the force behind the restoration of New York's Plaza Hotel, notes that the extensive renovation process was a privately-funded operation. "The greatest challenge was to renovate the hotel with the integrity with which it was built—without spending a fortune—and that took a tremendous amount of imagination," he says, explaining that the renovations were "as close to what was there originally as possible." Long-lost original pieces like chandeliers "were replicated from photographs and original drawings."

Current custodian Gene Prescott and Robert Kay of the Seaway Group—known fondly as the Biltmore's "keepers of the flame"—work hard to maintain a level of service commensurate with the hotel's esteemed architecture. Prescott explains he was attracted to the property because "the history gives it

some drama but, most of all, it couldn't be duplicated today—it's one of a kind."

When creating centerpieces for the hotel's historic lobby, Berg's team came up with something at once whimsical and yet strikingly fitting for the grand space. Prominent lobby features include two nine-foot-tall mahogany birdcages with porthole windows inspired by owners Enid and Robert Kay's love of finches and nightingales. "The birds sing in the morning and it fits well. It's a conversation piece," smiles Prescott.

The Biltmore was awarded National Historic Landmark status in 1996; Prescott and his team celebrated by installing around 100 photographs of the Biltmore's past and displaying them throughout the hotel's numerous floors.

About 15,000 a year come to the hotel just to take a tour of the historic grounds. From tours to local weddings to the 1994 Summit of the Americas—when the vacation destination hosted 34 heads of state of the Western Hemisphere—the Biltmore is a hub of activity.

The Biltmore hosts the ARTNEXUS party in celebration of Art Basel



The Biltmore's poolside cabana offers visitors the chance to sit back, relax and enjoy their surroundings. Image courtesy Biltmore Hotel, Coral Gables, Miami.

Miami Beach. Scheduled for December 6th – 9th of this year, the international art show is the American sister event to Art Basel in Switzerland, one of the biggest annual art shows worldwide. Art Basel Miami Beach is a cultural experience, combining an international art show with an exciting program of special exhibitions, parties and events relating to music, film, architecture and design.

Another grand event on the Biltmore's calendar is the Biltmore Holiday Pachanga and Lechon Cup on December 9th. This event celebrating a Cuban tradition was first held in 2004 and, due to popular demand, has become a yearly tradition. This year's cooks will include: Padron Cigar namesakes Jorge and Orlando Padron, Grammy-winning musician Arturo Sandoval, President of FedEx Latin America Juan Cento and various others. Celebrity judges this year will be: Willy Chirino (Grammy-winning salsa singer); Lee Schragar (founder/organizer of South Beach Food and Wine Festival); Michelle Bernstein (chef/owner of Michy's in Miami), Congressman



(Top): Nine-foot-tall mohogany bird cages create atmosphere in the hotel's lobby. (Bottom): The Biltmore's spire at night. Images courtesy Biltmore Hotel, Coral Gables, Miami.

Kendrick Meek (D-FL); and Felipe Valls (owner of Versailles and La Carreta restaurants). Once the judging is done, dinner will be served to over 300 well-heeled guests—the "who's-who" of Miami. ■