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OA ARCHIVE: THE ARCHIVE OF GOOD WRITING

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The Pleasure Domes of Florida

Living high in a low-lying state.

by [Diane Roberts](#)

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At some point in the late Gilded Age of America, rich white people decided winter would no longer be tolerated. The impertinence of cold, the incommodiouness of ice, the dirt of the coal fire, the gray of the sky—these were for ordinary people, not the titans who controlled the banks and the steel mills and the oil fields and the railroads and the bootlegging. They went to Florida.

In Florida the bright air was scented with citrus, the seas were blue as sapphires, the golf courses green as emeralds. It was almost always warm. Best of all, there were the great hotels—gilded, silk-upholstered, sybariti-cal hotels that looked like a charmingly demented version of the Alhambra crossed with the Tower of London, or like some bastard child of a Parisian brothel and a Russian



Orthodox cathedral. If you had the cash, they had the ocean-view rooms, the servants, the swimming pools, the Turkish Baths, the French chefs, the Italian gardens, the New York bartenders, and, best of all, the Old South hospitality. A 1904 railway brochure shows a classical gateway framing a path leading to azure skies, tall palms, and flowers. Two smiling black men beckon you inside: One holds your suitcase; one holds your golf clubs. The cover reads, *The east coast of Florida is paradise regained.*

Without the great hotels—the Royal Palm, the Tampa Bay, the Breakers, the Biltmore, to mention but a few—there would be no Miami, no condo canyons, no I-95, no gated communities. South Florida might still be under water, just as Nature intended.

Just after the Civil War, Harriet Beecher Stowe and some other New Englanders bought real estate on the St. Johns River, believing the air to be salubrious. At the time, Florida was called "the national sanatorium," the theory being that heat was good for consumptives, bronchial cases, and neurasthenics. There wasn't much in the way of amenities. Meanwhile, Hamilton Disston, heir to a Pennsylvania saw-manufacturing fortune, had a notion to drain the Everglades and turn the under-utilized river of grass into the American Mediterranean. He'd build shining white villas and elegant spas, attracting the crème de la crème to what was then the South's poorest, most remote, most backward state. Florida's government sold him four million acres for twenty-five cents an acre. Despite all the dredging and dynamite, the Disston Land Company went bankrupt. In 1896, Disston sat in the bathtub at his Philadelphia mansion and blew his brains out. No pleasure domes ever got built in the Everglades.

Disston's mistake was trying to market Florida's soupy, snakey innards (considered fit only for Confederate deserters, Seminole Indians, misanthropes, and alligators); the smart money heads for the coast, and looks out to sea.

Henry Flagler—oil baron, railroad king, creator of the Florida resort—knew this, and by the 1890s he and his fellow Yankee Henry Plant had run railroads down the Gulf and Atlantic coasts of Florida, punctuating their lines with glamorous hostelries. On Plant's line: Clearwater, Tampa, Punta Gorda, and Fort Myers. On Flagler's line: St. Augustine, Ormond Beach, Palm Beach, Miami, and, eventually, Key West. Plant invested in Southern express companies and railroads before, during, and after the Civil War. His railroads connected Georgia with Florida and pushed through what is now Orlando to Tampa and its gulf port, from which Plant ran steamships to Cuba. In the 1890s, you could ride a Plant System train along the Gulf of Mexico right up to the door of your hotel.

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Henry Flagler made his first hundred million joining up with John Rockefeller at Standard Oil. He discovered Florida in the late 1870s when he brought his first wife, Mary, down to St. Augustine for her health. He hated it. The hotel was lousy—literally. The sheets were mildewy. The other guests were in the last stages of tuberculosis. Though the woods teemed with game, the rivers ran with fish, and the fields and groves were fat with winter vegetables, dinner always came out of a can. Flagler told Mary it was fine by him if she wanted to hang around in this primitive backwater, but he had oil deals to cut. She, the dutiful Victorian wife, wouldn't stay without him. So back to New York they went, Mary coughing daintily.

The therapeutic air of Florida never had a chance to work: Mary Flagler died in 1881. Two years later, Henry Flagler married her former nurse-companion, a redheaded actress called Alice Shourds. For some reason, they chose St. Augustine for their honeymoon. This time things were different. This time Flagler liked Florida so much he thought he'd buy it. He bought whole railroads, whole towns, whole islands. He bought utility companies, city tram lines, newspapers. He bought mayors, legislators, governors. Nothing got in the way of his hotels, strung down the Atlantic Coast like the enormous Tahitian pearls he fastened around Alice's long, white neck.

His first hotel was the Ponce de Leon, named after the Spanish aristocrat who tripped over Florida in 1513 on his way to find the magical Island of Bimini. The Ponce was a vast fantasia on a Spanish palace. It was unlike anything seen before in the South, with acres of flamingo-pink alabaster, onyx mantelpieces, ceilings painted by George Maynard and windows crafted by Louis Comfort Tiffany. A newspaper re-porter standing in the roof garden at the Ponce swooned over the grandeur, sounding like he was standing in the clouds above New York rather than little St. Augustine: "Beneath us humanity is pygmified, and the heretofore great buildings of the city are awed into insignificance."

After the Ponce, Flagler built the Alcazar, the Ormond, the Cordova, the Royal Palm, the Royal Poinciana, and the Breakers. He founded towns for his railroad and hotel workers, pushing civilization down into the swamps and the marshes, into the wild lands where the Third Seminole War had been fought to an ignominious draw, where the land was inclined to become water at any moment.

Flagler gets credit for inventing Miami, but his magnum opus, his Garden of Earthly Delights, was Palm Beach. One day in the early 1890s, Flagler was out on his yacht, trying to avoid his wife Alice, who had discovered spiritualism and spent hours consulting the Ouija board, when he came upon a slim barrier island of creamy sand. It had supposedly been settled by a Confederate draft dodger named Augustus Lang. The place was so remote that Lang didn't get word of Appomattox until 1867. When Flagler happened by, the island was inhab-ited by a little clutch of no-hopers who couldn't believe that this rich fellow actually wanted to pay good money for these homesteads. Until then, the islanders' biggest score had been in 1878, when the Spanish ship *Providencia* ran aground, dumping its cargo of twenty thousand coconuts and one hundred cases of wine all over the beach. They drank the wine and planted the coconuts, which grew into tall, graceful trees, which attracted Flagler all the more. This place *really* looked like Florida.

In 1894, Flagler opened the Royal Poinciana on the western—or lagoon—side of Palm Beach, just about simultaneously with the completion of the Florida East Coast Railway line on the mainland. The hotel was in the shape of the letter F, a "neo-Georgian" suffering from gigantism, all pediments and garlands, shutters and porticos, columns and symmetry. The Royal Poinciana stood six stories high and had over five hundred rooms. It had a shopping arcade called "Peacock Alley," where the swells could buy jewelry, im-ported gewgaws, and Paris fashions. The pity of it was that the Royal Poinciana was only open during the winter. The guests never saw the great flame tree, after which the hotel was named, in bloom. But what did they care? The place had electric lights and room service.

Fine touches were in abundance. Plant impressed his guests with Spanish tile, Japanese porcelain, and a set of chairs that had once belonged to Marie Antoinette—spoils of his wife's shopping trips to Paris and London. The grand hotels of Florida borrowed promiscuously from famous monuments of the Old World. Visitors were invited to imagine themselves in Italy, soaking in the perfume of the orange groves, or in a prelapsarian garden. Towns were named Naples, Venice, Venus, Utopia. The Miami Biltmore, jewel of the obsessively planned Coral Gables (known as "The City Beautiful"), boasted a tower copied from the Giralda of Seville. The Breakers was modeled on the Villa Medici in Rome. Other hotels looked like a huge Swiss chalet or a colonial viceroy's Caribbean plantation. Plant's flagship, the Tampa Bay Hotel, was built in the "Islamic Revival" style—mostly. It has onion domes, silver towers, and crescent moon finials: an Arabian Nights palace by way of Moscow with state-of-the-art plumbing.



A hotel is not home. Especially a resort hotel. Some people did and do live in city hotels, but only the few Olympian rich are accustomed to thirty-foot ceilings, Frette linens changed daily, rooms tidied twice as often, and an army of house slaves to cater to every half-articulated desire. For the rest of us, a hotel is better than home. A hotel is where you can perform mildly transgressive acts, such as throwing your towels on the bathroom floor or leaving a plate of half-eaten cake in the bed with the certainty that someone else will clean up after you without yelling at you. A hotel is also where you can perform seriously transgressive acts—having an affair, committing a crime, taking on a different identity.

Everybody changes a little in a fancy hotel. You try to eye the marble and the gilt, the Italian

silk curtains and the French carpets, with a certain *froideur*, as if you were perfectly accustomed to such things back on Pineview Drive. Under Murano glass chandeliers, you sit up a little straighter and enunciate your drink order a little more loftily. You could be anyone; you could be *someone*.

The Breakers in Palm Beach, the Nautilus and the Roney Plaza in Miami Beach, the Biltmore in Coral Gables—these weren't just the accommodation at the destination, they *were* the destination. As "In Pursuit of Pleasure," the new exhibition at Miami Beach's Wolfsonian Museum, demonstrates, these hotels were so lush, so elegant, so like a lovely cage (as Henry James said) padded with the softest velvet, one hardly needed to go outside, at least in daylight. At the Royal Poinciana, or the Breakers in Flagler's day, one hardly left the building except to play golf. Later, when tanned skin became the fashion, one hit the beach. In New York, where Leonard Schultze and S. Fullerton Weaver designed the Pierre, the Waldorf-Astoria, and the Sherry-Netherland, it was obviously a different deal: In the great metropolis, the smart set went out on the town as often as they lounged about indoors. Palm Beach and Miami in the 1920s, however, were small towns. There wasn't much to do.

But nobody went to Versailles during the reign of Louis XIV to hang around the local villages; you went to see, to be seen, to be beautiful in a beautiful setting. A photograph in the Wolfsonian's accompanying volume shows guests posing at the entrance portico of the Breakers in 1926: a man in a sharp riding jacket, women in the newest clothes from Paris, the short skirts popularized by Mlle. Chanel, and very high heels. A postcard of the lounge at the Nautilus looks like the grand salon of a Riviera villa, a fitting backdrop for those gaudy souls F. Scott Fitzgerald called the Beautiful and the Damned.

Schultze and Weaver do not, as Cathy Leff of the Wolfsonian points out, "rank among the pioneers of modern architecture." Nonetheless, the vast edifices they made in New York and South Florida were the ne plus ultra of glamour. The plans of their principal work look like designs for a Modernist afterlife. In one drawing, the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel thrusts itself, silvery-bright, into a gray sky. Thirty stories below sits a little Victorian church—squat, dim, dwarfed by this rocket-topped, twentieth-century palace. In another sketch, the Waldorf tower shoots out rays of light. The catalogue says the beams suggest "a positive engagement with technology." Or maybe the New Jerusalem powered by Edison.

The photographs—of Babe Ruth playing golf at the Miami Biltmore in 1930, of picture-hatted ladies at a 1924 Nautilus Hotel tea dance, of slim women and slick-headed men on the beach at the Roney Plaza in 1929—illustrate a world of determined privilege. These heiresses and industrialists, gangsters and movie stars, politicians and Wall Street Caesars, congregated in Manhattan for the debutante and opera season, then flew south like ruddy ducks to winter in Florida. The collapse of the Florida land boom in 1925, the great hurricane of 1926, and the stock market crash of 1929 could not destroy their gilded leisure nor the hotels that catered to them. Photos of Jazz Agers are always interesting: They look like today's darlings of *People* magazine, with their sloe-gin smiles, yet also seem, with their complicated hosiery and headgear, to belong to an age as far distant as the Renaissance.

The exhibition, on view through May, shows how these hotels were planned and set-dressed as if for a Busby Berkeley musical. The sheets, the china, the carpets, the wallpaper—they all had themes. If you dined in the Miami Biltmore, you'd eat off plates painted with Spanish galleons and tropical flowers. If you sauntered through the Grand Loggia at the Breakers, the ceiling was painted like a Palm Beach sky on a sunny day. Everything about Schultze and Weaver's grand hostelries was calculated to reinforce the guests' sense of prestige, of being set apart from the masses outside. Blueprints reveal how much care was taken in creating kitchens, boiler rooms, and laundries both near the public spaces (so needs could be catered to quickly), and hidden from them (so the guests might imagine that those petit fours, those shined shoes, and those fluffy towels all appeared as if from fairyland).

Le Roi Soleil would feel at home in the Sunshine State, especially Miami Beach. In 1954, Morris Lapidus named his vast hotel there for the royal castle of Fontainebleau, not far from the Eden Roc, named after the famous hotel at Cap d'Antibes. Miami Beach is itself second-hand sand. In the early 1900s, it had been a sixteen-hundred-acre island covered in mangrove. But Carl Fisher, millionaire inventor of the automobile headlight, had it dredged, cleared, and augmented to where it became twenty-eight-hundred acres of quality real estate in Biscayne Bay. Now the tanned flutter off to South Beach, where they alight at one of the restored hotels of the Art Deco Historic District: the Ritz-Carlton, the Colony, or the Chelsea. Or, if they can afford it, check into the Delano, Ian Schrager's white-on-white-on-white, minimalist "urban retreat," where they dance until the sun rises beyond Grand Bahama.



When the Breakers opened in 1900, Henry Flagler decreed that the natives weren't allowed inside—by the front door, anyway. Floridians built the Breakers, living in a shanty town they called "the Styx," and were among the thousand servants who made the beds and dusted the ormolu clocks, who polished the mirrors and trimmed the hedges. But they were supposed to stay out of sight of the paying customers. Flagler wanted to attract what he called "that class of society one meets at the great watering places of Europe." No dogtrot cabin-dwellers or descendants of dogtrot cabin-dwellers. No land-poor white folks.

By the time the Breakers opened, the east coast of Florida had become far more fashionable than the west coast. Henry Flagler had outlasted Henry Plant, who died in 1899, even though Flagler's second wife, Alice, had gone insane. She told everyone she planned to elope with the

Tsar of Russia. Flagler spent hundreds of thousands of dollars bribing members of the Florida Legislature to change the law so that he could ditch Alice and marry Mary Lily Kenan, a nicely brought-up North Carolina girl he'd been sleeping with. He already owned the important newspapers in Miami, Palm Beach, and Jacksonville, so they naturally editorialized that if a man found himself legally shackled to a crazy woman, it was just plain common sense to let him set her aside. Finally, what everybody called the "Flagler Divorce Law" passed in April 1901. Flagler and Mary Lily, almost forty years his junior, settled in a white marble mansion around the corner from his Palm Beach hotels and kept on spending money.

In its various iterations, the Breakers attracted actors, gangsters, Eurotrash, and most of "The 400," the toffiest of Social Register toffs, so called because four hundred was the number of people who could cram into Caroline Astor's New York ballroom. J.P. Morgan, Andrew Carnegie, assorted Vanderbilts and Rockefellers all wintered at the Breakers or at the Royal Poinciana, confident that they wouldn't have to brush against anyone who was no one.

Henry James stayed at the Breakers in February, 1905, at the height of "the Season." He'd come over from London for a rare visit to his homeland and discovered that this was the fashionable place to be. He praised the local produce, "the admirable pale-skinned orange and the huge sun-warmed grape-fruit." From a perch in one of the padded and be-palmed salons, he observed the fauna of what he called "hotel-civilization": plutocrats with their golf clubs and cigars, lace-swathed ladies dozing on chaise longues, and heiresses "as perfectly in their element as goldfish in a crystal jar."

Henry James would be glad (one supposes) to discover that Palm Beach still swims with heiresses-Hiltons, Pulitzers, and Trumps—hair as gold as those goldfish, skin as perfect as that crystal. And Palm Beach still vibrates with scandal: a Pulitzer humiliated through adultery, a Kennedy charged with rape, a Trump convicted of bad taste. Not at the Breakers, though. The profoundly moneyed now live in their own demi-palaces on the Atlantic. These days they leave the Breakers to conventions of dermatologists or cable TV executives. And maybe the shade of Henry Flagler, though he died just a few miles away. One day in 1913, he took a bad fall on the bathroom floor. Mary Lily was somewhere in the house, possibly up in her rococo boudoir, self-medicating (they said she liked to mix bourbon and laudanum). It was some while before the servants found him, his eighty-three-year-old bones shattered.



The tourist board used to have this slogan: "Florida—the Rules are Different Here." Whatever repressive regime you were used to—the coat and tie, the meat and potatoes, the "yes sir, no sir," the 6 a.m. alarm, the 6 p.m. news—in Florida you would be free at last. Even the laws of Nature were suspended: Flowers blossomed in January.

In Florida, it's hard to hang on to the past. Almost all the old pleasure domes are gone. Plant's Hotel Kissimmee and Hotel Punta Gorda both burned, the Ocala, the Seminole and the Fort Myers were razed. Flagler's Ormond was torn down. So were the Royal Poinciana and the Royal Palm. The Tampa Bay Hotel and the Ponce de Leon belong to colleges now, and the Alcazar houses the St. Augustine City Hall.

The Breakers survives in its 1926 version. The original was constructed largely of pitch pine, and went up like kindling first in 1903, then again in 1925. The hotel dance band evacuated to the beach where they played "There'll Be a Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight" as flapper debutantes danced the Black Bottom in the surf. In the Tapestry Bar at the Breakers, a room as cool and dim as a cathedral, with a large fifteenth-century Flemish tapestry hanging on the high walls, you can savor Krug "Grande Cuvée" for sixty bucks a glass and listen, through big French doors that open onto the courtyard (their gauzy white curtains stirring in the salt breeze), to the deep music of the Atlantic.

One day the Delano, the Chelsea, the Mandarin Oriental on the pile of fill dirt they call Brickell Key, the Four Seasons downtown on land that might, if a force-five hurricane hit it, find itself drowned—one day these will be "historic." These will be the notorious, fabulous sites of the romantic past.

I stayed once in the Four Seasons in Miami. The shampoo in the marble bathroom was French and expensive and definitely worth stealing. The staff called me by name. The orchids in my vast, sunny room were replaced daily. I had a view of the Port of Miami, the old downtown, and part of the beach. I'd sit there in the window seat, watching the Atlantic sky go from turquoise to carnelian while the lights came on across the city. Mostly they were just the white-and-red of cars on the interstate or the cold yellow of office lights or the dirty orange of street lights. But in a few places I could see bright colors—parrot green, hibiscus pink, grape-jelly purple. Telltale signs of old Florida motels hanging on with maybe only a few tubes of neon left. I knew the next day I'd go check them out and find them sad and weirdly poignant, like a soiled dance dress, but recalling that dream of Florida as glamorous, exotic, and fine as any duchess that ever threw back a glass of Chateau Margaux in the Biltmore. ■

Image from Grand Hotels of the Jazz Age: The Architecture of Schultze & Weaver (Princeton Architectural Press, 2005)