

## Boca Raton—Sarasota's East Coast "Cousin" The Boca Raton Resort & Club is a World Unto Itself

Sarasota's east coast, 20's era cousin, Boca Raton, is just different and just far enough away to make you feel you've gotten away from it all for some R & R or a much-needed vacay. But it's also close enough that you can drive and explore how the other half (of the state) lives.

Boca Raton is in Palm Beach County which was incorporated in May, 1925. The 2006 population recorded by the U.S. Census Bureau was 86,396, so it is of similar scale to the city of Sarasota.

Listed on early maps as "*Boca Ratones*," many people assume the name is simply translated to "Rat's Mouth." The Spanish word *boca* (or mouth) was often used to describe an inlet, while *ratón* (literally mouse) was used by Spanish sailors to describe rocks that gnawed at a ship's cable (or as a term for a cowardly thief—or, perhaps alluding to a certain Mr. Madoff who was known to spend a lot of time in Palm Beach County).

The name *Boca Ratones* originally appeared on eighteenth century maps associated with an inlet in the Biscayne Bay area of Miami. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, the term was mistakenly moved north to its current location on most maps and applied to Lake Boca Raton, whose inlet was closed at the time.

As John Ringling left his stamp on Sarasota, Addison Mizner left his on Boca Raton. However, Mizner was an architect, not just a developer, whose Mediterranean Revival style left an indelible stamp on South Florida where it continues to inspire architects and developers.

Throughout the Florida land boom of the 1920s, Mizner envisioned and began to plan Boca Raton as a major resort destination. He was the brother and sometime partner of businessman, raconteur and playwright Wilson Mizner. The brothers' series of scams and picaresque misadventures were the inspiration for Stephen Sondheim's *Road Show*.

At age 46, Addison moved for his health to Palm Beach. His Mediterranean Revival designs, beginning with the Everglades Club, won the attention and patronage of wealthy clients in Palm Beach and West Palm Beach. The 6 foot 2 inch, 250-pound bon vivant epitomized the "society architect." Rejecting modern architecture for its "characterless copybook effect," he sought to "make a building look traditional and as though it had fought its way from a small, unimportant structure to a great, rambling house." Both Mizner and Ringling were equally big physically and in their vision. And both shared a passion for Italian architecture as well.

But in early 1925 Mizner entered into the Florida land boom with disastrous consequences. He formed the Mizner Development Corporation, a syndicate of prominent investors, to buy and transform Boca Raton from an unincorporated town into a resort dubbed the "Venice of the Atlantic." Hmmm, are we having Ringling *déjà vu* yet?

The group purchased over 1500 acres on which was planned a 1000-room hotel, golf courses, parks and a 160-foot wide grand boulevard called Camino Real—all envisioned by Mizner.

In an address before 100 salespeople, the architect declared: "It is my plan to create a city that is direct and simple... To leave out all that is ugly, to eliminate the unnecessary, and to give Florida and the nation a resort city as perfect as study and ideals can make it."

At first it appeared his enterprise would succeed. Sales at Boca Raton reached \$26 million in the first 24 weeks, and Mizner used the money to design and built infrastructure, the administration building, a 100-room hotel called The Cloister Inn, and some houses, although none of the proposed oceanfront mansions.

The present day **Boca Raton Resort & Club**, which opened February 6, 1926 as the Ritz-Carlton Cloister Inn, was designed by Mizner and was supposed to have been the latter part of an oceanfront hotel.

However, land sales were declining as the speculative real estate bubble deflated. To revive investor confidence, sales and working capital, Mizner promised in advertisements to continue the project regardless. But nervous Mizner Development Corporation members started resigning and unpaid contractors began to sue for payment.

Then in September the 1926 Miami hurricane hit the coast, causing considerable damage. The project was, as Wilson Mizner put it, "nixed by nature." Addison Mizner went bankrupt. The Boca Raton holdings were sold to public utility magnate Clarence H. Geist for \$71,500 and an assumption of about \$7 million in debt.

Subsequently, the U.S. Army used the club as barracks during World War II. Touted by officials as "the most elegant barracks in history," it housed soldiers during the Boca Raton Army Air Field's operation.

Mizner died in 1933 of a heart attack. (Ringling died in 1936.)



above:  
The Entrance to the Boca Raton Resort & Club is still as elegant as when Addison Mizner built it back in 1926.



left:  
The Resort's Spa Palazzo (shown here is its exterior pool) is modeled after the Alhambra in Spain and offers everything from facials to steam rooms for men and women.

below:  
The Boca Beach Club is a 212-room separate unit that sits right on the Atlantic. It has three pools, restaurants and beach access. You can stay there or shuttle to and from other parts of the hotel. It has recently undergoes a major renovation.

His buildings were typically dismissed by Modernist critics. Many were torn down and redeveloped, but those that survived are now usually on the National Register. In March 2005, an 11-foot tall statue of the architect by Colombian sculptor Cristobal Gaviria was erected in Boca Raton at Mizner Boulevard and U.S. 1 to commemorate his visionary contributions to both the city and Florida architecture. In addition, an elementary school in Boca Raton was named for him in 1968.

Throughout postwar times, the Boca Raton Club's ownership and ultimately moniker was changed. The Schine family purchased the club in 1944, renaming it the Boca Hotel and Club. Affectionately known as The Boca Raton, it was part of the Schine portfolio that included the McAllister and Biltmore Hotels.

Arthur Vining Davis, the brainchild of the Arvida Corporation, modernized the hotel. Opening the Boca Raton Club Tower in 1969, the building is still considerably taller than any other building in southern Palm Beach County. In addition, its famous "Boca pink" color has made it more famous than its stature of 300 feet and 27 floors.

Arvida also constructed the resort's beach club in 1980 on the site Mizner intended the main hotel to stand on. VMS Realty, Incorporated, the successors to Arvida, purchased the property in 1983 and renamed the hotel to the current

Boca Resort & Club in 1988.

The cloister and tower rooms were redesigned in 2006 and this year the Beach Club completed a \$120 million renovation. LXR Luxury Resorts has operated the resort until this spring.

The property has taken yet another turn in its colorful history and this one moves it even further into the upscale echelon. This spring it became part of the Waldorf Astoria Collection.

A visit two decades ago was memorable: the elegant drive into the property and the charming registration area and arcade. There was the main part of the hotel—a shrine to 20s architecture—but also the Tower, a swimming pools and brand new meeting space.

The Resort catered to toney guests and well paid business clients in for a meeting or a conference. Fast forward and the landmark



entrance is still there, beautifully maintained. But the rest of the property has grown so much it's almost like a village and nearly dwarfs the original 20s era part of the property. The result is likely to please more than it will dismay. There's old and new and enough variety to satisfy any taste.

The Resort sits in the heart of Boca Raton in Palm Beach County which has loads to do and see, but once you enter this pleasureopolis, you may just leave the car with the valet until you unfortunately have to leave.

Probably the toughest part of staying here is deciding what you want to do. They have tennis, golf, a spa, several pools and loads of restaurants. As for accommodations you have to decide whether you'll go for the classic main part of the Resort called the Cloisters or head to the adjoining Yacht Club with its Venetian theme or head to the Beach Club on the Atlantic Ocean. Oh yeah, it's all spread out on 356 acres.

To help you get your bearings, you enter at the registration area then you can shuttle via water taxi or shuttle bus to and from other parts of the property.



Palm Court is a great place to start the day with a buffet breakfast overlooking the Intercoastal. The room is atrium-like with a striking high ceiling with palm trees and bright blue upholstered seating.

The shiniest new jewel in the crown is The Beach Club which recently reopened after a renovation. It appeals to families wanting to spend the day in their Billabongs, not their Ralph Laurens. It features three pools, an oceanfront bar and private cabanas. The pools were jamming with people on an early spring weekend even as workers were putting the last dabs of paint on the walls.

While this was the busiest part of the property, it was all well behaved, and orderly. The smell of grilled hamburgers also made it entirely civilized. Trays of sushi, salads, and fancy cocktails were delivered poolside nonstop. Smelling a hamburger sizzle, while my own skin was more or less doing the same, was too hard to resist—I had to have one. It was perfect.

The Beach Club also offers beach access just a few steps away from the pool area. But one of the peculiarities of human behavior is that when there's a choice between an ocean and a pool, people swim in a pool.

The 212-room Boca Beach Club rooms are on the Atlantic or overlook the Intracoastal Waterway. The redesign included the lobby, restaurant and bars, guestrooms, fitness center, and children's activity center.

We stayed in the Yacht Club, 112 rooms with a Venetian theme just off the main part of the hotel. The majority of the rooms have a view of the Intercoastal and offer a big huge sun coming in when you awaken. There's a pool nearby, but you can get a land or water shuttle to the Beach Club.

Rooms are fabulously spacious with a bath with tub and separate shower. There's a spacious sleeping area adjoining a sitting area with desk on one side and a sofa area opposite it. They discretely tucked away the large TV in an armoire and also managed to include a minibar without too much notice. Best of all, there's a very large deck for taking in the lovely view of the water. That's what you expect—even fantasize about—in a Florida Resort and you get it here.

Other sleeping options include the 27-story Tower which also offers great views and The Cloister which gives you the feel of the original 20's building, but with all the modern trimmings. If you really want top of the line, consider the Boca Bungalows—it's just like having your own beach home away from home.

As I recall from my previous visit, dining options were pretty limited, but that is where there

has been the biggest change. The ground floor of the main building feels like a stroll down restaurant fantasyland.

There's the sweet shop, Serendipity, which kids from all ages will love (it's modeled after the New York City original), a very hip sushi bar, Morimoto (Iron Chef Masaharu Morimoto's first sushi bar was in Philadelphia), then there's the bar called Luna. Or maybe it should be called low light Luna. It's a handsome, spacious bar that feels like an old style library, but without the musty stuffiness. The hand-cut Venetian glass mirrors keep the look in tune with the hotel's overall Italian feel.

Turn the corner and there's Lucca which offers Tuscan dining with a water view, high ceilings and Venetian colors everywhere including the red and gold banquettes. The menu includes familiar appetizers and starters like Caesar salad and calamari, but also roasted apple goat cheese salad, crisp eggplant, entrees such as roasted pumpkin-butternut squash ravioli, linguine scampi, Key West red snapper and veal osso bucco. And you really must get your head in the clouds with a visit to Cielo. Take the building called the Tower to the top floor and you feel you've entered a very cool space in Manhattan—except there's no blanket of green Central Park to gaze at.

Instead there's a breathtaking sea of green—the picture perfect golf course to one side—and blue—the Intercoastal where you can watch boats come and go all evening. It's a wonderful place to have a drink in the bar area (Vetro) then proceed to dinner at Cielo.

You will probably start your day in the Palm Court with its high ceilings and almost as tall palm trees in a sunbathed room overlooking the water. If you believe all the article and studies that say water is relaxing, then the Resort fits the bill. Most of its restaurants and rooms overlook water of some sort.

Thank goodness we had a map and a list of all the restaurants. It was like a treasure hunt finding and then enjoying them as they're spread out all over the property.

The Spa Palazzo was easy to find—you only had to follow the lovely scent wafting just off the registration area. This space, too, brought a flashback as it is designed to resemble another place I had visited in my travels—The Alhambra in Spain.

Women will simply not want to leave this lovely, romantic, dreamy spa. The outdoor pool—which we had to ourselves, is either old and updated or new and made to look old—either way it was lush and secluded.

Indoors, you can experience both wet and dry steam rooms and a large and very hot whirlpool as well as private dunking pools, inhalation rooms and much more. Opt for a caviar facial (80 mins. \$215) or a cranberry pomegranate skin polisher (50 mins. \$135) and hope it's also edible...

If that's too much bliss, peace and quiet, there are two golf courses, 40 tennis courts, bike rentals, boat, sailing, and fishing charters, waverunners, parasailing, kayaking, a fitness center and croquet. Oh, and be sure to bring your all whites for the latter or you might get turned away as we were—the only negative experience in this stay.

Though it's not in the literature or on the web site, be sure to walk the grounds, preferably at daybreak or sunset. The flowers, foliage and palms all seemed to have been laid out with a carpenter's level and pruned with toenail clippers they're so manicured and balanced.

Part of the property houses a marina with some of the swankiest anchor droppers you've ever seen. We happened upon a couple who modestly told us which was theirs—a massive

home on the water that they were sailing to Key West on later that evening.

But it's not to say the property is pretentious or overly stuffy either. Their web site self-describes as an "eclectic, private village" and "barefoot elegance" which is PR-speak but an apt description. The Resort is a full out feast for the senses—the beautiful architecture of the main building, the manicured and colorful grounds, the eclectic mix of old and new furniture and antiques and wonderful scents and calming water views. It overwhelms at first, but as you begin to make your familiar paths, you really enjoy its layered beauty. It would make Mizner smile.

## Dining Highlights

► **Bar Luna**—a charming, "clubby" bar perfect for a pre-dinner libation before heading to Lucca or Morimoto.

► **Cielo**—sits atop the 27-story Tower. Continental cuisine with an Italian flair.

► **Lucca**—Italian cuisine, open kitchen. Sumptuous Venetian motif, but you don't have to be a doge to dine here

► **Mizner's Monkey Bar**—charming little bar tucked away in the main part of the hotel.

► **Morimoto Sushi Bar**—at first look seems too modern to fit in, but it grows on you. So does the ultra fresh sushi served in a minimalist setting.

► **Old Homestead Steak House**—lunch and dinner, steaks, seafood, Wine Spectator award-winning wine selection. Has an outdoor patio. Overlooks the golf course.

► **Palm Court**—what a way to start the day—or end it. Has palm trees and bright navy blue upholstered beach furniture. The morning buffet is massive, but chock full of healthy options, too. Evenings offer music and cocktails. You feel good just walking through.

► **The Seagrille**—overlooks the Atlantic from the third floor of the Beach Club. Light and airy.

## Getting There

Boca Raton is of course on the east coast more or less across from Bonita Springs and the Fort Myers area. But since no road takes you directly from those two places you'll need to decide between the antiseptic, but fast I-75 or the bucolic and slightly slower diagonal route on 27 until it connects with SR74.

There are advantages and equal disadvantages to both routes: the bucolic one will show you miles of sugar cane—our equivalent of Kansas' or Nebraska's corn. Whereas the bland I-75 is so quiet it will numb you with its straight line perfection interrupted only by occasional terror as some nut passes you at 100 mph.

Fortunately, it's a drive of not quite four hours and the effect of the ride is that you appreciate the dense transformation that took place in constructing the Boca Raton and Palm Beach areas.

## Packages/Specials

**Summer Escape**—Stay three nights at Boca Raton Resort this summer and get your fourth night free. You'll also receive a free night valid for

a future Boca Raton Resort three-night stay good until December 20, 2009. Definitely check out the web site for specials—they have some rally good ones until season kicks in.

A daily resort fee of \$22.30 (inclusive of tax) is added to your room and includes bellman gratuities for arrival and departure, Key Lime cooler, transportation within the resort, unlimited local and toll-free calls, in-room high speed internet, in-room daily bottled water (2), newspaper and access to the fitness center.

Along with the Naples Grande Beach Resort, the Boca Raton Resort & Club is the 13th hotel to join the Waldorf Astoria Collection.



Dining options are numerous at the Resort. Morimoto offers sushi in a modern setting.



Traditional Tuscan cuisine can be found at Lucca which has a rich, Venetian décor of red and gold



Have dinner among the clouds at Cielo which sits atop the 27-story Tower building. The views of the Intercoastal and the Boca Raton area are breathtaking.

For information on the Waldorf Astoria Collection and Boca Raton Resort & Club, visit [www.bocaresort.com](http://www.bocaresort.com) or [www.waldorfastoriacollection.com](http://www.waldorfastoriacollection.com).

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