

The Great Gasparilla: Legendary inn and club is queen

By Dayna Harpster

Once upon a time, doctors and lawyers didn't advertise their services. And neither did the Gasparilla Inn.

Oh, there was mention in The New York Times following the right type of wedding at the resort hotel. But any other details about the inn have been kept close to the vest.

It has quietly housed presidents and the pedigreed on its part-Charlotte, part-Lee County island since 1913.

Two unrelated events changed all that.

The first was two years ago today, when George Bush Senior conducted a short press conference outside the hotel. The Bushes were enjoying their traditional post-Christmas vacation at the inn when Gerald Ford died, and Bush Senior paid his respects with a speech.

And the Gasparilla Inn — which as the grande dame of seven-mile-long Gasparilla Island straddles Charlotte Harbor and the Gulf of Mexico — hired its first public relations professional.

Though history will always be its calling card, a few things were fraying around the edges when that landmark press conference occurred.

The 62-room inn, 20 cottages and assorted upscale playrooms for golf, tennis, spa and beach aficionados needed some physical and social renovation.

And now as 2008 draws to a close and the inn enters its 95th season, the loose ends have been tucked in.

Brochures listing "tariffs" for spa, golf and tennis services sport the same stripes in the same shades of yellow and green, but a few new words appear: "Florida as it was meant to be."

What that means is a bit factual, a bit ethereal, a bit hard to describe.

"When people think of Florida, they usually think of either South Beach and Palm Beach, or they think of high rises and Disney and the ears and all of the artificial things," said its general of about two years, Jack Damioli. "Not many people think about a wooden structure sitting on a beautiful beach on an island with no franchises. It's Mayberry in all the right senses."

It means "we're still very much in touch with our history, our heritage," said Tina Malasics, operations assistant and membership coordinator, who's worked at the inn since 1984.

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IF YOU GO

- What: The Gasparilla Inn & Club
- Where: Gasparilla Island, a barrier island separated from the mainland by Charlotte Harbor and the Pine Island Sound.
- Rates: Traditional social season (Dec. 21, 2008 to April 12, 2009) rates run \$365 for a standard guest room (additional charge for third or fourth occupants, cots or cribs) to \$445 including lanai, \$485 including parlor; suites, \$565; two-bedroom villa (one to four people), \$930; three-bedroom villa (one to six people), \$1,295.
- Off-season rates (October through mid-December) range from \$236 for a standard room to \$366 for a suite to \$602 and \$838 for the villas.
- Dining plans include modified American (breakfast and dinner) at \$75 per person per day and full American (breakfast, lunch and dinner), \$95 per person per day.
- Golf (by \$95 greens fee plus cart rental), tennis and private beach access included for guests.
- Spa amenities include Swedish and stone massages at \$115 an hour. Body wraps and other treatments are also offered.
- A marina is also part of the property.
- Memberships of various types available; call for rates.
- Call: 941-964-220 or go to www.gasparillainn.com.

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“It goes back to a time when a lot of places were like this. Quiet, quaint, secluded, before so much growth.”

And the Gasparilla Inn remains a place of Florida heart pine floors, croquet in traditional whites and dressing for dinner.

That was documented early in its two-year rejuvenation process. In April 2007, the Gasparilla Inn earned a spot on the list of national historic landmarks.

Damioli, who came to Gasparilla from the Greenbrier in West Virginia, said his goal when taking the helm was to renovate in three ways. Physically, the bar, dining room, lobbies, guest rooms and cottages have been updated. Wireless Internet was added to the hotel’s first floor and the 20 outlying cottages.

Damioli said he brought in a “hospitality-focused team.” That meant establishing the inn’s first human resources department. Employee orientations now train a seasonal staff that splits its time between Florida and New England resorts or Florida and home, to the Caribbean.

Although there are concessions to practicality and modern times, enough vestigial politesse remains to soothe the decidedly less-than-savage guests.

There’s no longer a relish girl, but Southern staples like watermelon pickles still sit on the salad bar. Guests do not have the same wait staff for their entire visit, as tradition dictated. But likely they’ll have the same waiter or waitress every day at breakfast and dinner, said dining room floor manager Diane Randazzo, on staff since 1990.

Rates still rise and fall with the season — the social season. Spring break brings a crop of events — shelling, family bingo.

A nine-page photocopied digest of the day’s news from The New York Times daily awaits guests. Books by Winston Groom and Anne Morrow Lindbergh share shelf space with Sara Gruen’s recent best-seller, “Like Water for Elephants” in the Writing Room, where guests once prepared notes for the next day’s post but now send e-mail all over the globe.

Once such physical upgrades were complete, the next step was “getting information out to the right circles,” Damioli said.

Following were glowing articles in Travel + Leisure Golf, Golf for Women, Southern Living and Florida Travel + Life.

But you need not subscribe to those magazines to be welcome. Your ancestors need not have entertained frequent Gasparilla guests J.P. Morgan, Henry DuPont or Harvey Firestone to dine at its Pink Elephant restaurant or book a room and a round of golf on its Pete Dye-redesigned championship course. Your grandfather’s name needn’t be etched onto the scale of a champion-size tarpon displayed in the Pelican Room for you to stay there, either (although it wouldn’t hurt).

Most of its visitors are grandparents who first stayed at the Gasparilla Inn with their own grandparents. That is most, but not all.

Getaway packages last summer offered discount stays for Florida residents; a food and wine festival enters its third year featuring Greenbrier chef Peter Timmins, Jan. 16-18.

And although the secret may be out, the Gasparilla Inn remains a stronghold of gentility and hushed tones, in voice and decor.

There will not be children screaming in the swimming pool. They’ll be kept busy by 2006 Flagler College graduate Lindsay Leibson, who in addition to handling in-house public relations runs the children’s programs, held on holidays too.

Gasparilla Adventures, another addition since Damioli arrived, can book a family kayak, fishing, cycling or other adventure by fee.

Or a guest can simply sit back in an overstuffed chair, pick up a W or a Newsweek or a hardback classic, and read.