

Gasparilla Inn changes with updated dining room, new credit-card policy and restored beach front

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BOCA GRANDE — The Gasparilla Inn & Club is the idyllic setting for a preppy daydream.

Imagine: Wake in a guest room on the third floor of Grandmother's gigantic, rambling beach house. Run down the wide, hardwood hallway, slide down the banister, slip past the sitting room where the flamingo in the Audubon print presides over a sea of pink-and-green floral chintz and white wicker furniture.

Leap over the golden Lab napping on the front porch, wave to cousins on the tennis court and sail across soft, white sand before diving headfirst into the warm, green Gulf.

Like The Breakers on the east coast of Florida, Gasparilla Inn & Club began as an early 20th-century destination for the well-heeled who arrived by private boat or railcar. But unlike The Breakers, with its gilded ballroom and tapestries, the Gasparilla Inn is not grand. Call it preppy chic - as comfortable as a broken-in pair of Jack Rogers sandals.

And that's just the way generations of guests - mostly from the Midwest and Northeast, who have come here to unwind with their families since 1913 - like it.

In the Inn's Pelican Club, a manly billiard room, tarpon scales personalized with messages written by the guests of long ago hang, framed, on the walls. The tradition, now outlawed, was to remove a scale from every tarpon caught.

"Mrs. J.K. Willing, Season 1918, 11 tarpon."

"Walter C. Carey, Season 1917, 38 tarpon."

"Walter C. Carey, Season 1918, 33 tarpon."

Fishing is still the main sporting attraction on Boca Grande Island - known internationally as a tarpon-fishing mecca - although the Gasparilla Inn & Club has grown to include a Pete Dye-designed golf course, a tennis facility and a spa.

On any lazy afternoon, you can find teenagers playing pingpong on the side porch, ladies playing bridge in one of the sitting rooms and youngsters playing Marco Polo in the pool.

The Gasparilla Inn is not so much a home away from home as a country club away from country club.

As beloved as the Gasparilla Inn has always been, the resort was in need of an update.

Enter Jack Damioli. The president and general manager was hired away from The Greenbrier, the renowned clubby resort nestled in the mountains of West Virginia.

Since Damioli's arrival in 2006, the deep burgundy décor of decades ago has been replaced with pink, yellows and greens as bright and sunny as the guests' pastel polos and Lilly Pulitzer dresses.

And the dining room, previously stuck in the time warp of an earlier 1970s-era update, was redone with the help of Kemble Interiors of Palm Beach.

The vast dining hall was green and yellow like a Sprite can, with a curious undersea mural that seemed more appropriate in a fried seafood restaurant than a jacket-required resort dining room. Even a childhood of pleasant family vacation memories wasn't enough to overcome the dated décor and overpriced food.

Now, in addition to a new decorating scheme, the restaurant features a much-improved menu.

That, and a replenished beach area in front of the beach club, and the recent move toward accepting credit cards - it was cash-only right up until 2006 - should keep the younger generation coming.

Oh, it's still delightfully Old Guard - Grandfather won't miss a beat - but in a way that will entice young families to continue gathering here out of pleasure rather than obligation.

"Instead of running away from it, we have embraced the history of this place," Damioli says. "We want people to experience what they remember as a child and give that experience to their children."

The dining room's new look is island style.

Beige, tan and green foliage-print fabrics are punctuated with white paint and purple orchids. Settees mix with oversized wingback rattan chairs to create the illusion that dinner is served al fresco in a tropical garden.

And the food, while still pricey, is good. James Dyer, a Culinary Institute of America graduate, came on board in 2006. John Reeher, director of food and beverage, followed Damioli from The Greenbrier.

Maine lobster bisque with a hint of sherry and pan-seared scallops topped with caviar recently made for an exceptional start. Florida heirloom tomatoes were simple and delicious as a second course. And the Key lime grouper (\$35) with sweet-corn purée was perfectly prepared. The shellfish pappardelle (\$38), a fresh mix of mussels, lobster, shrimp and blue crab, is also recommended.

Be careful to inquire about which desserts are made by the in-house pastry chef.

The chocolate hazelnut tart with hazelnut ice cream was a delicious standout, but the Key lime pie was disappointing. It was the same thick, overly tart, boring-crust thing that is served at the lunch buffet at the beach club. Bad Key lime pie is forgivable at a casual buffet lunch where options are plentiful, but it's disappointing in a dining room where Angus beef tenderloin, with Bearnaise and Bordelaise sauces, is served for \$42.

The inn is an easy weekend getaway destination for Florida east-coasters. Three hours across the state to Fort Myers and a short jaunt over to Boca Grande are worth the trip.

Cottages strewn about the main inn are popular with families who return for a week or more every season, and the main inn is a delightful place to stay for a couple of nights.

There are a few restaurants and a handful of shops on the island worth leaving the resort for, but there's not so much going on around Boca Grande as to make you feel the need to hurry up and see it all. The pace is slow, with golf carts being the preferred mode of transportation, and most everywhere closing by 10 p.m.

Fishing charters - tarpon is the prize here - can be arranged through the inn or through a number of captains who work on the island. Otherwise, the day's options are golf, tennis, beach, pool or spa.

Saturday afternoons at the beach club are a mix of couples who pull their chairs out on the beach for some peace and quiet; young parents, who pull their chairs near the pool to keep an eye on their children; and groomsman - there's a wedding most weekends in season - napping wherever they can find a chair.

A quiet lap pool - without a child's floatie in sight - is tucked behind the clean, professional, light-filled spa.

And the golf course, with views of Charlotte Bay, fully inhabits a 106-acre island where roseate spoonbills, eagles and dolphin can be spotted. The only problem are the large iguanas, quite a nuisance on Boca Grande, that don't know who has the right of way.

All in all, iguanas on the green and one bum slice of Key lime pie won't spoil this idyllic daydream. The Gasparilla Inn & Club is an Old Florida family tradition worth keeping - or starting.

The Gasparilla Inn & Club - 500 Palm Ave., Boca Grande; (800) 996-1913. Rates: From \$173 in off-season without a meal plan to \$346 in season with a full meal plan. Dec. 20 to April 6 is high season. Extensive summer closings. Greens fee, \$85. Singles tennis, \$20 (two people, per hour).

March, December, Easter weekend and President's Day weekend are popular with families. The inn features special family activities during these times.

A food and wine weekend featuring a master chef and sommelier is held in January.