



IN THE MOOD FOR MIAMI

Edited version from The Times by Ginny Dougary – 22 October 2011

If Miami was a celebrity, she would toss her immaculately groomed hair, give you a glacial look and stalk off in her six-inch-high designer heels.

It's an exciting, sexy city with wonderful architecture – both old and new – but beneath the surface dazzle, it has a slightly hard edge.

Our first visit was to the Arsht Center, designed by Cesar Pelli, which is something of a space-age looking landmark in its otherwise undistinguished downtown setting. We went to hear a handsome singer Cheyenne Jackson – later to appear in Glee – do a few numbers in a new restaurant in the arts complex, Prelude by Barton G. Barton G Weiss, who has a bit of a Donald Trump thing going on, appears to be a Miami mover and shaker, with a number of buzzy restaurants to his name, as well as transforming the late Gianni Versace's mansion into an extremely expensive boutique hotel.

On our way to the Versace hotel we passed giant sculptures along the water front: Botaros and massive bright pink snails. The Hotel Viceroy has gargantuan African faces used as struts to support the first floor; another building had strikingly decorative totem poles in grey and rust stripes as low-level columns.

Outside Versace's house, there was a swarm of tourists. On the architectural walking tour we went on the following day – incidentally, not to be missed - our terrifically informative guide, Jack Johnson from the Miami Design Preservation League, told us that this is the second most visited building in the States after the White House. Well, it is every bit as totally over-the-top as you might imagine it to be; Barton G's philosophy seems to have chimed in with the previous owner's: "More is more". There are hints of Ancient Rome, Istanbul and Morocco. Mermaids, Neptune, coral branches, strands of pearls are abounding motifs. Glorious, colourful, luxurious but not for minimalists.

They will surely enjoy the Frank Gehry-designed New World Center concert hall which opened in January. On the outside it looks a bit like a white box with a flourish of a white sail-like shape to one side. But inside, it is a dream of imaginative, tantalisingly democratic design.

The whole philosophy seems to be about transparency; there are many circular, slightly Esher-like staircases, where you can see the musicians walking to the performing space.

This has 756 retractable sea-coloured seats which are good-looking as well as comfortable. There are three different stages, one of which is extremely high up. The lobby floors are polished concrete; the walls are made of white plaster.

From the roof terrace, we looked down to the city-owned park, designed by the Dutch landscape artist Adrian Geuze, where the sound from the concert hall is carried in pipes covered in foliage and crowds can see the concerts which are projected onto a giant white wall. The New World Symphony, conducted by Michael Tilson-Thomas, has a wonderful programme of supporting talented graduates from conservatories around the world, in learning how to develop their craft in orchestras and ensembles.

Our last meal in Florida was at the famous Fontainebleau, designed by Morris Lapidus and opened in 1954, with guests such as Judy Garland, Frank Sinatra and Elvis Presley. The latest makeover of the 22-acre ocean-frontage site cost \$1 billion and is mega in every way. We had left our luggage with the bellhops on New Year's Eve, before taking off on the Highway, and witnessed the eye-popping sight of all the party girls showing off their gym-honed bods in the tiniest dresses imaginable paired with equally gravity-defying heels.

We had great rooms with balconies overlooking the ocean which because of the behemoth size of the site, with its many swimming pools, four luxury towers, 1,504 guest rooms and suites, 12 restaurants, nightclubs, spa and shops, seems rather far away.

The hotel's restaurants include Gotham Steak, with its Michelin-starred chef and Hakhasan but we ate at the Italian-inspired Scarpetta. This place comes into its own at night, sparkling with its black and silver mirrored effects and columns cinched in bands of rope. The club music boom in the background was a bit tiresome but as our knowledgeable and charming waiter, Rick, said: "it's part of Miami culture." And it's true; even the little French cafe we went to in Coconut Grove for brunch, had the same thumping soundtrack.

We had tastes of many courses: a delicious sushi starter of pacific yellowtail, Ahi tuna and Japanese mackerel anointed with various oils; then hot starters, most memorably (since I don't normally care for it) a creamy polenta cooked for three hours with milk and cream, finished with parmesan and butter. All the pasta choices were a hit, including the very rich duck and foie gras ravioli but we loved the simplest one: just homemade spaghetti with tomato sauce. The secret ingredient here turned out to be nothing more mysterious than adding a touch of butter with the parmesan at the end. Then the outstanding dish was a veal tenderloin, lardo-wrapped, served with sweetbreads cooked in *agro dolce*. This turns out to be a traditional Italian sweet and sour sauce, typically vinegar and sugar, sometimes wine or fruit, said to have been brought to Sicily by the Arabs.

On our last morning in Miami, we turned our backs on the swimming pools and headed for the ocean. Splashing around in the water, the early morning sun on our faces, just my partner and me; we agreed that this was our idea of real luxury.