

FLORIDA VACATION

The Fontainebleau Tries to Reinvent Itself

By Valerie Kellogg
STAFF WRITER

YOU KNOW you're staying somewhere special when mentioning the name of the hotel starts a rumpus on a crowded morning flight. The happy commotion broke out when a garrulous attendant on the JetBlue flight out of JFK came to the back of the plane and asked everyone where they were staying. Looking pleased with himself, a young guy with a goatee told him, "The Fontainebleau."

"The Fontainebleau?" asked the flight attendant, now grimacing. "Why are you going to spend all that money on a great big hotel when you won't ever be there?"

"It's happening," the young man replied.

Everyone chimed in, and before long, the plane was abuzz with opinions. And so the debate over Miami Beach's most famous hotel rages on.

When the Fontainebleau opened in 1954, young people would flock to the "Crown Jewel of Miami" just to get a peek inside. "It used to be you couldn't walk into the lobby without a tie," a former bellboy who still works at the hotel told my husband and me during our recent stay. Introducing himself as "Mac," he added, "It was like walking into a palace."

It wasn't quite like that when we got there. Like other travelers just checking in, we were crumpled in our T-shirts and shorts. And everything looked tropical, in a Disney sort of way. Notice the palm trees, jungle art and pastel colors that brighten up the rooms. But we did have something in common with guests of the past: We were visiting from Long Island. As Mac pointed out, "99 percent" of those who stayed at the hotel back then were from Long Island.

Those were the days. VIPs from Marilyn Monroe to Dwight Eisenhower to Elvis Presley took apartments at the hotel. Each night, the staff would polish the marble floors and teakwood walls until the surfaces bounced back their reflections. And the movies — there were tons of them shot here, from "The Bellboy" to "Goldfinger." Of course, the grandeur that attracted Hollywood to the Fontainebleau and other hotels designed by the late architect Morris Lapidus also managed to turn off critics, some describing his work as "superschlock."

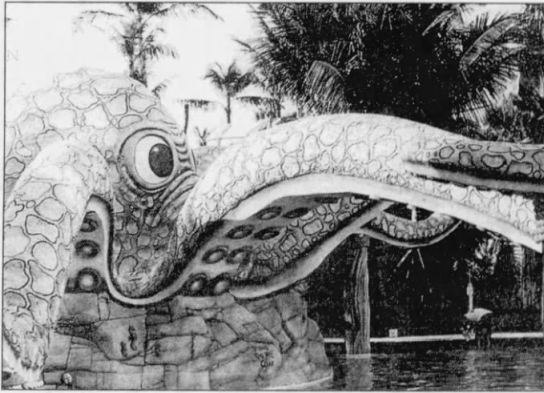
Today, the venerable landmark isn't the Fontainebleau Hotel anymore. It's the Fontainebleau Hilton Resort. (In case you forget, a copy of Conrad Nicholson Hilton's autobiography "Be My Guest" will be in the drawer where they keep the Bible.) It was a smart move on the part of hotel owner Stephen Muss to bring in a big corporation to manage the 1,206-room resort. Another smart move: Since buying the Fontainebleau in 1978, Muss has spent \$80 million to renovate one of Collins Avenue's most famous old addresses.

The latest renovation involved the \$5-million construction of the Octopus Water Playground — which features Cookie and its giant tentacles. The 21-foot tall pink monster faces the hotel's remaining once-legendary cabanas. But that was another time. Today, before the park fills up, the hotel staff polishes Cookie's water slide and raft lagoon early each morning.

The hotel management prefers



Newsday Photo / Valerie Kellogg



The pool at the Fontainebleau Hilton Resort in Miami Beach, above, has a rock grotto and waterfall. A recent addition, left, is the Octopus Water Playground.

guests to spend their entire vacation right on the hotel's grounds. From lodging to food to entertainment to recreation, goes the theory: it's all there.

The fact that you never have to leave the hotel is a bonus for some vacationers seeking rest and relaxation. And the grounds are beautiful — green and lush. With its lagoon-style rock grotto and waterfalls, the pool is considered by many to be the best in the city. There are seven tennis courts and a gym. The 40,000-square-foot spa, which has a saltwater pool, is worth the trip on its own. (During our stay, I got my nails done, as well as a facial and massage.) There are 10 restaurants, from a steakhouse to a tapas bar to a cafe. And let us not forget that the 20-acre property is on the Atlantic Ocean, which we could see from the

wicker chairs by the mini-bar in our breezy little room.

One evening, we decided to catch the early show at Club Tropigala, the hotel's Las Vegas-style nightclub. The hotel encouraged guests to go — for free. Except for the empty seats, I don't remember much about our evening except showgirl feathers, cleavage and thongs, a screen showing movie clips of ports-of-call in Caribbean islands and really cheesy music. At the end, we lingered at our table trying to make sense of what we had seen. We were laughing into the last of our drinks when our waiter came to the table but not to ask if we wanted anything. He came to inform us that we had to pay admission for the next show. It would be \$20, apiece. We looked around at the empty tables, then each other. We declined.

We went to the bar overlooking the club and ordered refills, partly out of curiosity and partly out of defiance. After we paid for our drinks, the bartender told us we had to pay a \$10 admission. We declined again, and soon my \$9 glass of Chilean Merlot and my husband's equally expensive vodka tonic were in Styrofoam cups.

By Saturday evening, we realized that it was time for us to make an escape. We broke out to South Beach and peeked into all the new hotels there. One, the Delano, was swanky, the way I hoped the Fontainebleau would still be. But times change, as Mac would remind us. Hardly anyone who comes to the Fontainebleau anymore even knows about its past. The ones who would be not around anymore, including Lapidus, who must have taken all the glamour with him when he died last year at 98.

Being treated like a spa queen and dreaming of when I can put my children on the water slides will have to do. Besides, it's the Fontainebleau.

Fontainebleau Hilton Resort, 4441 Collins Ave., Miami, Fla. Information: 800-774-1500 or 305-538-2000. The Web site is www.fontainebleau.hilton.com. Price: Two people, \$249 to \$309. Inquire about specials.

Golf course, driving range, and putting green; pools; children's water park; fitness center, spa and pro shop; paddle tennis and pool tables; jet skiing, wave running, windsurfing and parasailing; jogging track; video arcade; walking track; family games and activities; shopping gallery.

Travel

NEWSDAY, SUNDAY, JANUARY 27, 2002