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PALM BEACH MAGIC

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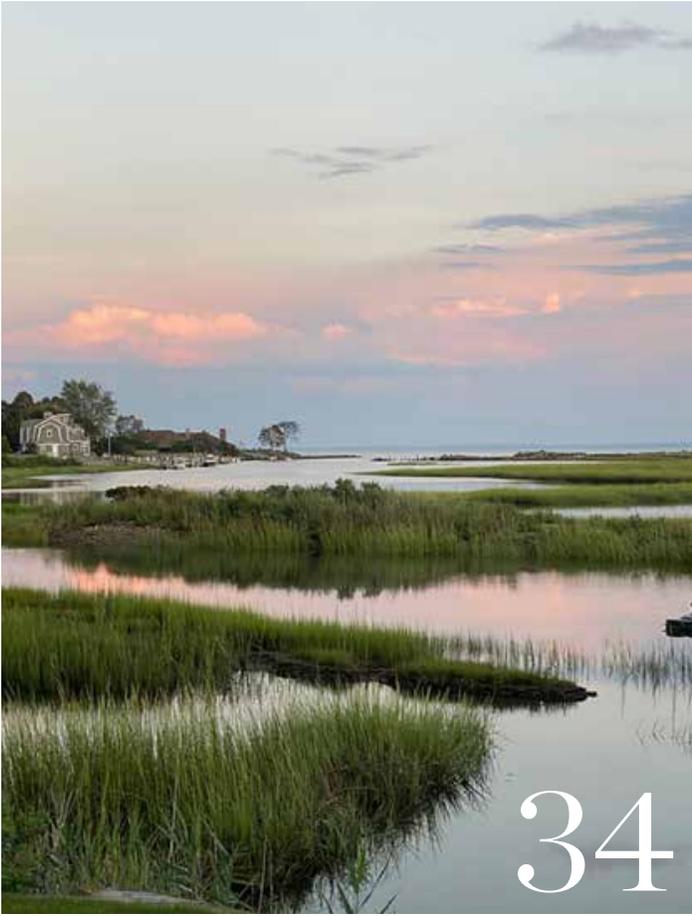
GORGEOUS  
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NANTUCKET,  
MALIBU & MORE

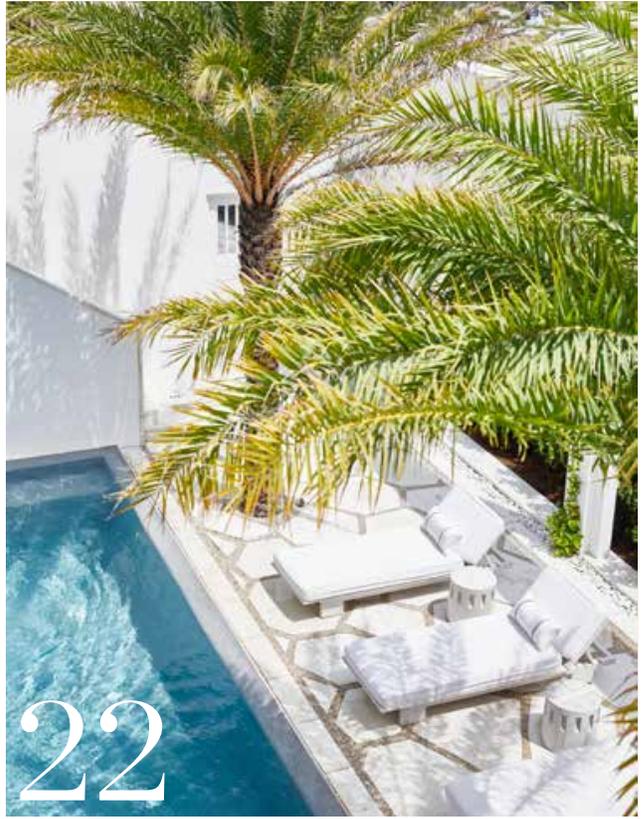


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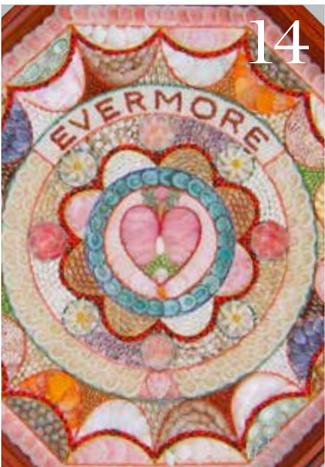
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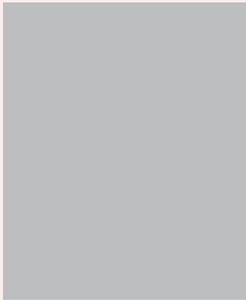
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2021



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# MIZNER & ME

What better way to explore Palm Beach than with the ultimate guide and bon vivant? **JANCEE DUNN** locks arms with the resort's visionary architect, Addison Mizner, to explore the enclave's legendary sites



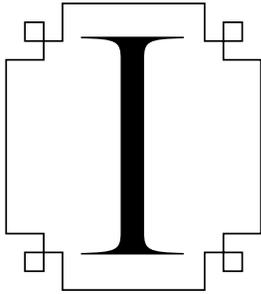
PHOTOGRAPHS BY GATELY WILLIAMS



Clockwise: The reflecting pool and fountain at Memorial Fountain Park; stately palms along Worth Avenue; Addison Mizner in 1926



PORTRAIT COURTESY BOCA RATON HISTORICAL SOCIETY & MUSEUM



have been in love with Addison Mizner, the exuberant Jazz Age architect who left his indelible stamp on Palm Beach, even before I learned that he strolled around town with a pet monkey named Johnnie Brown on one shoulder and a macaw upon the other.

During his heyday, Mizner designed roughly 100 buildings, an astonishing 67 in Palm Beach from 1919 to 1925 (35 of which survive, including John F. Kennedy's mansion La Guerida, dubbed the "Winter White House" and now in private hands). Mizner's lush Mediterranean

Revival creations told a story of fantasy, history and allure, with signature touches such as arched windows, glazed Alhambra-style tile floors, courtyards with splashing fountains, red barrel tile roofs, wrought iron, and bougainvillea-draped balconies. "I never begin to design a home without first imagining some sort of romance about it," he once said. "Once I have my story, then the plans take place easily."

Frank Lloyd Wright—not a guy to dispense compliments—said of Mizner, "many architects had imagination, but only [he] had the courage to let it out of the cage."

He was also great fun to be around. Unlike many of the stuffy architects of his day (like Wright) the 6'3", 300-pound creative genius had verve, wit, élan. A self-invented bon vivant, he was seen at all the best parties in Palm Beach. Wealthy people adored his company, which he used to full advantage, donning a tuxedo he called his "fishing clothes" to hook a commission, and vowing to "step with all my might on the charm pedal."

Who better to act as my spirited guide for a spin around Palm Beach?

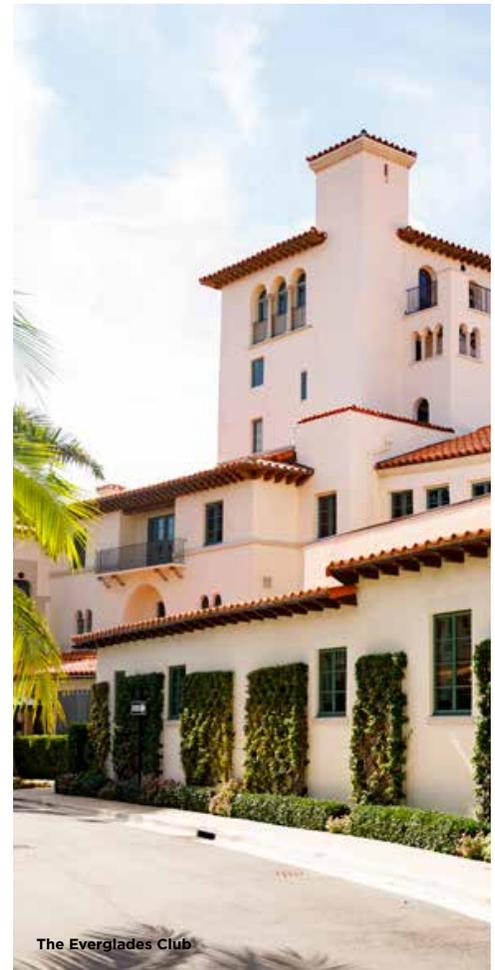
It was a trip I'd been craving for some time, having heard that the renowned resort city was enjoying a marvelous revival on its art, hotel, and food scene. Where else to bed down, then, than at The Colony, the delicious pink midcentury confection designed by Mizner protégée Byron Simonson and renovated in 2019. My first official stop after breakfast: the Everglades Club, Mizner's first building in Palm Beach. En route, I happily people-watch. This is a town where people get dressed, and they're not afraid of bold, sunny color: turquoise and coral, flamingo pink and garden green, often mixed at once in a bold print. (Mizner, a dapper dresser himself, was a century ahead of his time when he sported silk pajamas on the street.)

As I walk, I fall into a conversation with a Lilly Pulitzer-clad woman whose white Birkin bag matches the tiny, fluffy dog she is walking. "Barney is naughty," she tells me, shaking a finger at him. "My housekeeper makes special dog cookies for him that he eats constantly, so I've stepped up his walking schedule."

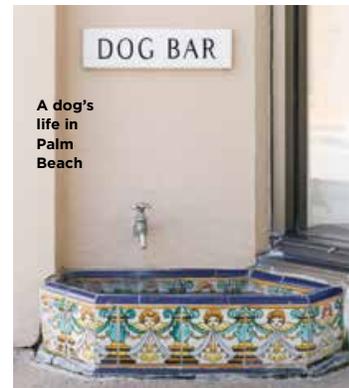
The preppy, slightly daffy charm of Palm Beach has endured through the decades (not to mention the pandemic), but this is no town frozen in amber: It's pulsing with new energy, as young arrivistes have busily opened restaurants, hotels, and stores, from a Goop pop-up shop to a new outpost of Almond, the beloved New York bistro. The town even boasts a new interactive selfie trail.

Palm Beach, like Mizner, is fun. It's irreverent. It has a thriving arts scene. It's gay-friendly. Mizner himself was likely gay, although likely closeted, says Graham Brunk, a former technology librarian at the Society of The Four Arts's King Library (possibly the prettiest town library ever, with its 75,000 volumes housed in a circa-1938 Mediterranean Revival-style building with high-ceilinged galleries and turned details of pecky cypress). "In the 1920s, it would have been social suicide to even suggest a hint of homosexuality," he adds.

Imagining the century-old stricures around Mizner's ebullient true self, I arrive at the Everglades Club, originally designed by Mizner as a hospital for World War I vets and transformed into a swish club so exclusive, there's no website even



The Everglades Club



A dog's life in Palm Beach



La Guerida





TOP RIGHT: COURTESY COLONY HOTEL

## STAY



**The Colony** (above and near left) chose Johnnie Brown as a mascot, says hotel president Sarah Wetenhall, “to reflect the joyful whimsy of the hotel, and as a nod to The Colony’s historic landmark status.” Mizner’s spirit is everywhere, from the stuffed monkey presented to children at check-in to the ubiquitous “Brazilliance” palm wallpaper in the lobby to the luscious saturated color of the rooms, finessed by Carlton Varney and refreshed by Kemble Interiors. Breakfast by the Florida-shaped pool is a must. Rates start at \$700; [thecolonypalmbeach.com](http://thecolonypalmbeach.com).

**The Ben, Autograph Collection** is a sleek new waterfront hot spot inspired by Byrd Spilman Dewey’s Ben Trovato Estate, one of Palm Beach County’s original great homes. Dogs receive their own room service menu, as well as tiny robes, and high tea is served every afternoon in the lobby. Rates start at \$169; [marriott.com](http://marriott.com).

A new sister property of Nantucket’s iconic White Elephant hotel, the palm-fringed **White Elephant Palm Beach** is a crisply gorgeous confection inhabiting the historic bones of one of Palm Beach’s earliest resorts. Rates start at \$650; [whiteelephantpalmbeach.com](http://whiteelephantpalmbeach.com).

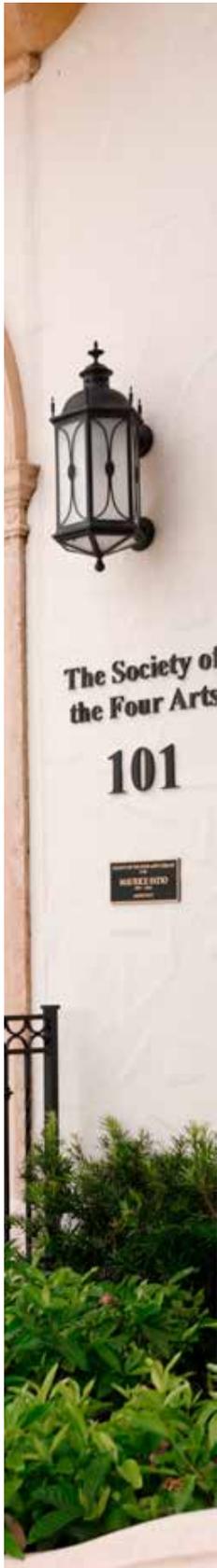
## EAT

Chef Clay Conley is at the vanguard of Palm Beach's hopping food scene, carrying on the Mizner tradition of fearless experimentation and global influences with a quartet of perpetually jammed restaurants: **Imoto**, **Grato**, the **Sandwich Shop**, and his sublime flagship, **Buccan**. The small-plate, seafood-based menu is lively and inventive: How can you resist a menu category called "Crispy," offering hot dog panini and short-rib empanadas? You can't; [buccanpalmbeach.com](http://buccanpalmbeach.com).

When Mizner first arrived in Palm Beach, he cavorted at **The Breakers**, the venerable 1896 resort monument to seaside glamour. Mizner's signature drink, served by his butler at parties, was a rum cocktail, so proceed to the **HMF** (named for founder Henry Morrison Flagler), the resort's airy cocktail lounge, to tip back some Prohibition Punch—a zingy combo of rum, fresh juices, and Champagne. After drinks, stop by the **Seafood Bar** (which has an aquarium built into its 48-foot bar) to tuck into a crab cake dinner and watch the sunset; [thebreakers.com](http://thebreakers.com).

Mizner adored coconut cake, and locals love the delectably tender slices served at **Howley's**, a midcentury diner in West Palm Beach that has modernized its classic menu with quality organic and local ingredients; [sub-culture.org/howleys](http://sub-culture.org/howleys).

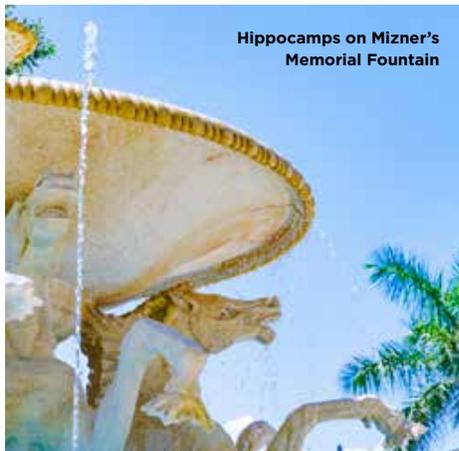




Worth Avenue



Prohibition Punch at The Breakers



Hippocamps on Mizner's Memorial Fountain

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**WEALTHY PEOPLE  
ADORED HIM, WHICH  
HE USED TO FULL  
ADVANTAGE, DON-  
NING A TUXEDO HE  
CALLED HIS “FISHING  
CLOTHES” TO HOOK  
A COMMISSION**

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to scout. Which is to say there’s no way I can worm my way actually inside the fanatically private organization with a select roll that has included names such as Vanderbilt and Pillsbury. Instead, I gawk outside at the dreamy white, palm-fringed building, with its classical Palladian windows and tiled roofs of different heights, which Mizner finessed in order to simulate an older structure that has been built on over the years—“as if it had fought its way from a small, unimportant structure to a great, rambling house,” as he once put it.

I can almost hear him whispering in my ear that inside the entrance of the club, he may have had those beams made to look like they sag a little. Whether that’s literally true or not, Mizner did take pains to imbue this and other Palm Beach interiors with a sense of history by crafting materials to look weathered. “It’s important to remember that he was designing for a new American aristocracy, often self-made, and in his houses and furnishings, he was offering what I’ve long called an ‘instant pedigree,’” says Beth Dunlop, author of the recent book *Addison Mizner: Architect of Fantasy and Romance*. (Mizner Industries—which fabricated wood, stone, tile, wrought iron, furniture, lighting, and decorative ceramics—was the biggest employer in Palm Beach County in the early 1920s.)

Much like the spaces he invented, the Gatsby-like architect was himself an entirely self-made creation. Born the seventh child of eight in Benicia, California, he described his family home as modest. “When the front door opened and vomited forth the family,” he wrote despairingly in his memoir, “people must have thought it was a subway exit.” As a teenager, Mizner spent a year in Central America, where his attorney father was posted; on the way, the family stopped in Mexico, where the architect got his first look at Spanish Colonial style, which he famously called the greatest day of his life. He never formally trained, bouncing around a few colleges before dropping out, followed by a ramble across the globe that included Alaska during the second Gold Rush and a gig as an amateur boxer in Australia. He got serious about design after working with noted San Francisco architect Willis Polk before arriving in South Florida in 1918.

Which reminds me: time to move on. I head to the exquisite Esther B. O’Keeffe Gallery. Like the King Library, it is part and parcel of the Society of the Four Arts, a pioneering cultural institution founded by three Palm Beach women in 1936. This sparkling white jewel was originally designed by Mizner in 1929 as an exclusive supper club called the Florida Embassy Club, but entered a new chapter in the early 1990s, when the Society purchased it and employed architect John L. Volk to transform it into a gallery and auditorium. I wander through the Society’s verdant botanical and sculpture gardens before proceeding to the sumptuous Memorial Fountain—a Mizner creation that sits at the heart of Palm Beach.

Who better, as the Great Depression bore down on even this tony enclave, than this architect of dreams to design a public garden? *Palm Beach Daily News* publisher Oscar Davies and industrialist Harold Vanderbilt had tapped Mizner in 1929 for the project; he tapped his memory of an 18th-century fountain he’d spied at the Villa Borghese in Rome years before. I trace the tranquil, hedge-lined reflective pool that leads to a terrace graced by a magnificent double-bowl, cast-stone fountain flanked with four rearing hippocamps—the mythological horses of the sea—representing points of the compass. Restored for \$1.5 million by the city (a million of that price tag came from donations), the shining, splashing monument honors veterans with a plaque, but I cannot help but think it memorializes that domineering spirit himself.

I save the best for last and stroll the community’s palm-lined Worth Avenue to Via Mizner, a plush, bougainvillea-bedecked courtyard and a warren of shops modeled on a Spanish village that lies hidden behind the avenue’s opulent boutique facades. It’s landmarked—so much of it is beautifully intact—including splashing fountains and a bright stairway using Mizner’s hand-made multicolor Las Manos tiles.

“My total favorite is Worth Avenue, which I regard as Mizner’s greatest achievement and still makes my heart soar,” Dunlop says. “I love the experience of walking Worth Avenue and thinking about the way in which he was able to conjure up the idea of another town long ago and far away.”

At 1 Via Mizner is the architect’s own dramatic, five-story, tower-like residence, now owned by descendants of former president John Adams. It is here where Mizner lived and also, in 1933, where he died—after a failed attempt to establish a Venice-like community in Boca Raton just before the Florida banking collapse. He died nearly penniless, and with the advent of modernism, his work became unfashionable.

Thankfully, Mizner was rediscovered by curators and scholars in the 1970s. Now developers throw his name around when they want to give their developments a little class and background, an irony that I feel would have amused him.

My tour ends on the most sacred spot in Via Mizner: Nestled among the ferns and other lush botanicals lining the courtyard of the restaurant Pizza Al Fresco, a Palm Beach institution, is a simple gravestone. *Johnnie Brown, the Human Monkey*, it reads.

I raise my glass to a man who has the cheek to install a beloved pet monkey’s grave in the middle of a bustling public byway, and imagine their happy reunion.



## MORE MIZNER

Fancy a Mizner-themed road trip? Here are some of his other famous creations that dot the Florida coast.

Many consider the **Riverside Baptist Church** the architect’s only religious building, in Jacksonville to be his magnum opus. Delray Beach’s invitation-only **Gulf Stream Golf Club**, once described by the *Palm Beach Daily News* as “the acme of beauty,” boasts a magnificent curved double staircase. **The Boynton Women’s Club**, a stately white Mediterranean Revival edifice in Boynton, has just undergone a spiffy renovation. The pink, palm-shrouded **Boca Raton Resort & Club**, originally called The Cloister Inn, is now a Waldorf Astoria resort. Pay tribute with a stay in the historic section and tip back a cocktail at the red-and-gold Monkey Bar, a salute to you-know-who.

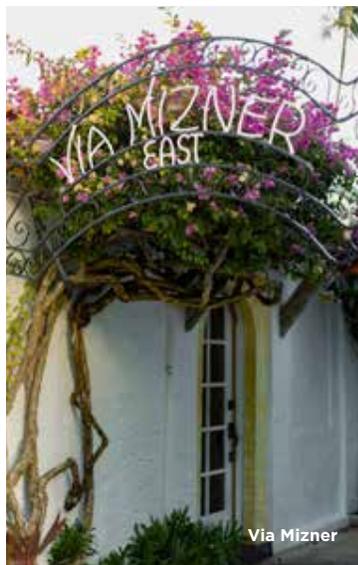




Worth Avenue meets the Atlantic Ocean.



Johnnie Brown's gravestone



Via Mizner

## PLAY

Mizner, who euphemistically declared himself a “confirmed bachelor,” would likely have been delighted by the light-flooded **Gavlak Gallery**, long a champion of contemporary LGBTQ artists such as Jose Alvarez, who came to the U.S. from Venezuela to escape persecution as a gay man, and Alex Anderson, whose work examines identity politics; [gavlakgallery.com](http://gavlakgallery.com).



Don't miss a trip to **The Kemble Shop** (above), the delightful boutique inside bougainvillea-covered Kemble Interiors. Designers Celerie Kemble and her mom, Mimi McMakin, have infused the space with wit, vitality, and color, from seashell art to straw bags in every conceivable shape (including elephants and butterflies) to a rainbow of chic Indian tunics; [thekembleshop.com](http://thekembleshop.com).

Mizner frequently went on buying voyages to Europe to purchase art and objects for himself and for clients. He would have salivated over the extensive Collection of European Art at **Norton Museum of Art**, which underwent a massive \$100 million refresh in 2019; [norton.org](http://norton.org).