

Travel and Adventure: The best of Boca and beyond

by Beverly Mann

BOCA RATON, Fla. - Boca Raton boasts more than sunshine and beaches. Beyond the pristine, white sand and swaying palms is a burgeoning arts scene. Centrally positioned within the heart of Florida's Gold Coast in Palm Beach County, Boca is a tidy package of cultural surprises - from world-class museums to internationally acclaimed performers.

ELEGANT ENTRANCE - 'The Slave Girl,' a sensual statue created by Italian sculptor Ettore Pellagatta, stands at the Boca Raton Resort and Club's entrance. CNS Photo by Beverly Mann. MEMORABLE MUSEUM - The interior of the Norton Museum in West Palm Beach has gone through several expansions and renovations and includes a cantilevered spiral staircase and a dramatic, three-story atrium. CNS Photo by Beverly Mann. ART EVERYWHERE - A sculpture at the entrance to Boca Raton Resort and Club is part of its luxurious tropical landscaping and gardens. CNS Photo by Beverly Mann. WELL ROUNDED - 'Genesis,' is a sculpture by Jorge Jimenez Deredia on display at the Boca Raton Museum of Art, one of South Florida's finest cultural attractions. CNS Photo by Beverly Mann. Mizner Park's Centre for the Arts makes a fine first stop for the art aficionado. The new outdoor amphitheater showcases an eclectic array of top performing artists from classical to rap. During 10 days in March, the Boca Wine and Food Festival enlivens the palm-studded pathways. This bacchanal is an added plus amid the high-end boutiques, bustling bistros, live evening entertainment and a multiplex cinema.

The Boca Museum, which is also a part of the Centre for the Arts, houses more than 4,000 works in its 19th and 20th century permanent collection and rotating exhibitions. A recent showing, "Degas in Bronze," featured 74 Degas sculptures posthumously cast in bronze from the artist's original composite and wax models. During my visit, I meandered amid the museum's outdoor sculpture garden with works by international artists Jorge Jimenez Deredia of Costa Rica, Julio Larraz of Cuba and Rabarama from Italy.

Another impressive exhibition of some 60 bold, colorful works was "The Masters of Latin America." The art of Fernando Botero, Diego Rivera and Francisco Zuniga embraced the intimate galleries.

Mizner Park presents a great people-watching arena both day and night. I enjoyed the parade of characters during a hearty and healthful lunch at Max's Grille and while I nursed a soothing pinot grigio at Gigi's during dinner.

Just minutes from Mizner Park sits the luxurious, 356-acre, 1,043-room Boca Raton Resort and Club. This Shangri-La of eccentric architect Addison Mizner opened in 1926 with lush, tropical landscaping and gardens, Spanish-style courtyards, elaborate antiques and flowing fountains. The Spa Palazzo was part of a \$100 million renovation and was modeled after the Alhambra, Spain's Moorish palace.

I relaxed at this luxurious spa with an 80-minute de-stress massage and a ritual bath with sheets of waterfalls sounding in the distance. I definitely received the royal treatment in this palatial setting.

At the resort's entrance boldly stands "The Slave Girl," a sensual statue created by Italian sculptor Ettore Pellagatta, who did a restorative work at Vizcaya on Biscayne Bay.

For those interested in Japanese culture and gardens, a quick turn off Interstate 95 to the Morikami Museum will be worth a visit. The museum touts a splendid 200-acre garden and some unique events.

Perhaps the most memorable venue of world-class art was the Norton Museum of Art in West Palm Beach, a 25-minute drive north on I-95. Everything from Old World paintings of European masters, impressionists and contemporary artists, along with Chinese artifacts, adorn the corridors around the dramatic spiral stairway. I arrived during a showing of Georgia O'Keeffe's painting and a whimsical collection from the personal wardrobe of fashion icon Iris Apfel, originally organized by New York's Museum of Modern Art.

Also on view was a special Elger Esser photography exhibit, the artist's largest U.S. museum presentation. Most of the sepia-tone photos were painting-size landscapes taken in France, Spain, Ireland and Italy.

It was also the first time that I had seen a section of a museum dedicated to the visually impaired. The original paintings were hanging near duplications in a Braille-type format, which I found quite fascinating.

I equally enjoyed an artistically prepared prix fixe lunch (\$18) at the museum's Cafe 1451. Each savory salad, warm entree and irresistible dessert passing my table was a creation in itself.

Another good culinary bargain is high tea at the stately Chesterfield Hotel near the ritzy shops on Worth Avenue, the Rodeo Drive of Florida.

The Kravis Center for the Arts on Ockeechobee Boulevard is a great place to check out some evening entertainment before departing from the area. Unfortunately, I didn't have the time to experience any of the dance, theater, comedy and concert performances.

I decided to take a scenic, leisurely drive back to Boca from West Palm along Highway 1, passing the azure ocean and a myriad of mansions and towering palm trees. I stretched my legs and devoured some crispy calamari at Delray Beach's popular local hangout, Boston's on the Beach, located at 40 South Ocean Blvd.

As I continued my sojourn to Boca, I could hear the roll of the ocean waves and smell the salty scent. I was satiated, not just from my meal but visually, reflecting on my day's journey through the rich art and architecture discovered beyond the endless beaches and tropical landscape.

IF YOU GO

Note that most of the museums are closed on Mondays.

The Boca Museum: 501 Plaza Real, Mizner Park, 561-392-2500, www.bocamuseum.org. The museum is open Tuesday, Thursday and Friday from 10 a.m.-5 p.m., Wednesday 10 a.m.-9 p.m., and Saturday and Sunday 12-5 p.m.

Norton Museum: 1451 South Olive Ave., 561-832-5196, www.norton.org. Open Monday through Saturday 10 a.m.-5 p.m., Sunday 1-5 p.m., and closed Mondays May through October and major holidays.

Mizner Park Centre for the Arts: 433 Plaza Real, 561-368-8445, www.centre4artsboca.com.

Boca Resort and Club: 501 East Camino Real, 561-447-3000, www.bocaresort.com.

Beverly Mann is a freelance travel writer.

Â© Copley News Service

Travel and Adventure: The best of Boca and beyond by Beverly Mann