Barnett on Business Travel: Scoundrel, business baron's spirit thrives in West Palm Beach saloon

by Chris_Barnett

Scoundrel, sportsman, steel mill laborer, shrewd 19th century speculator. Just a few of the items on the curriculum vitae of E.R. Bradley, whose name adorns the hottest saloon in West Palm Beach, Fla. Other career skills: gold miner, gambler, cowboy, thoroughbred horse breeder and owner of four Kentucky Derby winners.

He's also said to have been a pal of gun-toting peacekeeper Wyatt Earp - legend or legit? Consider this: Bradley graced the cover of Time magazine on May 7, 1934, looking quite prosperous at a time when the nation was deep in depression.

His history doesn't exactly live on at his namesake, E.R. Bradley's Saloon. But that doesn't stop the Florida faithful from enjoying the local gathering place. And with six bars and 21 barkeeps on a busy day, bargain buffets and stunning views of the Intracoastal Waterway and its endless parade of boats, Bradley's is a legitimate hot spot.

Even so, it's hard to imagine Edward Riley Bradley himself entertaining a crowd that ranges in age from 2 to 80, including squadrons of business travelers quaffing Patron margaritas or dancing to Justin Timberlake late into the night, when the place morphs into a dance club and you can barely find a square inch to shimmy.

Lore mixes well with the libations, but take it all with more than a few grains of salt. This saloon is billed as a former private gambling den dating back to the early 1900s. Not exactly true, says George Ortega, a HR consultant for Alphastaff and a loyal patron for the last 14 years.

"I started at the original E.R. Bradley's," Ortega says. "It was a small, dark bar in the Bradley House across the bridge on the island of Palm Beach that was once a private casino. But you should talk to one of the regulars from the 1940s or 1950s for the real history."

Regulars from 60 years ago are hard to come by, but owner Frank Coniglio knows the real story. Coniglio told me he owned bars and restaurants in the Washington, D.C., area, including the first Bradley's Saloon in Bethesda, Md.

"As a horse owner and gambler myself, I felt an attachment to him."

In 1983, Coniglio and wife Gail moved to Palm Beach and found a boarded-up restaurant across from

Bradley's old gaming casino.

"It was manna from heaven," remembers Coniglio, and E.R. Bradley's Saloon opened up in Florida too. The old Bradley's was nondescript and an instant hit with celebs and politicos who wanted to dodge the groupies, reporters and paparazzi who camped out at the palatial Breakers Hotel.

E.R. Bradley's Saloon later moved to its current locale, which is anything but small and dark. You can do an entire tropical tavern pub crawl at Bradley's without ever leaving the premises. Start off at the C-shaped tiki bar with its perfect view of the Jet Skiers.

Check out the hopping main bar inside, and then move on to the open-air deck bar, which offers the single best view of the Intracoastal's nautical conga line. Drop by the DJ bar, where bartender Mike Steinberg skillfully takes requests, slips in CDs and mixes cocktails - without a spilling drop - before cozying up to one of the five stools that front a huge fountain at the rock bar, which is fashioned out of massive stone and slate.

Add in a portable bar that current boss Nick Coniglio, son of Frank and Gail, rolls out on Friday and Saturday nights, and it's easy to see why the action here continues almost nonstop. E.R. Bradley's opens for breakfast at 8 a.m., and last call is a few minutes before 4 a.m. If a cocktail or late-night cognac fires up your appetite, you're in luck.

"We serve food until an hour before we close, and on weekends, the last hour is a full barbecue," says bartender Debbie Neale, who's been here just under five years. Like all of her colleagues, she introduces herself by name to everyone she serves. Smooth touch.

Neale and her bartending buddies make many full-pint Bradley Bloody Marys, made with Absolut Peppar, some fiery secret mix, spices and fruit and veggie garnishes ($10). The Golden Margarita is an uptown wedding of Patron tequila, Cointreau (no triple sec), Grand Marnier and a fresh sour mix ($10).

Overall, the alchemy isn't all that adventurous, since this is a high-volume thirst parlor. One exception: the life saver, anointed the "beachie drink" - a bucket full of Malibu mango, pineapple and coconut rums, pineapple and orange juice, and a dash of grenadine for color, with a float of 151-proof Ronrico rum. The tab: $10 for one, $16 for a bigger version with two straws.

E.R. Bradley Saloon customers are big brand-name droppers - Jack, Stoli, Goose - and most people don't go for the basic well drinks that start at $8. However, they order no-name California house chardonnay at $7, a steep price in my book, and will pop $5.50 for a bottle of Bud or Miller. For an extra half a buck, go for a Guinness, a Kalik (a Bahamian beer) or a Red Stripe.

This is not to imply the Coniglio clan is raking it in with high-society pricing, like the $12 grilled brie or the $18 Maryland crab cake appetizers. They give back. The weekday 4:30 p.m.-to-6:30 p.m. "happy hours" have a cool rule - two drinks give you entry to a gratis buffet with roast beef, shrimp, sushi, pizzas, pot stickers and make-your-own tacos.

Old E.R. is no doubt chuckling in his box seat at the big racetrack in the sky. The gambler knew that if you let the players win a few hands, they'll always come back.

- E.R. Bradley's Saloon, 104 Clematis St., 561-833-3520; erbradleys.com.

Chris Barnett writes on business travel strategies that save time, money and hassle.

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