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A Return to Glory

Over the course of 86 years, **The Brazilian Court Hotel and Beach Club** in Palm Beach had seen its heyday come and go—until new ownership revitalized the landmark, restoring its luxury status among both New York City's elite and a new generation of travelers

By Matt Alderton

Every summer, New York City's rich and famous flock from Manhattan to the eastern edge of Long Island for a season of sun-kissed opulence in The Hamptons. They dine on fresh seafood. They go sailing and yachting. They attend soirées and socials. And then, when the sun and surf eventually gives way to falling leaves and chilled temperatures, they take the party south to The Brazilian Court Hotel and Beach Club in Palm Beach, Florida.

Established in 1926, The Brazilian Court has always been a destination for well-to-do Yankees, who flock there annually from November through April. Especially popular among celebrities, socialites, and politicians, guests in The Brazilian Court's early days included the likes of Gary Cooper, Cary Grant, Judy Garland, Greta Garbo, and Howard Hughes, followed more recently by such notables as Mary Tyler Moore, Nora Ephron, and Paula Dean.

The hotel owes part of its prestige to its location: Palm Beach was established as an island resort in the 1890s by oil tycoon Henry M. Flagler, cofounder of Standard Oil. Because it's located in the heart of town, The Brazilian Court sits squarely in the center of swank.

Its geography is only part of the equation, however. To differentiate itself from competitors, The Brazilian Court has spent the last 86 years focused on its service and space, the foundation of which is its small size. "We're the intimate, discreet boutique property here in Palm Beach," says Leticia Bilotta, general manager of The Brazilian Court. "If you look at our competitors—the Breakers Hotel, the Four Seasons, the Ritz-Carlton—they all have a few hundred rooms each. We have 80 rooms."



Its boutique feel served The Brazilian Court well until 1995, when then-owner Abe Gosman wanted to turn it into a high-end retirement home. Although it was still a popular destination, the hotel began to lose its luster—until 2002, that is, when Gosman filed for bankruptcy and sold The Brazilian Court to father-and-son real estate developers Richard and Adam Schlesinger, who purchased the hotel intent on restoring it to its former glory.

"The new owners of the hotel are Palm Beach residents," Bilotta explains. "When they bought the hotel, they knew they could make it a gem again." The Schlesingers' plan for The Brazilian Court was to establish it as a condo-hotel. So, the first thing they did was downsize 103 guest rooms into 80 custom-renovated studio, one-, two-, and three-bedroom condos, which function as private residences that their owners can either live in or "rent" to

hotel guests.

The makeover was just one component in a six-year, \$50 million property-wide renovation designed to restore both the hotel's facilities and its reputation. Between 2003 and 2008, the property was updated with a new swimming pool and hot tub, a fitness center, two state-of-the-art meeting rooms, an "Entertainment Loggia" featuring five flat-screen televisions, a library stocked with books from famous authors who've stayed at the hotel, and an art gallery featuring the work of California artist Mark Bowles, whose signature landscape paintings are displayed throughout the hotel.

Perhaps the most significant improvements, however, were a new restaurant and salon: Chef Daniel Boulud opened a fine-dining restaurant, Café Boulud, at The Brazilian Court in 2003, which was followed in 2004 by the Frédéric Fekkai Salon & Spa, owned by celebrity hairstylist Frédéric Fekkai. "The new owners have enhanced the hotel with great amenities, and that has brought us back into the limelight again," Bilotta says.

"Nowadays, luxury travelers have iPhones and iPads, and they're using them to book rooms directly. Social media is a great way for us to capture the next generation of the luxury market."

—Leticia Bilotta

While its physical transformation has no doubt helped The Brazilian Court reclaim its luxury brand, even more significant has been its service renovation: In 2005, the property was accepted as a member of Leading Hotels of the World, a sales and marketing organization for luxury hotels. As a condition of its membership, The Brazilian Court hosted a Leading Hotels consultant from Europe, who spent a week at the hotel training staff on the finer points of four-star service.

"Luxury starts with service," Bilotta says. "That's how we set ourselves apart from other hotels. We treat all of our guests as VIPs." The Brazilian Court's VIP service starts with calling all guests by name: bell staff are trained to read new guests' luggage tags upon arrival while regular guests' pictures are posted as nomenclatural reminders. Because The Brazilian Court is a pet-friendly hotel, even guests' pets are acknowledged by name. "When our guests are here, we strive to make it a memorable stay for them because word-of-mouth advertising is our best tool," Bilotta says.

In fact, word of mouth is how The Brazilian Court gets most of its guests. "Our guests are all from Greenwich, Connecticut, the Hamptons, and New York City," Bilotta says. "They all speak to each other and are looking to share their great experiences. As a result, we see a lot of new faces."

Along with new faces, the hotel wants to see younger ones, which it's actively courting with promotions and events posted on Facebook and Twitter. "Nowadays, luxury travelers have iPhones and iPads and apps, and they're using them to book rooms directly," Bilotta says. "Social media is a great way for us to capture the next generation of the luxury market." Ultimately, though, it all comes back to the guest experience. "We cater to every desire and every need," Bilotta says.



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TIMELINE OF THE BRAZILIAN COURT

1890s

Oilman Henry M. Flagler establishes Palm Beach as a winter resort town for wealthy Northerners.

1926

New York Investors Joseph D'Esterre and Stanley Paschal open The Brazilian Court.

1931

D'Esterre and Paschal sell The Brazilian Court to Vincent S. Mulford, who doubles its size in 1936.

1994

The Brazilian Court is designated a historic landmark, although by now it has lost its reputation as a premier Palm Beach property.

2002

Father-and-son team Richard and Adam Schlesinger purchase The Brazilian Court with the intent of restoring it to its former glory. To do so, they commence a multi-million-dollar property-wide renovation in 2003.

2003

As part of the hotel's renovation, award-winning Chef Daniel Boulud opens a destination restaurant, Café Boulud, at The Brazilian Court. Celebrity hairstylist Frederic Fekkai follows suit in 2004 with the Frédéric Fekkai Salon & Spa.

2005

The Brazilian Court is accepted into Leading Hotels of the World, a membership-based sales organization for elite hotels and resorts.

2008

The Brazilian Court completes its six-year renovation and is now a condo-hotel, allowing guests to establish permanent residency at the property.

TODAY

Renovations to its property and service have helped The Brazilian Court re-establish itself as a top destination for luxury travelers. The hotel is now focused on appealing to a new generation of discerning guests with social media and word-of-mouth marketing.