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The Ritz-Carlton

REALIZING CIRCUS MAGNATE JOHN RINGLING'S DREAM

Interior Design by Hughes Design Associates/Text by Gerald Clarke

Photography by Dan Forer

By rights, Sarasota, Florida, should be called Ringlingville. Visitors drive along Ringling Boulevard, they line up outside the Ringling Museum of Art, and they wonder at the inspired eccentricity of the Ringling home, a Venetian-style palazzo called Cà d'Zan (see *Architectural Digest*, October 2002). When they are tired of sight-seeing, they can cross over the John Ringling Causeway to enjoy some of the 130 shops and restaurants that surround St. Armands Circle—a green oasis that is one of John Ringling's most felicitous gifts to his adopted city. The only project the circus king left uncompleted was a luxurious Ritz-Carlton hotel—victim of the Florida land bust in the mid-1920s—and for years its ghostly skeleton was a mute but eloquent reminder of what might have been.

No one needs to be reminded any longer. What might have been now is. Sixty-seven years after Ringling's death, Sarasota at last has a Ritz-Carlton. Opened in November 2001, it rises 18 stories, contains 266 rooms (31 of which are suites) and sits



LEFT: The arrival court of the Ritz-Carlton in Sarasota, Florida. The hotel has 266 rooms, including 31 suites, and stands where the John Ringling Towers once were. **BELOW:** The lobby. At right, a Michael Taylor mirror hangs over a credenza from E. J. Victor. William Switzer table.

on the former site of—what else?—the John Ringling Towers. Many things about this 21st-century Ritz-Carlton—air-conditioning and Internet connections next to the telephones, to name just two—would doubtless have astonished a man who, in a long career running the country's biggest circus, had seen just about everything. But in other ways the Sarasota Ritz *is* Ringling's hotel,



OPPOSITE: "We wanted the Cà d'Zan Bar to look like John Ringling's library," says Pamela Hughes, whose Virginia-based firm, Hughes Design Associates, completed the interiors. In the 1920s the circus tycoon began construction on a Ritz-Carlton at a nearby site; it was never finished.

BELOW: The parlor of the 2,500-square-foot Ritz-Carlton Suite. "The idea was to develop a very residential feeling for the hotel guests," Hughes says. The lamp at left and the desk chair fabric are from Schumacher. Brunschwig & Fils sofa fabric; Robert Allen drapery trim.



and the Ringling stamp is everywhere, from the Italian styling Ringling favored to the name of the hickory-paneled bar—Cà d'Zan. "We wanted to pay homage to Mr. Ringling and to the history and arts of Sarasota," says Carter Donovan, the hotel's general manager. "His dream has finally come true."

Before beginning work on the interior, Pamela Hughes, who had previously designed seven other Ritz-Carltons, did what she always does when she starts a new one—she looked, listened and asked questions. What is unique about Sarasota? What did people in Sarasota want to see in their very first luxury hotel? "For each hotel, we do a lot of research," says Hughes. "We spend a long

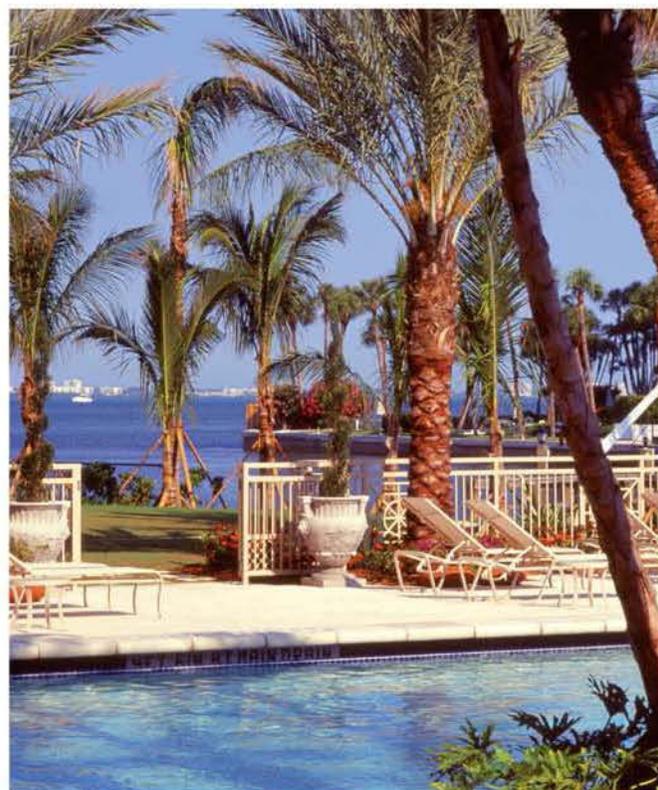
time at it, reading all the publications, visiting the historical society, talking to a lot of people and just driving around. We want to get the real flavor of the local lifestyle. We get a sense of place, and sooner or later everything comes together."

Sarasota, she and her team discovered, is an open, friendly city, with so many transplanted midwesterners that it sometimes feels like Cleveland with palm trees. It is also—another midwestern trait—conservative and traditional. "This is not a beach town," says Hughes. "People dress up here. They didn't want something that was ultracontemporary and wild-looking. They have beautiful homes, and they wanted a

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“Sarasota is not a beach town. People dress up here. They wanted a beautiful, elegant hotel.”



Hughes, who has done the interiors of seven other Ritz-Carltons around the country, “tried to refer to Italy in the design wherever possible.” LEFT: She used a light palette for the bedroom of the Ritz-Carlton Suite. The tables are from Drexel.

TOP: Atlanta-based architect J. Lockwood Brown III gave a Tuscan influence to the waterfront façade of the 422,000-square-foot building. ABOVE: Florida landscape architect Greg Meyer planted palms around the pool, which overlooks the bay.

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beautiful, elegant hotel in which they could host their weddings and charity events, a place where they could gather and be comfortable.”

Wherever she turned in Sarasota, Hughes saw and heard one name. “It was obvious,” she says, “who the dominating figure was—John Ringling.” The designs of most Ritz-Carltons make a graceful bow to Georgian England. But a visit to the Ringling Museum, which resembles a Florentine villa, told Hughes that the Sarasota Ritz should look to a different part of Europe—Italy. Never once taking a note, she wandered through the Ringling time and again, pausing longest in the Italian galleries, with their seven centuries of art and artifacts. “The people at the museum didn’t know that I was lifting ideas from them,” she jokes, “and that they were my ultimate source of inspiration.” Inspiration did not mean copying, however; it meant borrowing colors and motifs and reinterpreting them for Florida and the 21st century. “Florida is colors,” says Hughes, “and we pulled them from the gardens and sunsets—aqua, peach, coral, gold and lavender. People come here for sun and openness, and all the rooms are light and full of glowing colors.”

Donovan wants her guests to feel that the Sarasota Ritz is their home away from home. Unlike a lot of Ritz-Carltons, it even welcomes guests’ dogs and cats, going so far as to present them with gourmet treats and water bowls with their names attached. But if it’s home, the Sarasota Ritz is home with a touch of Italian drama, and Hughes has made the lobby—with its inlaid-marble floor, crystal chandeliers and gilt chairs—grand enough for a performance of *Aida*. “We want people to walk into the lobby as if they’re walking into a beautiful palace,” she says. “We want them to say, ‘I feel good! I feel excited!’”

Local people have already spoken. The Cà d’Zan Bar—“John Ringling would have been proud,” says Hughes—is full most evenings, and afternoon tea in the lobby lounge is now a Sarasota tradition for mothers and daughters and grandmothers, too. Success has come a little late, but John Ringling finally has his Ritz-Carlton. □

