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Historic Deering Estate in Palmetto Bay is drawing quite a crowd

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If the sight of more than 5,000 century-old wine bottles doesn't tell you that you're amid history, then sniff the air. The nose knows the ghosts of Florida's past float here.

"Here" is the Deering Estate at Cutler, a sprawling 444-acre historical home and nature preserve neatly tucked along the edge of Biscayne Bay and open to the public for tours and events.

Increasingly, Deering is becoming a must-see site. Attendance jumped nearly 80 percent last year. And already 12,000 more people have passed through the estate than what was the entire attendance in 2007.

William Irvine, Deering's director, attributes the rise to "increased programming" such as new educational and events like the annual seafood festivals that draw 4,000 in a day.

The estate in Palmetto Bay, part of the Miami-Dade County Parks and Recreational Department, plays host to tours of its two main houses -- the 1896 Richmond Cottage, the last surviving structure of the town of Cutler, and the 1922 Stone House. There are guided nature walks in the off-summer months, archaeological digs for kids, kayak rentals and trips to the offshore island of Chicken Key.

The estate also provides a setting for 75 to 100 weddings a year.

The May heat brings sweat, but a natural deodorant apparently looms on the grounds, too, according to one of the site's naturalist educators -- but more on that later.

People come to the lush grounds for meditation, a retreat from bustling city life, picnics with the family or, in the case of mom and daughter Marianne and Katherine Barr of Fort Lauderdale, for an instant history lesson.

"I just love history," said Marianne Barr, a third-grade teacher at Indian Trace Elementary in Weston. "This is a wonderful Mother's Day present. I eat it all up."

After learning about Deering's existence via a Google search, Katherine, 21, a Florida State senior majoring in English education, treated her mother to the estate for the first tour of the morning on a recent Saturday.

They emerged from a basement wine cellar, post-tour, to stand before a decoy white wooden bookcase, a solid steel vault door, a second and a third door of iron bars. Also with the Barrs and tour guide James Lee: That tell-tale aroma of age, a heady melding of must and magic. Nostrils become the ball -- with A-Rod at bat. It's that *potent* a punch down here in the bowels of a Florida landmark.

In the roaring 1920s, Marianne Barr probably could tell you: Prohibition forbade the manufacture, transport or sale of alcohol in the United States.

But Charles Deering, an art collector, wine lover and the man who made Deering Estate in his image, had the means to protect his massive bounty of alcohol.

Deering, a harvester company mogul, stored thousands of bottles in his basement vault and disguised the entrance to the brick and cement room like one of those hidden panels from the pages of a 1920s Hardy Boys mystery novel.

But on Sept. 12, 1945, 18 years after Deering died at age 75 in a second-floor bedroom here, a Category 4 hurricane washed Biscayne Bay into the room. That breach led to thousands of bottles of champagne, wine and liquor into becoming a broth of salt water, insects and algae.

The vault door, perhaps shamed at the condition of the room it so proudly protected for decades, rusted shut and remained so for 40 years.

Students from Florida International University eventually helped tidy the space and cataloged salvageable bottles.

Their task became more difficult when 1992's Hurricane Andrew and its 16-foot storm surge pummeled Deering, destroying 70 percent of the cottage, according to Lee.

Seven years and \$7.5 million later, the hardy Stone House and its adjacent cottage -- home to dining quarters, a kitchen still clad with an original stove hood and butler's pantry ice boxes -- reclaimed its original feel. New wood shelving and wine-tasting tables display some original bottles.

It's for show, though. The ancient purple liquid swishing in one bottle, whose cork has deformed and merged into the glass top, would taste of vinegar, Lee recently surmised.

Another stop on his tour is the Stone House's ballroom where jazz and classical concerts are regularly held.

Its walls stretch 17 feet toward a coffered concrete ceiling. A Ramón Casas painting, *Ash Wednesday Procession in Barcelona*, and a nearly 800-year-old embroidered silk tapestry bookend a 15th-century mantle.

"The ballroom is gorgeous; it's my favorite part," said Katherine Barr.

"I can imagine the dances there," added her mother.

For Lee, who retired from the Army in 1993 after serving 20 years, these grounds and the on-site marine biology program, help give visitors a new-found respect for the state's history.

"It [gives] one an appreciation for what we have in Florida and makes one responsible for our environment and sensitive to how fragile nature is," Lee said.

He recently told a recent tour an amusing anecdote that he likes to tell kids who take part in the nature walks he leads.

Well, he began, ``it's interesting learning about the native plants species and how the Indians used to use them for medicine. I tease the kids about where we got the idea for deodorant."

Turns out the potato tree, a relative of the tomato and eggplant flowering tree found in South Florida, has a leaf that ancient Indians rubbed into their skin to mask body odors so that animals on the hunt would not be able to detect them.

Remember, before Dadeland, U.S. 1 and a Starbucks on every corner, this region was teeming with wildlife.

Lee is one of a staff of 40 full or part-time personnel employed by the Parks Department at Deering. They maintain the grounds, run tours and teach courses.

For instance, up to 200 students per week are on the estate as part of a two-hour, home-school enhancement program on science and archaeology Deering operates in partnership with Miami Metrozoo.

Meanwhile, attendance has taken off over the last three years, Irvine said.

There were 27,000 visitors in 2007. That figure jumped to 48,000 in 2008.

Already, 39,000 have crossed the gate by mid-May -- an increase of 20 percent from where the park was at this time last year.

The estate operates on an annual budget of \$2.4 million.

Though the Deering Estate is property of Miami-Dade County, Palmetto Bay partners with the venue for several events, including the spring's popular seafood festivals.

"We're thrilled to have [Deering] as a centerpiece of our village," Palmetto Bay Mayor Eugene Flinn said. ``It's going to be there . . . protected . . . for future generations and that means a lot to us."

Irvine said it remains a challenge to live up to the imprint of Charles Deering.

"We have a special property here and want to take appropriate advantage of its opportunities," Irvine said. ``It's such a wonderful thing [to] honor that legacy. Such a beautiful story. So many beautiful stories."