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HOLISTIC HIPSTER'S PARADISE: NEW HOTEL RECALLS OLD BEACH



RONNA GRADUS/MIAMI HERALD STAFF

SPREADER OF WARMTH: A client of The Standard, a hotel and spa on Belle Isle, relaxes in the hamam, which means 'spreader of warmth.'

Holistic hipsters are replacing the Borscht Belt set at the new Standard hotel. But the place is trying to cling to its Lido Spa past in at least one way: No posers allowed.

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Hotelier André Balazs has pushed lunch to the end of the day — because he's been caught up in endless meetings, but also because he knows sunset is the most seductive hour at his new Standard hotel off the Venetian Causeway.

When he glides into the Mod-Danish-meets-Retro-Miami lobby around 6, a bottle of his signature Domain Ott Rosé is already chilling by a row of rocking chairs that say Old Beach.

This is, after all, the former Lido Spa, one of the last holdouts of the white-haired set, a place where Aunt Sadie and Uncle Sol used to come for the cheap rates, complete with sauna, dietetic meals and entertainment that cried Catskills.

When it opened in 1960 at 40 Island Ave. on Belle Isle, it was called Miami Beach's first health resort. Remarkably, it clung to life, the ladies doing aquatic exercises and the hubbies letting themselves be dragged to bingo, until 2003, when Balazs bought it from the original owners for \$9 million, according to property records. (Balazs won't say how much he put into redoing the place.)

Now it's a holistic hipster's paradise that dares to suggest it's OK to spend time neither seeing nor being seen.

Balazs, in a blue pinstriped suit he wears as comfortably as a T-shirt and shorts, nibbles from a platter of cheese, fruit and blanched almonds. The sky has finished its display of pinks and oranges. He sits still in his rocking chair.

'PERFECT TIME'

"Sunset is the perfect time. It signals the end of the day's stressors," he says in a near-whisper, perhaps to not break the twilight-in-the-tropics spell the skies have cast over a hotel that can feel like a sanctuary (especially with the new stained glass out front). Really, it's more of a hideout from an amped-up, blown-out Beach.

Tucked inconspicuously on the bay side instead of being part of the trendoid parade on the ocean,

devoid of the DJ-by-the-pool aesthetic and encouraging guests to shed the designer labels and hang out in white robes and flip-flops — even in the lobby, even at dinner — the new Standard takes the South Beach glamfest down a few notches and reminds what made the place such a lure to the white-haired set in the first place:

The sun, the breeze, the water. The old folks may have sported black socks with their sandals, but at least they had the grit to actually get wet.

Long before Jaime Foxx, before Missy and Diddy and Madonna and Gianni, before Jackie Gleason even, Miami Beach was touted for its salubrious qualities. It was about the weather, about the palm trees. About just sitting there, wearing wet shorts in the weather under the palm trees.

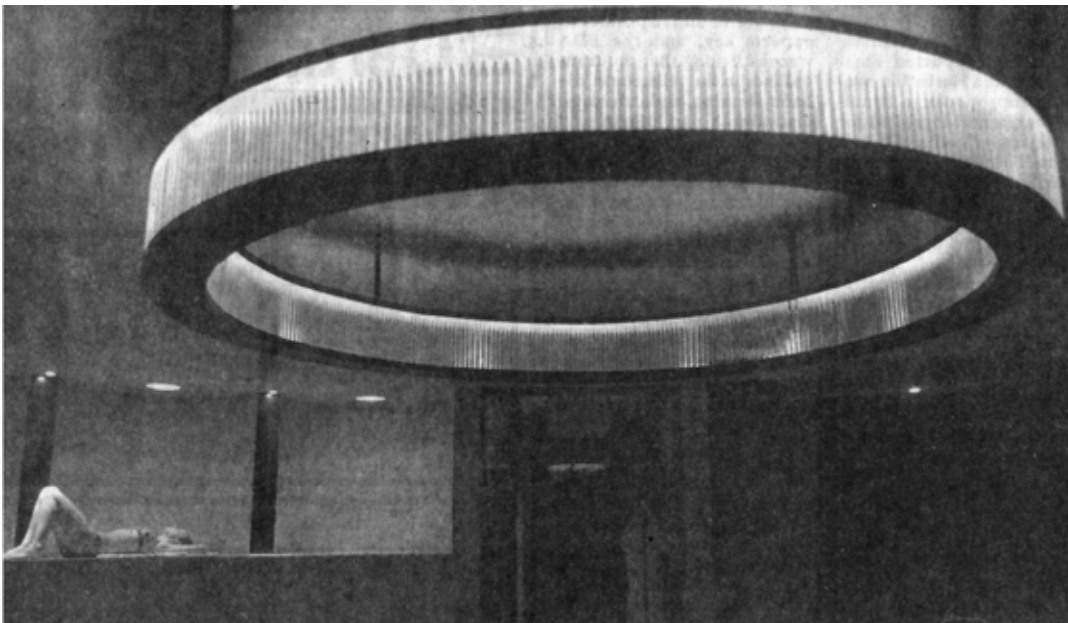
That's what Balazs wants guests of the 105-room Standard to learn to do.

"Everything has seemingly gone in one direction on the beach. It's very pulsing, very frenzied. The Standard is the exact opposite of that. It's about withdrawing," says Balazs, who has a knack for reviving the spirit of moribund, historic hotels.

In 1990, he resurrected the Chateau Marmont in Los Angeles without killing its rock-and-roll vibe, and in 2002 he began bringing back the tropical elegance of the Raleigh on Collins Avenue, renovating just about every inch but somehow leaving visitors with the feeling that nothing much was touched.

"I think I am a little bit in love with a Miami of the past," says Balazs, 48, who first visited Miami Beach 25 years ago, before it all spun out.

He sees the Standard as a place where Aunt Sadie and Uncle Sol



HOT ROCK: A woman rests in the hamam, which means 'spreader of warmth,' which is part of the spa at The Standard on Bell Isle. The hamam features heated marble, bellystone and four baths.

would still just about fit in — if they could get over the coed hangs in the Turkish-style hamam, a sweat room where the semi-nude and often-topless sprawl on slabs of heated marble.

GENERATION GAP

“OK, maybe that would be one big generational difference,” Balazs concedes. “But we are going to have hours in the hamam that are limited to one gender. Because not everybody is comfortable with the coed part.”

The Standard retains the old glossy white terrazzo floors and Mod Morris Lapidus architecture. The motelish guest rooms out back (decent-sized rooms start at \$195) feature blonde woods, picnic baskets doubling as nightstands, cotton cozies covering wall-mounted flatscreen TVs and organic options in the mini bar (not to worry, there are still Oreos and M&Ms.) Outside some doors are Army cots and bathtubs, so that you can soak while taking in the breeze, not to mention your neighbor’s soaking, since he or she is separated only by a thin white curtain.

The sheet of clear water that is the Standard’s new chlorine-free swimming pool seamlessly blends into a wide expanse of Biscayne Bay. Guests kick around out back, getting acquainted with the concept of hydrotherapy. There is the hot tub with 98-degree waterfall, which you should alternate with the 50-degree



RONNA GRADUS/MIAMI HERALD STAFF

HIP HOTELIER: André Balazs owns The Standard, a hotel and spa on Belle Isle. Here he stands in the spa hallway.

Arctic Plunge. There is the open-air mud lounge with its clawed bathtubs, where you and a friend can paint each other in different types of mud, then bake in the sun, then take turns high-pressure hosing each other.

BEING COMMUNAL

“It’s about being communal the way ancient civilizations were communal, around water,” says Balazs.

Gary Pini, a New York writer who keeps a place on South Beach, is already a regular at the Standard, which opened right before the new year.

“Guess where I’m calling from? I’m in the locker room. I come every day for the gym, then I do the steam and sauna, then I go out by the pool,” he says. “Usually staff at a spa can be kind of cold. But they’re warm and friendly here. I don’t feel like I’m on South Beach, I feel like I’m in another country somewhere.”

Upstairs, flanking the hamam, are a cedar sauna, scrub room, aroma steam room and the Wall of Sound showering rotunda where folks can gather to get sprayed while listening to piped in Tibetan singing bowls and whatnot.

There is also a small hair and nail salon, a gym and treatment rooms for every version of massage. The average 60-minute treatment runs about \$120. Combo packages like The Morning After (Chinese herbal detox bath, detox massage, antioxidant facial and green cocktail with kale, parsley and sea minerals) run around \$250.

But Balazs insists you don’t have to spend a lot to have a good time.

“You can have all of the traditional spa services here. Or you can just enjoy the bathing culture.”

HIPPEST HOTELIER

But how is he going to keep the place low-key and poseur-free? After all, this is South Beach and he is André Balazs, the hippest hotelier in the land. Not only does he have movie-star good looks,

but he dates a movie star.

“Yes, everything is still great, but she’s working hard these days,” he says with a laugh when you push about his relationship with Uma Thurman.

Celebrities and hipsters have the run of his hotels (there are the two Standards in L.A. and the Mercer in New York). So how is he going to keep the new Standard Miami from becoming another strung-out South Beach spectacle?

“Let me introduce you to Jason, our general manager,” Balazs says.

Enter the tattooed, soft-spoken Jason Harler, wearing a plaid shirt and loose pants, wavy hair falling to his shoulders.

He used to run the spa at the West Hollywood Standard, and he uses language like “setting the intention.”

As in, you can attract the laid-back, holistic types by setting the intention.

You can keep cheesy sorts from turning the hamam into a meat-market singles scene by setting the intention.

And where the New Age stuff fails, the membership fees kick in. Unlike the Delano, this is not a place where the causeway crowd can just saunter in for a night of gawking.

To get into the Standard, you need at least a day pass. For \$25, you get access to the indoor baths and a yoga class. For \$40, the outdoor baths are tossed in. For all-access, all the time, it’s \$150 a month.

Or, you can walk in for free if you’re having breakfast, lunch or dinner. Or a cocktail at the happily smoke-free bar. Eric Ripert, of New York’s Le Bernardin, is creating the restaurant menu, which is focused on organics.

But that doesn’t mean you can’t get an order of mini cheeseburgers and fries by the pool.

“We don’t draw hard lines here,” says Jason the GM, who can get into a long explanation about treatments during waning and waxing moons, but is cool enough to make light of the Standard’s California-ish aesthetic.

The slow retro elevators?

“I like to call them contemplative.”