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# PAMELA

*Photographed by Michael Thompson*

MIAMI BEACH RENAISSANCE

# The Grande Dame Returns

Fresh off a \$1 billion renovation, the legendary **Fontainebleau** reemerges with a gleaming restoration and a new roster of luxe, state-of-the-art offerings

BY JACQUELYNN D. POWERS

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A rear view of Morris Lapidus' original curvilinear structure and pool, as well as the new \$50 million Lapis spa (right).

# FONTAINEBLEAU

It's Election Day, and the scene at the soon-to-debut Fontainebleau hotel is more about a flurry of construction than the battle between Obama and McCain. This billion-dollar project is experiencing the pains all new construction faces on Miami Beach—only on a much grander scale (think Las Vegas-size). Alarms are blaring, jackhammers are breaking up cement, and lights are flashing. But through it all, owner Jeff Soffer is calm, and eerily relaxed. Clad in brown suede loafers, cream trousers and a striped oxford shirt, Soffer, the Aventura Mall scion, looks like he should be on vacation in Saint-Tropez rather than dealing with last-minute permit issues and construction workers. There's not a crease to be found. Nor a worry line, for that matter.

Soffer, who resembles John Kennedy, Jr., is also cavalier during our tour of the nearly complete hotel. When an underling suggests he don a hard hat for safety purposes (and to meet code enforcement's requirements), he shrugs off the turtle-looking headgear, saying, "I have a hard head." Frankly, I'm quite happy to avoid hard-hat hair, as well. We begin with the grand lobby of the Fontainebleau, which has several signature details from the original 1954 property, including architect Morris Lapidus' columns and bow-tie-motif flooring. Whether Soffer, 40, wanted to restore these features is a moot point. Resurrecting the historical elements was mandatory, especially the so-called "staircase to nowhere," a grand setting upon which patrons have posed for half a century. Nevertheless, Jeff says of Lapidus, "He did an amazing job. He was ahead of his time."

The three oversized chandeliers in the lobby, too, hark back to a more elegant era. However, these million-dollar light fixtures are not authentic to the 1954 décor. They were created by Chinese artist Ai Weiwei, who also co-designed Beijing's National Stadium, a.k.a. the "Bird's Nest," for the Summer 2008 Olympics. Behind the stunning chandeliers is the Bleau Bar, a circular area with blue LED flooring and a 360-degree bar. This is the arrival area, where one can order champagne before checking out designer restaurants like Hakkasan, Scarpetta and Gotham Steak. Off the lobby, retail options abound with high-end boutiques, all of which were curated by Jeff's sister, Brooke. Further afield are ballrooms galore, ready to be filled with brides, 13-year-old bar-mitzvah students and charitable socialites. In an especially nice touch, one of the ballrooms features an oceanfront terrace. Take that, Miami

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Beach Convention Center.

As the tour continues, Soffer, executive chairman of Fontainebleau Resorts, throws out million-dollar figures like the rest of us discuss buying a few items at Epicure. "The spa cost \$50 million," Jeff says casually, despite the fact that it's a sum that could more than pay for several stand-alone hotels on Miami Beach. Who has ever spent \$50 million on a spa? In Miami? In this economy? However, after walking through the in-progress two-story Lapis spa, which was designed by Richardson Sadeki, I am sold. The 40,000-square-foot facility includes heated hamam-style benches, enough water features to make Poseidon happy, and a misting system on the way to the steam room, which Soffer compares to a "car wash." There's even a coed wet area (how racy), with a pool that warms up as you traverse it. There are 30 treatment rooms (for facials, massages and body wraps), and a state-of-the-art gym with the latest cardio equipment and breathtaking ocean views.

Within 40 minutes we are done with the breakneck tour. Apparently, other executives take at least double that time to explore the 22-acre property. But Soffer exhibits the enthusiasm of a teenager, often bounding up stairs several at a time. My head is spinning by the time we sit down for coffee in the lobby of the much more simple Trésor Tower, which is south of the original Chateau building. Between an-



Jeff Soffer, the man behind the Fontainebleau renovation.

swering calls on his BlackBerry Bold, Soffer responds to my queries about his billion-dollar baby. So, what does \$1 billion get you today, I wonder? "It gets you this," Jeff says plainly. "You get what you pay for. Maybe I could have done things for a little less, but people will appreciate it. I hope they do, because I really tried hard to make it special."

Of course, this has always been an iconic property since it debuted in 1954. Back then, Miami Beach was the winter playground of the rich and famous. A sense of fierce competition brought on the "Hotel of the Year" phenomenon, whereby wealthy entrepreneurs battled to erect the most lavish inns on Miami Beach. That war



Fontainebleau architect Morris Lapidus, circa 1954



The circular Bleau Bar features a 360-degree bar and blue LED flooring.



The hotel lobby as it appeared in the 1950s, and (right) as it appears today, with its restored bow-tie flooring and a new chandelier by Ai Weiwei.

“Hopefully, gambling will come soon. People want it.”

unequivocally won by owner Ben Novack, whose Fontainebleau was the stomping-ground of Rat Pack regulars such as Frank Sinatra, Sammy Davis, Jr., and Judy Garland. Movies like *Goldfinger*, *The Bellboy* and *A Hole in the Head* were filmed here. The end of the glamour occurred in 1977 when Novack filed for bankruptcy. The next year, Miami developer Stephen Muss bought the embattled property and hired Soffer to run it. Over the decades, the hotel morphed into a kid-friendly accommodation with amenities such as an ice-skating rink and water-slide complex with an Elvis theme.

New blood was brought in with a joint venture between Soffer and Muss in 1995, with the opening of the Fontainebleau II condo tower, south of the main building. This led the way for Jeff to buy the entire property the same year. As he recalls, Stephen Muss said to me one day, ‘I want to sell you the hotel.’ He wanted me to buy this place. It was a great opportunity. It should belong to someone like me, who grew up on Miami Beach.” So, did he have aspirations to own the Fontainebleau as a youngster attending bar mitzvahs here and ice-skating on the weekends? “Back then, I didn’t think about owning anything,” Soffer says, laughing. “I just wanted to have a good time.” In fact, it would take Jeff several years to join the family business (ventura Mall and Turnberry), after owning a yacht dealership. The plucky heir also collected boats, flew planes and skied all over the world.

With his youthful ways behind him, Soffer is now a pillar in Miami Beach society with a sprawling mansion on Indian Creek, three kids, and significant real-estate holdings throughout Florida and Las Vegas. In fact, his dealings in Sin City have inspired him to become a billionaire bachelor. “When I bought the Fontainebleau, I envisioned this as a Vegas-style resort on the ocean,” he explains. “That’s what you have to do to draw people in. And I delivered. It’s unlike anything else on Miami Beach. Nothing like my competitors in town, but we’re at a different level. If this was in Las Vegas, it could just be a nice hotel.” Actually, Soffer will be exporting this concept to Vegas. In 2009, the Fontainebleau redux is poised to launch with a similar architectural style

and the three main restaurants (Scarpetta, Hakkasan and Gotham Steak) in tow. The price tag for that project is a reported \$2.9 billion.

Speaking of Vegas, there is speculation about Soffer’s intentions to bring gambling to Miami Beach. He is bullish on the prospect. “Hopefully, it will come soon,” Jeff says. “It’s not in our cards today, but people want it. While the City is not happy about it, gambling is here already. After all, you can play blackjack 20 minutes away from the beach. What’s the difference? Why not have it here and have it benefit the people? A hotel like this could generate a lot of revenue for the City. It’s not there yet, but it will come to fruition.” Later on, I ask the hotelier his hopes and dreams for the Fontainebleau, and he utters one word: “Gambling.”

Until then, hedonists will have to make do with the gourmet restaurants and cutting-edge nightlife. According to Soffer, three important food concepts were sussed out immediately: Chinese, Italian and a steak house. Bryan O’Shields, senior vice president of food and beverage, elaborates, “Miami is a different market. There are world travelers here. What they are seeing in Barcelona, Paris and Tokyo is what they are looking for here. They want things to be new and exciting.” Hakkasan, for example, is the first Chinese restaurant in the world with a Michelin star. Alan Yau’s award-winning London eatery features Cantonese dishes like braised Peking lamb ribs, stir-fry Dover sole, grilled beef with lemongrass, and homemade tofu. Adds O’Shields, “This is not your mother and father’s little Chinese restaurant they went to in the past.”

For their steak-house concept, Alfred Portale of Gotham Bar and Grill in New York was approached for the culinary challenge. “Portale is a perfectionist with food,” Bryan notes. Expect fare like warm mushroom salad with crisp bacon, black bass ceviche with grilled mango, and grilled pork tenderloin with cheddar-cheese grits. The two-story Jeffrey Beers-designed restaurant features a 500-bottle wine wall and exhibition kitchen. The Italian eatery went to Scott Conant, also of New York. His Scarpetta has won rave reviews from *The New York Times* and the sister lo

# FONTAINEBLEAU



An aerial view of the restored Fontainebleau.

ation is already generating great buzz for David Collins' nautical décor and Scott's signature plates like scallop tartare with baby greens, braised short ribs of beef, duck and foie-gras ravioli, branzino with leeks, *maccheroni* with stewed Mediterranean octopus, and roasted baby chicken. There's also La Cote (a Saint-Tropez-style beach club), Vida (an all-day destination with Pan-American cuisine) and Fresh (the pool-side snack bar).

Bridging the gap between nightlife and food is Blade, the ultra-lounge-cum-ushi-bar. Originally envisioned as a burger bar, Blade developed into a spot for California rolls and champagne. It overlooks its own lap pool, where European bathing (k.a. topless) is permitted. LIV is the hotel's main nightclub, and it literally means "54" in Roman numerals (a nod to the original opening date). This high-energy, two-story, 30,000-square-foot dance club will feature world-renowned DJs like David Guetta, Tiesto, Steve Aoki, Ruckus and Vice. Soffer also expects to book many corporate parties, including one this month hosted by Lyor Cohen for Tory Burch with musical guest Estelle. Be sure to look up at the domed ceiling, which is studded with more than 3,000 color-schemed LEDs for the ultimate light show.


The Fontainebleau's face-lift is the combined effort of several notable architects, such as Jeffrey Beers and the firm Nichols Brosch Wurst Wolfe & Associates. David Collins created Scarpetta, while Hakkasan was designed by the French firm Gilles & Boissier. In the hotel's check-in area, there is a light installation from artist James Turrell. There are also electronic touchscreen maps throughout the property, and iMac computers in each room (on which you can order room service and book spa appointments). Of the more than 1,500 rooms, the majority is housed in the original Chateau and Versailles towers. The newer structures, Trésor and Sorrento, contain the remaining 658 accommodations. "The rooms are very comfortable," Soffer asserts. "They have big showers, flat-screen TVs and iMacs. All of the rooms are brand-new. They don't smell." Options range from junior to one- and two-bedroom suites, and start at \$399 a night.

As far as whether the economy can sustain such a mammoth project, Soffer is optimistic: "Yes, I think about it, but what do you do? You put your nose to the grindstone. This hotel is an offbeat thing. I always thought we would do things that nobody has done before. I pride myself on the fact that I've been a developer who looks outside the box. I'm not interested in riding the waves that everyone else has. We've always built great projects. My dad built Aventura. We moved out to Las Ve-

The interior of the Pan-American restaurant Vida.




gas when no one else was there. The situation here is that it's a project in an amazing location. It has all of the great bells and whistles. I can attract people from over the world because of what I have here. People want to come to Miami Beach. Whatever money is out there, I'm going to get it." Nevertheless, earlier this year he sold 50 percent of Fontainebleau Resorts to the Dubai-based company Nakheel for \$375 million.

With prelaunch hype that was covered on the front page of the Fashion & Style section of *The New York Times* and in *Time* magazine (to name just a few publications), the buzz is certainly there. The opening lived up to every expectation and more, despite the fact that, in typical Miami Beach fashion, the hotel received its temporary certificate of occupancy at 7 p.m. on Wednesday night, two days before the gala weekend. Nevertheless, celebrities like Paris Hilton, Kate Hudson and Kathryn Paltrow piled in all weekend to see Mariah Carey and Robin Thicke perform, as well as ogle Heidi Klum and her leggy band of Angels prancing down the runway at CBS' annual Victoria's Secret fashion show. "In 1954, this was the hotel to come to," says Soffer. "My vision is to bring it back. And to make it the hotel to come to in 2009 and 2009, and thereafter." Mission accomplished. 







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The Luster Gallerie, with Morris Lapidus' iconic cheese-hole wall in the background.