

Jewel of the Desert Distinct history and architecture make the Biltmore Resort an icon in Arizona

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With a rich history and one-of-a-kind artistry, the Arizona Biltmore Resort and Spa in Phoenix offers guests more than golf courses and pools. The resort is, in fact, a tribute to Frank Lloyd Wright, one of America's most illustrious architects. Every inch of the 80-year-old resort showcases Wright's influence.

Wright's student, Albert Chase McArthur, built and designed the Arizona Biltmore in 1929. The Arizona Biltmore was McArthur's first hotel project, and the property still remains the only existing hotel in the world with a Wright-inspired design.

ICONIC ARCHITECTURE

Referred to early on as the "Jewel of the Desert," the Arizona Biltmore's design complements its awe-inspiring desert surroundings. Wright advocated "organic architecture," a concept that dictates all parts of a design should relate to the whole. He applied this concept by adopting indigenous materials and influences to make his structures become part of the landscape rather than dominate it.

McArthur applied Wright's organic vision to the resort by constructing each building of the resort with Biltmore Blocks—pre-cast blocks made from desert sand. There are 34 different geometric patterns, all inspired by the trunk of a palm tree.

Julia Thorn, director of marketing and public relations for the Arizona Biltmore, said the pre-cast blocks were originally created in a factory, then erected onsite where men worked 10-hour shifts to make 250,000 blocks.

"Over the years, with the expansions, the number of Biltmore Blocks has grown to more than 6 million," Thorn said.

To bring the essence of the surroundings inside, McArthur and Wright also designed a

gold-leaf ceiling in the lobby that still remains the second largest gold-leafed ceiling in the world, second to the Taj Mahal.

"The ceiling is comprised of 36,000 square feet of individual four-inch squares that were hand-applied by artisans on scaffolding," said Thorn.

Management staff at the resort have maintained the ceiling over the years. After a fire in the 1970s, the original ceiling artist was brought in to train people in restoration and preservation of a gold-leaf ceiling.

PART ART MUSEUM

Along with its architectural beauty, the historic artwork scattered throughout the resort transforms the property into an art museum of sorts. The "Saguaro Forms and Cactus Flowers" stained-glass window by Wright sits prominently in the lobby welcoming guests.

Throughout the resort's gardens sit the Biltmore Sprites, some of the most eminent pieces on the grounds. These slender statues of ethereal spirits are often referred to as the "lost children of Frank Lloyd Wright." They were conceived in 1914 by sculptor Alfonso Iannelli for a project Wright was working on in Chicago. In 1985, six of the sprites found a new home at the Arizona Biltmore when Wright's wife donated them to the resort.

PRESERVATION AND EVOLUTION

Safeguarding the property's history while staying with the times, is a constant balancing act for the Arizona Biltmore.

"It has been challenging with so many expansions and enhancements over the years," said Thorn. "Preserving the history and design is very important to us; it is our heritage. But, we also have to keep pace with the ever-evolving,

discriminating guests that we have.”

As one of the Historic Hotels of America, certain historic aspects of the interior and exterior of the property are protected and the resort owners are responsible for ensuring all historical elements remain intact. Out of respect for the architecture, Biltmore Blocks are still used whenever the resort adds new wings and buildings, and new furnishings are always consistent with Wright’s decorative style.

At the same time, the Arizona Biltmore is in line with today’s most luxurious resorts, complete with a spa, fine dining and upscale shops. The resort has also continued to grow and evolve. Recently, the pools and pool surfaces were reworked and a highly upgraded Arizona wing of rooms was opened, along with upgrades in other areas.

UBIQUITOUS INFLUENCE

By respecting its past and embracing its future, the Arizona Biltmore has maintained its status as an oasis of luxury, both locally and nationally. When the resort opened in 1929, it was owned by the Wrigley family until 1970. Throughout those first 40 years, guests had to be invited to stay at the Jewel of the Desert. The resort quickly became world renowned as a preferred luxury oasis for celebrities, heads of state and captains of industry. In fact, every U.S. president since Herbert Hoover has stayed at the Arizona Biltmore. Most recently, Senator John McCain held his election night party at the resort.

Since changing ownership in the 1970s, the Arizona Biltmore is no longer invitation-only, yet it still remains an exclusive getaway for many high-profile guests.

“The Arizona Biltmore has been very influential,” said Thorn. “It is an international icon.”

KEEPING IT RUNNING

Of course, maintaining such a high-profile property takes a strong and organized management team. With 739 guest rooms located on an amenity-filled, 39-acre property, the team has many responsibilities. And managing a historic



[TOP] THE ARIZONA BILTMORE RESORT WAS CONSTRUCTED FROM BLOCKS MADE OF DESERT SAND IN 1929.

[BOTTOM LEFT] THE BILTMORE SPRITES CAN BE FOUND THROUGHOUT THE RESORT’S GARDENS.

[BOTTOM RIGHT] THE “SAGUARO FORMS AND CACTUS FLOWERS” STAINED-GLASS WINDOW WAS CREATED BY ARCHITECT AND ARTIST FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT.

property poses unique challenges.

“The building is 80 years old and has been remodeled and expanded several times,” said Andrew Stegen, general manager. “There are many different materials and methods of construction, and some of those materials are no longer used or in existence.”

However, managing a property with so much notoriety allows the managers and associates a sense of pride in their work.

“I get to work in a very interesting, historic property that is deep with stories,” said Stegen. “I get to ride the coattails of a legend that will, frankly, be around long after I will.” ■