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TRAVEL: Local getaway to the Biltmore takes guests back in time

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By Judy Wade and Bill Baker | Special to the AFN

Strolling among the graceful palms and fragrant orange trees, past the people-size lawn chess set, it's easy to imagine Clark Gable in his tennis whites appearing around a corner.

When it opened in 1929, the Arizona Biltmore pioneered the luxury hotel experience. For decades it welcomed families who came for weeks and months at a time, complete with nannies and steamer trunks. Parents stayed in the main building, with children and staff occupying cottages scattered throughout the grounds.

Today's guests can tune into that opulent era by taking the Biltmore's History Tour, led by a certified historian.

Sprites

The marvelous mood of this fabled place kicked in the minute the valet whisked away our car. Two classic Sprites, elegantly immobile and unmistakably Frank Lloyd Wright in origin, accent the front lawn. The 6-foot-tall Sprites were designed by the

legendary architect in 1914 for Chicago's Midway Gardens, which was essentially a beer garden. Prohibition brought the garden's revelry to a standstill, and the original Sprites were buried in a farmer's field in the Wisconsin Dells. They've been unearthed and recovered, and the Sprites at the Biltmore were recast from original molds and given to the resort by Taliesin West.

Eager for a close encounter with history, we joined a dozen or so others in the Biltmore lobby. Concierge/historian Kerl Christian explained that the tour would last about an hour-and-a-half, and we could drop out at any time.

She walked us over to a wall of historical photos, pointing out how the Biltmore's classic architecture reflects the unmistakable influence of Frank Lloyd Wright.

"He served as the consulting architect in collaboration with his student, Albert Chase McArthur, who was the architect of record," Christian said.

Stained glass

As we moved along, Christian stopped at the magnificent stained glass "Saguaro Forms and Cactus Flowers," donated by Mrs. Frank Lloyd Wright. The original design was done by her husband for the cover of *Liberty Magazine*, but was rejected, and languished in a drawer for years. Mrs. Wright retrieved it, and commissioned a local artist to bring it to life for the Biltmore.

Walls throughout the resort are made of "Biltmore Block," a version of a textile block first used by Wright to construct private homes. Made of desert sand and pre-cast on site, their unusual designs are said to reflect either the trunk of a palm tree or the mathematical equation for light.

The Gold Room, now used for special functions, was the hotel's original dining room.

"Guests had assigned tables, like on some cruise ships, and dinners were very formal," Christian said. "After the appointed dinner hour, doors were closed and latecomers were not admitted."

On the third floor, in the history-cum-card room that's now used for private functions and receptions, we realized just how much presence the ghosts of guests past still have. Walls are lined with photos of ladies in pale lawn dresses and sleek slacks suits, gents clad in the resort whites of the 1930s, and scrubbed children energetically eluding watchful nannies. Many of the photos were sent to the hotel by past guests.

Wrigley influence

Following the stock market crash in 1930, chewing gum magnate William Wrigley, one of the original investors, became the resort's sole owner. When our tour group moved outdoors to the Catalina pool, named for the beautifully-colored Catalina tile used in its construction, we saw the Wrigley connection. The artistic tile was produced on California's Catalina Island, also owned by Wrigley.

The Wrigley family sold the Biltmore to Tally Industries in 1973, and today it is part of the Waldorf-Astoria Collection. With the addition of air conditioning that year, the "Jewel of the Desert" as it was dubbed at its inception, became a year-round property.

Along with the glitterati of the entertainment, literary and art worlds, every sitting president since the hotel was built has stayed at the Biltmore. History Hallway has photos of each of them taken in some part of the hotel.

As we left, we stopped at a cage of cockatiels in the foyer.

"This pair is named Bill and Coo," Christian told us. "Bill, for William Wrigley, and Coo for his wife Ada. Coo was Ada's nickname."

The history tour is offered to the public on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday at 10 a.m., for \$10.

For an elegant local getaway, book the Biltmore History Package that includes the tour, plus one night accommodations in a resort room located in a historic cottage or in the main building. It also includes breakfast for two at the Café or The Grill, a tour for two of Frank Lloyd Wright's Taliesin West, an Arizona Biltmore or Frank Lloyd Wright history book, and a Biltmore chocolate block, inspired by the signature "Biltmore Blocks" used in construction of the hotel.

The package is priced at \$437 through May 21, and goes down to \$248 May 22 to Sept. 13. Reserve either the package or the tour by calling the resort, (602) 955-6600.

The Arizona Biltmore Resort & Spa is located at 2400 E. Missouri in Phoenix. For more information, visit www.arizonabiltmore.com.

Judy Wade and Bill Baker are a food/wine/travel writer-photographer team based in Ahwatukee Foothills.

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Bill Baker/For the AFN
The Paradise Pool at the Arizona Biltmore, which still has its original Art Deco water slide, tempted divers to show off their skills.

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Definitely better off today, with more disposable income, fewer worries and a bright future ahead.

About the same, it seems we haven't really moved forward in the past few years.

Things are worse, five years ago we had few worries and today I'm staying awake at night worrying about the future.

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