

BY MARITZA COSANO

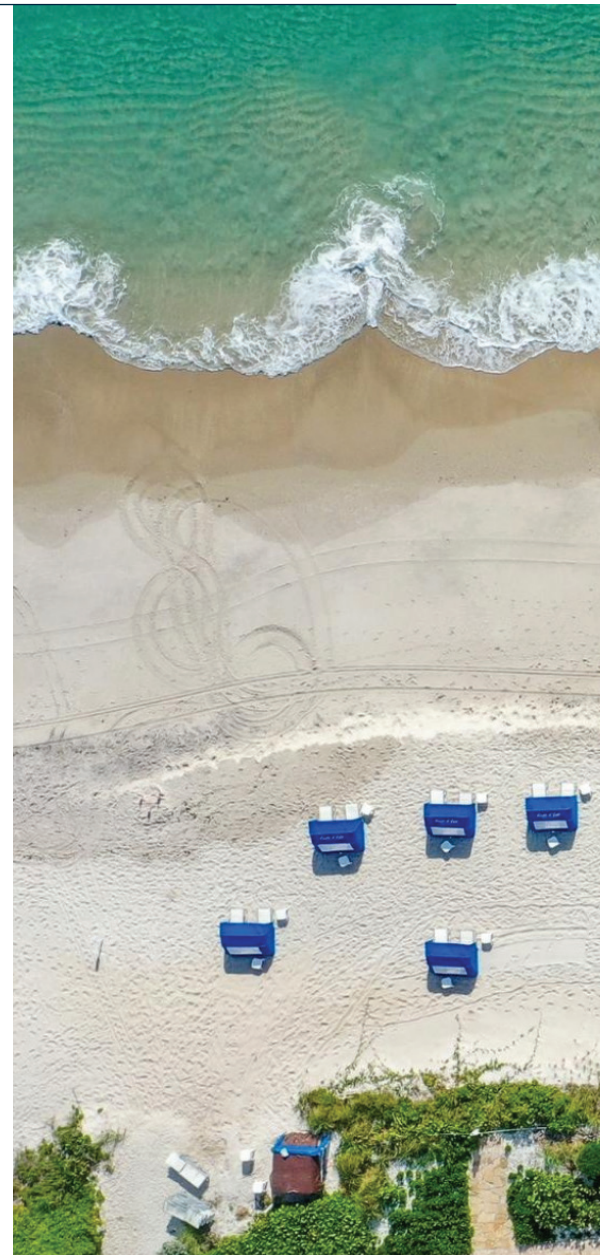
COSTA D'ESTE BEACH RESORT & SPA

What Locals Call 'Gloria's Place,' is Drawing a Young Crowd



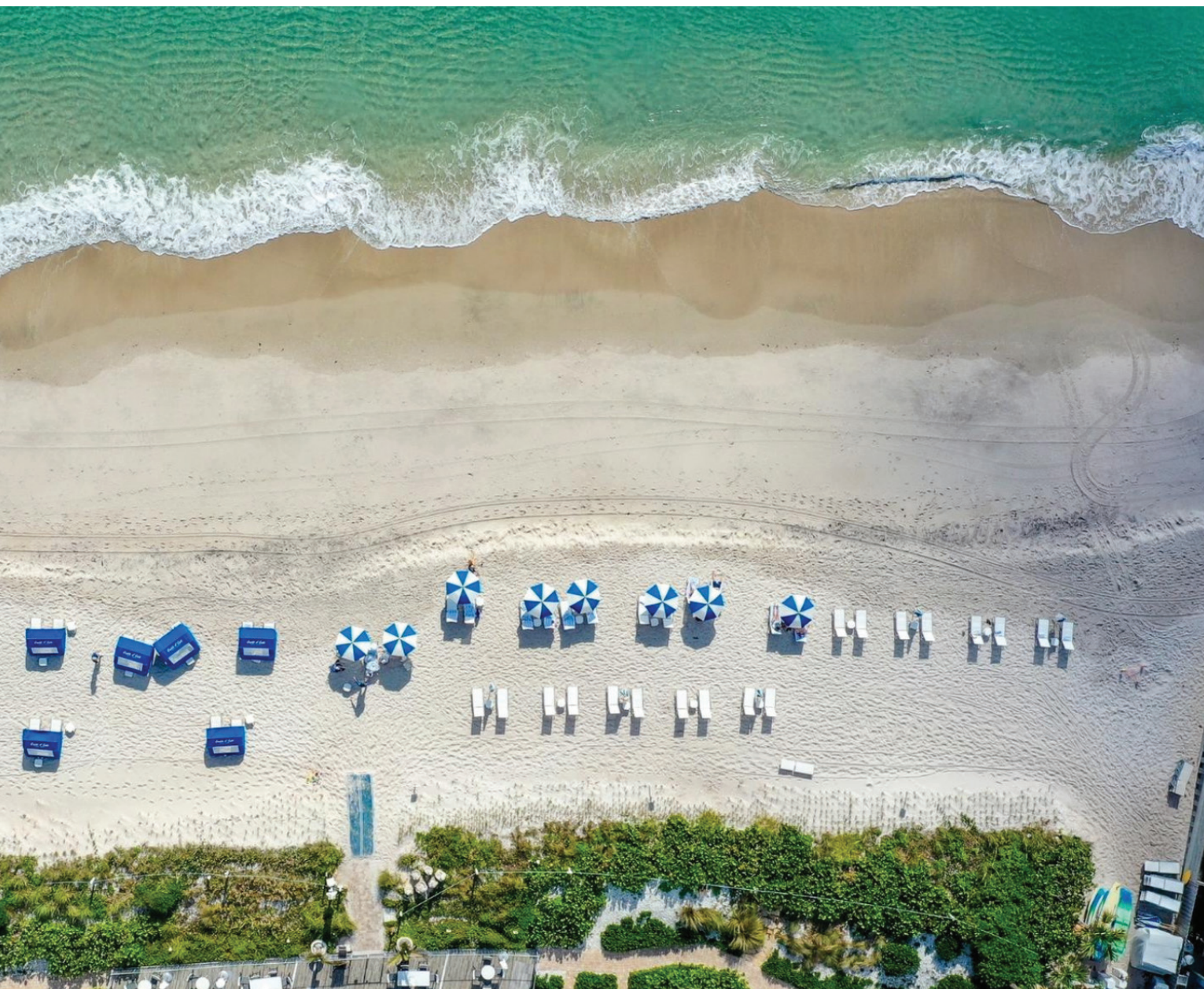
It was barely six o'clock on a Friday night, but the sun had already begun its descent over Florida's east coast. After crossing over the tall Beachland Boulevard Bridge that connects Vero Beach's mainland to the island, it seemed like we were driving straight into the cotton candy blue sky. As soon as we rolled into Costa d'Este Beach Resort & Spa, we were wowed by the natural beauty of the place. Two bright white towers stood tall over the single wall adorning the entrance with its shimmering water cascade. Outside the hotel lobby, there was an antique, two-seat bicycle available for hotel guest use, so I made a mental note of that. In my experience, if you truly want to explore an island, you'd rather do it on foot or on a bike, not in a car.

From that point on, we were welcomed as honored guests, as if we were part of Gloria and Emilio Estefan's entourage. The resort, I came to find out, was built in the early 70s, when it opened up as a Howard



Johnson. It's had quite the transformation over the years—from a Howard Johnson's to a Day's Inn to an independent stand-alone hotel that was very closely tied to the Dodgers baseball players, who stayed at the hotel and spent many hours at the restaurant after spring training. So, the resort had been deeply ingrained into the community.

Fast forward to 2004, when Gloria and Emilio Estefan entered the picture. They were focused on finding a resort in Vero Beach, as they loved the area and had visited it many times. A realtor friend to the Estefans made them aware of an opportunity to buy the resort. They



“Charmed by the area’s mix of upscale and laid-back social scene, boutique shopping, fine dining, and craft brewery shopping, Costa d’Este offers a calm and breezy setting unlike any other.”

Aerial view of the beach at Costa d’Este Beach Resort & Spa. For more than a century, Vero Beach has been a symbol of a small coastal town’s exclusivity. But because of resorts like Costa d’Este—which is owned by Gloria Estefan, one of the most successful crossover Cuban artists in Latin music history, along with her husband Emilio Estefan—this once sleepy town with sparkling lakes and rivers made alive with fish and fowl is now becoming more accessible, beckoning a younger, more diverse crowd.

quickly jumped on it, but six months after they made the purchase, two hurricanes, Francis and Jean, hit and completely wiped out the resort. According to Chad Olson, Costa d'Este's general manager, the Estefans always had every intention of remodeling the resort into what it is today. However, it was going to take more time to complete the process. The hurricanes kind of forced their hand to do it all at once. Costa d'Este as you see it now, opened in July of 2008.

Every design element that you see at the resort, from the exotic foliage in the lobby to the restaurant's chic green leather alligator print seats, has a signature stamp on it—a tropical Cuban flair that's both elegant and inviting.

At the bottom of The Wave Kitchen & Bar's menu, there's a personal note from Gloria and Emilio, introducing the Estefan Kitchen. "Some of those recipes are very close and dear to Gloria and Emilio's

family, so those items will never be taken off the menu," explained Olson. Dishes like Ropa Vieja, Paella, Cuban Sandwich, Steak, and of course, White Rice, Black Beans, and Sweet Plantains—the staples of Cuban cuisine. "When it first opened, Wave was just a Cuban restaurant, offering Cuban cuisine only. It evolved into today's menu, which offers the freshest seafood and the finest steaks in town. But, the Cuban flavors remain," he said.

The resort itself transports you to a tropical place. You encounter the excellent cuisine and service, and find yourself checking all the boxes—superb! Over 50% of their business is coming from locals, and that's not surprising. With its lush gardens, sandy beaches, and towering palm trees, this affluent area is a perfect match for the resort's classy ambiance. It's reminiscent of Cuba's glamor days in the 40s and 50s.

It was amazing to see the king-size bed in the cabana room that awaited us. I opened the back, glass door and there it was, just a few steps away: a sweeping view of the Atlantic Ocean, unmarred by the city's loud noises or towering shafts of steel and stone. I was enchanted by

the way the ocean waves rolled up to the pristine shores, so I claimed one of the loungers, which is shaded by tall palm trees and a beige-trimmed umbrella by day, and sat sipping a shot of WhistlePig whiskey, a gift from the resort and, as it turned out, one of the world's finest rye, with a robust, bold flavor.

My daughter joined me on this trip. Our first dinner was at The Wave Kitchen & Bar, the resort's signature restaurant.

Inside, a bright red spotlight fell like a rubicund swell on a Baby Grand piano, a design that took you back to the 1930s, inviting you to the majesty of the Steinway in this cozy space. The food can only be described as exquisite. Everything we expected. From the fresh, scrumptious seafood and produce to the Center-Cut Filet Mignon, served with Sauce Béarnaise to the Spanish Paella and Ropa Vieja. . . outstanding wine and delectable desserts like Cuban flan, churros, and pecan pie . . . dining at The Wave for three days and two nights was an unforgettable experience. Topped by personalized service and an Instagrammable atmosphere, Costa reflects the splendor of Florida's diverse culture.

View of the sunrise from the resort's pool. *The quiet setting is ideal to relax in the Florida sun with a Piña Colada or ice-cold local craft beer from the Cabana Bar.*



On our second day's early morning, we took a kayaking tour with Paddles by the Sea. Our guide, Dana Bryan, gave us a glimpse of the city's past and present.

Near Costa d'Este, a section of beach, back in 1932, was Vero Beach's main public beach until the nearby Humiston Park and other recreational areas were developed. Directly offshore from the Grill lies the wreck of the S.S. Breconshire, the only visible remains of a sunken ship that drifted too close to shore during a storm. The S.S. Breconshire has become part of Costa d' Este's attraction, as it offers its guests a kayaking and snorkeling experience they won't forget. But we took another fascinating water adventure—coasting along the Indian River, where we were able to see manatees and Blue Herons, and all other types of wildlife in their natural habitat.

Since the 1930s, Vero Beach has become a nesting area for the wealthy, filled with mansions and magnificent hotels and resorts like Costa d'Este. In the past two years, however, young urban crowds from cities like Miami and Fort Lauderdale, and out-of-state travelers from New York and Los Angeles have been making Vero Beach their home. Lured by the prospect of lower rents and taxes, and a less-densely populated area, a new generation is moving to Vero, reclaiming this old tropical haven and making it their own.

The resort's luxurious C|Spa made "pampering" with a purpose that much more

real. The full-service spa offers a wide variety of massage and beauty treatments, but we opted for the 50-minute signature massage. At first, we didn't know whether we were seeking relaxation or rejuvenation, or perhaps a bit of both. In the end, the simple indulgence revived our senses and relieved our aches and pains.

Our experience was not complete without a lazy afternoon under the sun, followed by a leisurely stroll up and down the town's boutique-lined streets.

As we walked back to our room, we saw a wedding party in Costa's lobby heading to the shore where the ceremony would take place under a beautifully designed, pristine white cabana.

The next morning, after a delicious and outrageous brunch of fish tacos, ropa vieja, and grits, avocado salad, eggs

benedict, coffee, and mimosas served conveniently on our cabana's back porch, we set out to cross a different kind of line: Vero Beach mainland. Although the narrow body of water dividing the mainland from the island is easily navigated by the Beachland Boulevard Bridge, it has represented a sort of barrier for decades.

But as more new residents discover both sides, that division has begun to fade—and a younger crowd has drawn in. "Don't tell anybody about Vero Beach," a young man told me tongue-in-cheek, as his way of keeping this hidden gem on Florida's Treasure Coast all to himself. Sorry, pal, the secret is out!

If you plan to travel to Vero Beach, visit Costa d'Este Beach Resort & Spa at costadeste.com.

These monkeys at the Costa d'Este Beach Resort are regarded as a good-luck charm. The sculptures stand out as something quite different and unexpected along the beach.

