

Of Gorillas and Ghosts

Written by Jim W. Harper -- BT Contributor
April 2013

At Crandon Gardens, the remains of the old Crandon Park Zoo provide a scenic, somewhat spooky backdrop

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re you over Miami? Think you've seen everything? Well, let me suggest that your Miami bucket list cannot be complete without this item checked off: Visit the haunted zoo.

The zoo in question, now known as Crandon Gardens, is both haunted and hauntingly beautiful, an apt microcosm of our mangled metropolis. The old-timers will remember this place as the Crandon Park Zoo, and newcomers will discover the cages and other ruins of that zoo as ghostly interlopers in a lush and photo-ready backdrop.

This hidden garden in plain sight is one of the most beautiful locations in South Florida, yet it is shockingly devoid of visitors. Wedding photographers know about it and regularly bring their clients here for photo shoots, without the need to pay for privacy. The privacy comes by default, because practically no one seems to know this park exists.

Not that Crandon Gardens is off the beaten path. It occupies 30-odd acres inside of Key Biscayne's Crandon Park, one of the area's most popular parks and the setting for the annual Sony Open tennis mega-event (which explains the traffic last month). The problem with the botanical garden may be that it gets bypassed in favor of the park's other attractions, such as the beach, cabanas, picnic areas, nature center and preserve, sports fields, and the carousel

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with its expansive tot lot. With all that, who has time to relax in a garden?



But you must, especially bird-lovers. The free-roaming exotic birds are superior to those that can be viewed at most zoos. Then there are the reflecting lakes, the wide-open animal cages, and the surreptitious art. The strange and the beautiful collide here as if arranged by master surrealist Salvador Dali.

Back in 2003, the *BT*'s current editor was editor-in-chief of the weekly *New Times*, and he named Crandon Gardens "Best Public Park." Still, it remains obscure. It has no Website. Its name is not mentioned on Miami-Dade's Parks, Recreation, and Open Spaces website. A Google search for "Crandon Gardens" brings up 289 results, whereas a search for the much smaller "Miami Beach Botanical Garden" brings up 122,000 results.

I first discovered Crandon Gardens by accident. I did it while riding my bike to the farthest end of a massive parking lot. In fact, I couldn't tell you how to drive to Crandon Gardens, as the closest potential entrance seems to be permanently closed. It is marked by a large, seemingly unused yellow gatehouse. (Perhaps, at night, a phantom operator collects fees.)

A Crandon Park official told me to enter at the South Beach gate and ask for directions. (Note: Crandon Park admission is five dollars on weekdays and six dollars on weekends.)

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My directions are: Drive as far south as possible and, when you see the empty yellow building, you're there.

Better yet: Arrive by bike or on foot, and it's free. Bikes here are ideal.

Once inside, you will be on your own. No signs inside the gardens tell you where you are or where to go. (Yup, so Miami.) You simply have to wander around and discover it for yourself. Be safe.

Don't be surprised if you attract a gaggle of geese or a pod of peacocks. People clearly feed the birds regularly, and they know how to work the system. Their aggressive friendliness, however, may frighten small children.

The red-headed cranes, much taller than a child, are a bit more standoffish, but their beauty is exquisite. Their bodies don sleek gray tuxedos and taper to a thin neck topped by a hat of scarlet red. These are Sandhill cranes, the same ones on display at Zoo Miami.

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In the past, five types of swans nested in the garden, but they have been killed by rare American crocodiles, according to Valerie Cassidy, founder of the defunct Gardens of Crandon Park Foundation and a longtime volunteer caretaker of the gardens.



Other flocks of birds persist. Have you ever heard a male peacock vibrate his feathers in full array? Perhaps if you live in El Portal, but for those of us who don't live in a bird sanctuary, a free-roaming peacock remains astonishing. I was entranced when one peacock, strutting alongside a lake, put on a 15-minute show of courtship. The peahens, on the other hand, were not impressed.

Besides flocks of birds striking a pose, the most remarkable sight at Crandon Gardens is the vestige of the zoo that closed in 1980. In the back are pits surrounded by coral rock. Cages appear prehistoric; some are painted with murals and have been left wide open, allowing visitors to pose like monkeys at some ghoulish, unauthorized Art Basel event. You have to ask yourself: Why are these abandoned cages still here?

Like many Miami stories, this one gets complicated. It follows the saga of the Matheson family, which owned most of Key Biscayne when it was a coconut plantation. Dade County Commissioner Charles Crandon persuaded them to donate nearly 1000 acres to the public, and Crandon Park opened in 1947.

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CRANDON PARKS



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