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Rock Hall is filled with coffered ceiling and elaborately carved fireplaces.

MIZNER MAGIC

*A touch of 1920s
Palm Beach
in New England*

BY GEORGETTE GOUVEIA

Amid the society folk of New York City and Palm Beach in the Jazz Age, Addison Mizner could've out-Gatsbyed the Great Gatsby himself. The architect had a reputation for cynical mouthing off, so much so that he co-authored something called "The Cynic's Calendar." (Sample adage: "Where there's a will, there's a lawsuit.") Fortunately, he also had a reputation for designing marvelously eclectic homes for the rich and famous in his native California, New York and especially Florida. While many of these are gone, the one extant Mizner home built north of the Mason-Dixon Line happens to be in WAG country. Better still, it can be your home, too, for the price of a hotel stay.

Nestled in the Litchfield Hills and southern Berkshires, Rock Hall is a 10,000-square-foot manor house in Mizner's trademark eclectic style, which was described by Alva Johnson in his book "The Legendary Mizners" and George B. Tindall in a 1965 *American Heritage* article as "Bastard-Spanish-Moorish-Romanesque-Gothic-Renaissance-Buff Market-Damn-the-Expense." Certainly, that style is apparent in Rock Hall's stately Spanish-flavored stone and stucco exterior, dramatic coffered ceilings, elaborately carved fireplaces and richly textured guest suites (five in all).

There's also a billiard room, a private movie theater, an inground pool, a grass tennis court and a marked hiking trail, all on 23 acres of specimen trees and perennial gardens that represented a collaboration between Mizner and the firm of Central Park designer Frederick Law Olmsted.

The circa 1912 house — on the National Register of Historic Places — has also added some 21st-century amenities, along with spa treatments, carriage rides, hot-air ballooning, kayaking, fly-fishing, antiquing, arts trekking and shopping.

How Mizner would've loved it all. He was born in San Francisco in 1872 and developed his passion for Spanish and Spanish colonial art and architecture

during a stage trip with his father to Guatemala and a stint at the University of Salamanca in Spain. For a time he worked as a society architect and Japanese-landscape designer in New York City before ill health took him to Palm Beach at the end of World War I.

There Mizner hooked up with Paris Singer, heir to the Singer sewing machine fortune and onetime boyfriend of modern-dance goddess Isadora Duncan, and began signing clubs and mansions for various Vanderbilts, Wannamakers and Biddis. These were strong on warm hues, dressed accents (before there were dressed accents) and, integrating the landscape and the interior. Unfortunately, a Mizner design wasn't as strong on blueprinting or backed by the most scrupulous business practices.

Soon Mizner and his roguish brother Wilson were vainly planning the resort city of Boca Raton amid a Florida land boom that went bust at the end of the '20s, foreshadowing bad things to come. (Sound familiar?)

Mizner, however, was lucky enough to land a commission in his native state, from businessman Alfred Dieterich, for whom Mizner had once created a house in Millbrook, N.Y. The new house, Casa



Billiard room



Rock Hall

Bienvenida or Bienvenido, in Montecito, had everything Mizner fans love — a mouthwatering, earthy palette, recessed ceilings, commanding fireplaces, cloistered walkways, plenty of warm woods, geometric Mediterranean gardens and

a stucco exterior flanked by pineapple-shaped palm trees. It was among the evocative beauties featured in Tim Street-Porter's "The Los Angeles House" (Clarkson Potter, 1995).

Mizner died penniless in 1933 and

many of his houses were sacrificed to 1950s' redevelopment. However, at Rock Hall at least, the public can sit back and marvel at a man whose touch, like Gatsby's, was a bit larcenous but still magic. ■