

December 02, 2005 – Vizcaya Museum

We drove to visit Vizcaya today. This is an Italian style villa built by John Deering, a rich industrialist from the early 1900s. This villa resides south of Miami and sits of US1 and overlooks the waterfront. This 2 story mansion is built of marble. Both levels are comprised of a rectangular ring with an open inner courtyard. Each room in this ring is designed to look like it was made in a different era. Hence one room looks classical Greek, another room looks Renaissance style, and still another room had the look of an expensive opium den from 1800s China.



After Vizcaya, we wanted to visit the Miami Sea-aquarium. We called the place first, and they notified us that they were closed to ~ March 2006 due to hurricane damage. So instead we drove to Coconut Grove, which was only a couple of miles from Vizcaya. Coconut Grove is to Miami what Pasadena is to LA, a wealthy suburb with posh shops and exquisite restaurants. We walked around this area, did some window shopping, checked out the water front park, and had dinner at a Mexican restaurant.



Having driven in this place for one week, we have come to several conclusions. First, people here are horrible drivers in the sense that they show no courtesy to each other. People change lanes without signaling, make right and left hand turns without signaling, run red lights, cut in front of each other constantly, and in general show minimal courtesy to their fellow drivers. Horning is also quite prevalent. Newton said he has been in 20 US states and driven in eight of them, and have never seen people horn each other as constantly and quickly as here in Florida. We actually did a test one day. While driving Newton counted each time we heard a horn while Casy counted of the time. After 20 minutes, we had heard 19 instances of horning in which we knew it was on the road we were on, either our lane or the opposite lane; i.e. the horning was not coming from some other road. We repeated this test several times in different cities; Miami, Key West, Miami Beach, etc... The results were fairly consistent, about 1 instance of horning per minute regardless of time of day, day of week, location, street type, etc... Everybody horns everybody else regardless of age, gender, race, and type of car.

Second, pedestrians here are just as reckless as the drivers. On just about every street we saw pedestrians dashing through traffic, often when there was a crosswalk nearby that they could have used if they bothered to walk an extra block. Even on the freeways we saw people dashing across the street. Pedestrians did this day and night, and the most aggravating was that everyone did this; old, young, children, even the handicapped. This occurred on one-way streets, two-way streets, in the city, in the suburbs, everywhere...

Third, both pedestrians and drivers are on their cell phones constantly. Drivers talk on their cell phones while driving and pedestrians talk on their cell phones while jaywalking. The result is a lot of inattention. At nearly every intersection where I came to when it was red light, some driver would be chatting on their phone and miss the light change from red to green. The people behind her would honk their horns; she would look up, and then start moving.

Fourth, Southern Florida in general and Miami in particular has a horrible road system. Many roads, big or small, had multiple names, with a typical road having one name for several blocks, and changing to another name at an intersection or bend in the road. This often occurred with little advance notice, making it quite easy for newcomers to get lost. Even worse, road signs such as speed limits, stop signs, road names, and other signs in this area are quite small, and often located in difficult to find locations. For example, many intersections have the traffic lights placed on the side of the intersection closest to you, making it hard for drivers in the front to see the light, instead of being placed on the opposite side of the intersection such that the drivers in front can see it easily. Another example we saw is how at some intersections, the street names were placed at ground level, like painted on a rock or on a fence, instead of sitting atop an unobstructed pole. I saw this both in Coconut Grove and in Coral Gables, two of the wealthier suburbs of Miami, along with seeing it in some of the poorer neighborhoods.

Another appalling feature was the lack of sunshades on the traffic lights. In Arizona in general, and Phoenix in particular, nearly every traffic light has separate shades above each of the three lamps (red, yellow and green) such that if the Sun is overhead, the shades prevent sunlight from reflecting directly of the lamps and masking their light. Miami is closer to the equator than Arizona, and probably has as many days of sunshine as Phoenix, yet we saw few traffic lights with these lamps. This made city driving during daytimes just as challenging as during nighttimes when it is easier to see the traffic lights but harder to see the pedestrians dashing across the roads.

Last, parking is a major dilemma in Miami. Many towns and cities handle parking in one of two ways. The first is the off-the-road parking approach. Here, parking is in large lots or structures located either on side streets or alongside complexes such as shopping malls. This leaves the roads clear for cars to move quickly through them. This approach is characteristic of Phoenix, Vegas, and many of the newer cities in the West. The second way is the small-town approach; parallel and diagonal parking on the sides of residential streets, and lowered speed limits to reduce traffic speed. Everyone can essentially find parking anywhere as long as space is available, but road speeds are reduced due to the presence of cars entering and leaving parking spaces. Miami seems to have meshed both approaches and got the worst of both worlds. Specifically, all road, street, and avenue had some sort of roadside parking; even stretches of some of the multi-lane highways and freeways had roadside parking. Because of this, cars would pull in and out of roadside parking, which in turn slowed down and often stopped traffic. But the speed limits remained high, as if those parking spots were not even there. This meant stop and go traffic; drivers would race through the streets and slam on their brakes as somebody pulled into or out of a parking space.

**The parking lots here are strange.
Notice the presence of both diagonal and straight-on spaces in one lot**

