

GLOBEANDMAIL.COM

An island of parrots in the middle of Miami

Former roadside curiosity revamps itself as a jungle attraction on Watson Island

BY VANESSA PETIT

SATURDAY, JANUARY 17, 2004

POSTED AT 1:28 PM EDT

ASSOCIATED PRESS

MIAMI -- Nearly 70 years after a small tourist attraction with squawking macaws and other exotic birds attracted a few curious visitors to a sleepy suburb, a modern tropical jungle has emerged on a man-made island near downtown Miami.

Parrot Jungle Island, which was part of a generation of roadside attractions in Florida when it started up in 1936, opened its new \$47-million (U.S.) home last summer on Watson Island in Biscayne Bay.

The new attraction is home to thousands of tropical birds such as yellow Amazon parrots and pink flamingos, animals such as crocodiles and orangutans, and more than 2,000 varieties of plants and flowers. "We have created our own jungle on a really barren island," said Bert Levine, a veterinarian and one of the owners.

Levine bought Parrot Jungle in 1988 from the Austrian family that had operated the park since it opened in its original location in the Miami suburb of Pinecrest. The new location, Watson Island, is off the McArthur Causeway that connects downtown Miami and Miami Beach's tony South Beach. It has remained undeveloped for decades and offers panoramic views.

Parrot Jungle Island's boosters hope the new location will dramatically boost attendance and make the attraction profitable. In its last year of business at its old location, it attracted 300,000 visitors, 70 per cent of whom were area residents. Levine hopes that the new location, situated across from the Port of Miami's cruise ship terminals, will attract cruise ship passengers and double attendance. Also opening soon on Watson Island will be the Miami Children's Museum. A luxury hotel and a marina club for large yachts are planned as well.

Ady Milman, a theme-park management professor at the University of Central Florida, said the new park will need to distinguish itself from other attractions such as the Seaquarium and Miami's Metrozoo and compete with tourism magnets such as the beach and sporting events. But he believes that the park is "a refreshing change to the urbanism and will provide an escape for residents and tourists."

Many of the features of the old Parrot Jungle remain the same. Visitors still can get their photos taken while holding talking parrots with names such as Jaspar and Athena.

But the jungle has been revamped to include a wider variety of birds, more than 1,100 in all. Two sets of concrete trails, both covered and open, allow visitors to amble comfortably through the park.

The new park does look stark from the highway, but that will change as the vegetation matures,

Levine said. The old location was renowned for its lush winding nature trails dug through the coral rock and thickly wooded land with untouched natural flora.

The Parrot Bowl, a covered amphitheatre, seats 1,200 and has free-flying birds. The Serpentarium holds 500 people and exhibits larger reptiles and amphibians.

Flamingo Lake, with its famous pink flamingos that were filmed for the opening credits of TV's *Miami Vice* in the 1980s, has been duplicated with almost the same design.

New to the park is the Manu Encounter, a copy of the clay cliffs in Peru called Manu. "It represents a mud bank of a river where parrots go to eat minerals," Levine said. About 200 parrots and macaws will fly free in the screened area.

The new park also features an Everglades-like habitat, an 800-seat theatre for music and animal shows, a 1,000-person ballroom on the third-floor of the main building, and a petting zoo.

For more information, visit <http://www.parrotjungle.com> or call (305) 258-645.

© Copyright 2005 Bell Globemedia Publishing Inc. All Rights Reserved.