

# Dread and Decay in An 'Abandoned' Miami Beach Hotel

A symbol of luxury in one of the most unequal places on Earth became a refuge for homeless people. Then the cops got involved. [SHARE TWEET](#)

On February 13, about a dozen police officers from the Miami Beach Police Department staked out the Deauville Hotel, a historic oceanfront resort in the center of Miami's North Beach District, from the second-story window of the condominium next door. Once upon a time the Deauville's opulent ballrooms and suites played host to Frank Sinatra, Judy Garland, and JFK. From the exterior, its white parabolic curves and long sections of fixed green glass produced a near-hallucinatory vibrance when blended with the cobalt-blue sky and sea.

But now the cops were responding to numerous calls, over the course of several weeks, about unsavory hotel patrons. This was not the typical gaggle of rowdy South Florida tourists. Instead, four men had "unlawfully entered the secured resort," a police report read, and allegedly stolen \$50 worth of miscellaneous cables.

At the time of the stakeout, the hotel had been shuttered for over a year and a half, its once stark-white main tower now pockmarked and streaked with grime, and during that period gained the attention of nearby residents and law enforcement as a hive of criminal activity. It also emerged as an unlikely refuge for the area's homeless population who might otherwise be stuck wandering up and down the glitzy streets of Miami Beach in search of a

secluded place to rest. That a seemingly opportune haven for those in need was now the target of aggressive police activity came as no shock to experts and advocates on homelessness. They suggested the situation at the Deauville was an especially jarring example of a national trend in which wealthy communities complain about the unsightliness of abandoned buildings and homeless people who find shelter in or around them, while refusing to address the root causes.

"Something's just not right with this," said Ellen, a local woman who has lived on and off the street for the last ten years, and requested VICE withhold her last name to protect her privacy. She said she'd watched people come and go through the Deauville, and other abandoned or vacant lots, to squat for a few nights at a time. "They come in the middle of the night with their mats and nap sacks," she said. But eventually they are chased away by police or property managers, "and everybody has to leave."



The closing of the Deauville coincided with a [city-wide crackdown on nuisance crimes](#) such as trespassing, occupying a park after hours, and drinking in public. In a county beset with rampant homelessness—and the [second-worst ranking](#) of economic inequality in America, by one measure—these ordinances have led to the arrest of a disproportionate number of homeless people, though local officials argued that this was not the intended effect. The problem, as the *Miami Herald* [reported](#) in January, is

that despite there being roughly 1,400 homeless people in Miami Beach, by the official count, the city does not have any homeless shelters, and only 100 beds are set aside for local accommodations county-wide.

Given all of this, an empty hotel with hundreds of rooms in a posh community might seem like a promising solution. It did not last long. The Deauville has been completely blocked off and come under close surveillance, a result of the uproar from residents and businesses surrounding the hotel (one local outlet [described](#) it as "abandoned"). This is often the case in places with extreme concentrations of wealth such as Los Angeles, New York, and particularly the Miami metro area, which has [America's highest number of resident billionaires](#), by one count, and over 14 percent of the population living in poverty.

"Sadly, this does fit with the national trend," said Elizabeth Bowen, an assistant professor focused on housing and homelessness at SUNY Buffalo School of Social Work. "In general, a lot of cities don't want to see homelessness, and people don't want to make the commitments necessary to address the root causes of homelessness."



Designed by post-war modernist Melvin Grossman, the Deauville Hotel and Resort has been a landmark since its construction in 1957, and a favorite venue and winter retreat for the Hollywood set. Its humpback porte cochère

and honeycomb façade exemplified the exotic frivolity of the MiMo (Miami Modern) architectural style. On February 13, 1964, exactly 55 years prior to the cops' recent stakeout, the Beatles alighted from their Pan Am jet at the Miami International Airport. The band was [promptly shuttled to the Deauville Hotel and Resort on Miami Beach](#), where they would [appear](#) on the *Ed Sullivan Show* for its live taping in the hotel's Napoleon Ballroom.

The episode helped cement Deauville's iconic status, though it is expressed in far more elegiac terms today. In July 2017, an electrical fire [forced](#) the evacuation of 800 guests from the 17-story structure. Two months later, as contractors were only beginning to assess the damage, Hurricane Irma [delivered](#) a coup de grâce to the already enfeebled building. A recent lawsuit [filed](#) against the owners of the Deauville Hotel by the City of Miami Beach alleges that "damages were later amplified by certain illegal work performed on the property without a permit."

The Deauville was left to molder in the heat, alongside the vintage-chic beach resorts and tony condo towers. In its vacancy, it has become anathema to some surrounding businesses and residents. As David Sexton, a local business owner, put it, "It's ugly as hell." Reports from the Miami Beach Police Department reviewed by VICE indicate officers responded to calls about the Deauville property at least 18 times from September 2018 through late April 2019, though North Beach locals said evenings had been far more active than that figure suggests.



The condo tower next door has its own log of complaints from tenants who have watched the ungainly transformation, and people sneaking into the building on a nightly basis. "There have been a lot of squatters over there," said one worker at the condo who requested anonymity because, he said, his employer did not permit him to speak to the press.

The Meruelo family—real estate magnates with properties on both coastlines—has owned the hotel since 2004. In the lawsuit, they are accused of refusing to pay for repairs, failure to pay taxes and, generally, of abandonment. Both the City Commissioner and the Meruelo family declined to comment, citing the ongoing lawsuit, but the family has previously indicated insurance and other financial problems were hamstringing their attempts to comply with local demands for repairs.

According to local residents and police reports, cops have performed periodic sweeps of the Deauville since the fire, ascending the main tower on foot, dogs at their side, to root out squatters. Cruisers are often parked in the cross street that faces the hotel, forcing those who have camped at the Deauville in the past to search for other options. (A request for comment from the Miami Beach PD was not returned.)

But getting chased off by police is nothing new for Ellen and others like her.

"We just have to give up our spot," she said.

Since last January, according to the *Herald*, there has been an uptick in a mechanism for targeting low-level crimes on Miami Beach. Nicknamed the "stay away" order, these judicial mandates temporarily forbid defendants from returning to the scene for one year or else potentially be subjected to further, typically harsher, punishment. Stay away orders are [commonly used](#) in other cities as a means of shuffling around the homeless.

"If you only deal with homelessness by trying to tell people they can't sleep outside, or prosecute people for nuisance crimes, it detrimentally affects our communities," said Bowen, the homelessness expert. "Ultimately, we as taxpayers pay to incarcerate those people when we could be paying instead to deal with healthcare and housing."



On a typical day behind the hotel, North Beach residents amble along the boardwalk that runs parallel to the beach. Some briefly stop to take in the decrepit building before continuing on their walk. Two years' worth of detritus and fallen coconuts scatter across the brick. The windows and glass doors that lead into the Napoleon Ballroom have been shattered and boarded up with mildewed plywood. All the way up the main tower, random windows have been busted out, their plaster eyebrows crumbling above.

Despite the close surveillance, police reports indicated that break-ins continued to occur on the site, at least through the month of April. On an

evening in late May, there was more to suggest such a thing: A section of fencing that was pulled out of the ground nearby rested against an exterior wall of the hotel; the fence-posts were horizontal, doubling as ladder rungs, leading up to a second-story platform. On another day in early June, bed sheets and towels were laid out on a slab of concrete in a secluded alcove—further signs of life that had not been there the week before.

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