

Tour



Manor reborn ... visitors in the courtyard of Casa Casuarina, the former home of Gianni Versace.

Photo: AP

Flush with opulence

It may be over the top but you'll be won over by Gianni Versace's former home, writes **Sue White**.

There are reportedly only three marble toilets in the world, so as I put down my glass of champagne and open the door leading to Gianni Versace's marble loo, I feel obliged to take a moment to reflect. The bathroom before me, like every other space in this Miami mansion, is decorated to within an inch of its life. Artworks and 1930s architecture compete with murals and mosaics but somehow it works.

When designer Gianni Versace was killed on the steps of this South Beach building in 1997, it's said his sister Donatella couldn't deal with the memories. She went on a selling spree; the elaborately restored mansion and its furniture were sold off at rock-bottom prices to the present owner.

It's easy to sympathise with Donatella's grief but as I contemplate the loo, I am perplexed by one detail: how come, in her distress, she remembered to take the 24-carat gold toilet

seat? An hour earlier, observing the mansion's entrance with a growing sense of schadenfreude, I watched stylishly dressed guards decline access to the constant stream of tourists begging for a peek beyond the wrought-iron gates.

Not being a Versace fan per se, it seems mind boggling that the hopefuls are so persistent but the flow never ceases for more than a few minutes at a time.

As most settle for a photo on the steps where the famous designer was shot (on his way home from a morning coffee at nearby News Cafe), I wonder whether they simply haven't heard the news.

The property now hosts hourly tours, a guaranteed way to bypass the men in black on the gate.

Despite the steep \$US65 (\$99) entry tag, it's surprising the owners of Casa Casuarina, who now operate it as a luxury boutique hotel and



one of the world's most expensive private clubs, would bother with the hassle of running tours.

A-list celebrities reportedly pay \$US50,000 a year for club membership, which, of course, doesn't include room rates should they wish to come and stay (\$US2000-\$US10,000 a night).

Waiting for our own 45-minute experience to begin, we venture outside to the stunning veranda overlooking the pool and garden, key additions Versace made to Casa Casuarina after demolishing an adjacent hotel.

Almost immediately, we're wrangled back inside so as not to disrupt a famous designer dining outside with his partner.

Neither I nor my fashion-loving companion can place him but his membership obviously guarantees him solitude to admire the million mosaic tiles used in the pool's design.

Versace spent millions renovating the interior of this formerly dilapidated building, with no surface forgotten. A stairwell hosts a

palm tree mural, one dining room features mosaic walls on all sides and anything that looks gold actually is, from the pool's mosaic tiles to the kitchen's gold-speckled tiles.

Inexplicably for a building where the phrase "over the top" would be an understatement, the effect never feels anything but superb.

While it was Versace who restored Casa Casuarina to its present state of opulence, the original owner also put considerable energy into the building.

Architect, author and philanthropist Alden Freeman built the extensive property as a homage to the oldest existing house in the western hemisphere, Santo Domingo's Alcazar De Colon.

As we ponder the 12-person shower room, recline on ancient Persian hash lounges and step over gold drainpipes shaped like Versace's medusa muse, a walkie-talkied manager communicates with our Brazilian guide to

ensure we don't accidentally bump into Beyonce en route to the pool or Britney coming in from a big night out. We probably won't see Madonna. She pays for a permanent room here but we hear she never uses it.

We may be getting restricted access but Casa Casuarina is generous with the experience of the mansion.

When not walking on gold, tour attendees are encouraged to run their hands along 16th-century Italian tapestries, stand in his niece Allegra's shower or sneak a feel of Versace's bed cover. As we reluctantly leave the building, the pleasure of the experience lingers as we're politely ejected back outside with the crowds hovering by the steps.

To enjoy Casa Casuarina you don't need to be a celebrity spotter, fashionista, artist or architectural buff. But if you enter, be aware that the magnificence of this building may convert you into at least one of the above.

Lap of luxury ... (from left) the swimming pool; decorative tiles cover the mansion's floors; special effects for an evening soiree. Photos: AP, Getty Images

> TRIP NOTES

■ **Getting there** Flights to Miami are typically \$1600-\$2500 plus taxes but specials abound: at time of printing Best Flights had specials of \$1600 plus taxes (\$483) for Sydney to Miami via Auckland and Los Angeles. See bestflights.com.au.

■ **Touring there** Casa Casuarina, 1116 Ocean Drive, Miami Beach. Tours are offered daily, 9am-6pm. \$US65 (\$99) a person (including complimentary champagne or mimosa). Tour guests can also arrange to dine in the hotel's restaurant for an additional charge. Book in advance. Phone +1 305 672 6604 or see casacuarina.com.

■ **Staying there** While Casa Casuarina's rooms start about \$US2000 a night, the nearby National Hotel is more realistic for most, with prices from \$US259. 1677 Collins Avenue, see nationalhotel.com.