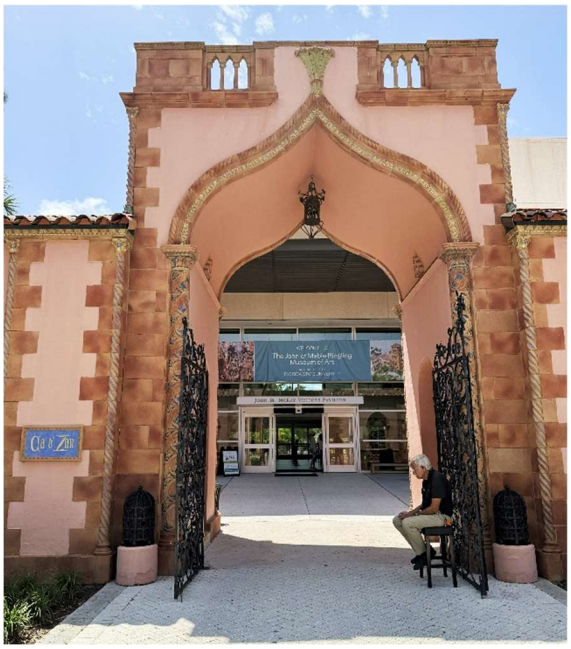
The Flyin' Solo VanLife on the Highways and Byways of North America
RICK'S ROADS
Ride Along and Enjoy the People, Places, and Who Knows What

BLOG POST: 2026.05.03

Ca d'Zan, Sarasota, Florida



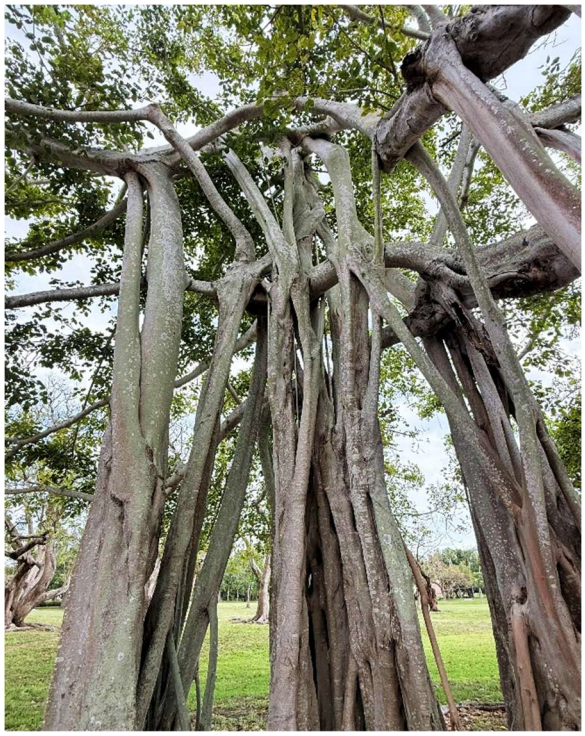


Circuses must have turned a pretty tidy profit back in the day. This was the home of John Ringling, who made his fortune through the Ringling Brothers Barnum & Bailey Circus' "Greatest Show on Earth" among other circuses. At his peak, Ringling was said to be worth $50 million. In 1926, he commissioned this 56-room mansion, which was inspired by the Venetian Gothic palaces. Its name, *Ca d'Zan,* is Venetian for "The House of John."

The Great Depression kicked the circus industry in the head, though, and John died in 1936, just 10 years after building the mansion, with a mere $311 in the bank.

Despite his debts, he somehow was allowed to keep the house and the extensive





seaside grounds – which include an art museum and a circus museum – and John bequeathed those to the State of Florida when he died.

In 2024, Hurricanes Helene and Milton landed haymakers to Sarasota Bay within two weeks of each other. Ca d'Zan did not do well. Eight feet of water flooded the basement and trashed much of the utilities, including the aging electric and AC systems.

The house was closed to the public while repairs were made. First-level tours resumed in early 2025, and second-level touring came back online around the end of the year. As of my visit, the tower was still not accessible, and the stairs from the patio to the bay are still a wreck from where two boats slammed into them.



The inland-facing facade

The tour I signed up for cost $40. There was a less-pricey version, but it did not visit all the same places. I wanted the full monty.

Our guide was great. She loaned us all listening devices. I might have been the youngest of our group of six (and the only male), so hearing would have been an issue for all of us.

The mansion did not disappoint. We saw the classic mansion fare: Reception Room (below), the Great Room, the Banquet Room, bedrooms, library, all with elaborate accents and furnishings.



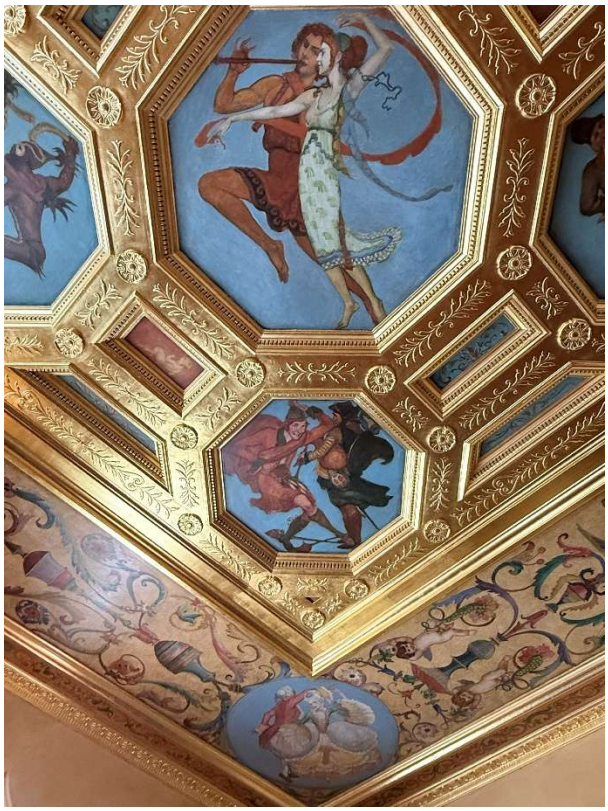


The listening devices allowed our guide (whose name I forget, sorry) to speak in a normal voice rather than trying to shout at us in those large echoey chambers with other tours walking by. She was very informative.

I'll save myself several thousand words and show you pictures for a while.







The Dance Room, with its segmented ceiling



The Great Hall



The stained glass windows extended the full width of the Great Room







The Breakfast Room, with some unusual pieces



The Dining Room



The crazy ornate ceiling of the Dining Room



Some of John's spiffy duds



The elaborate beds.

It was all pretty cool, if you like over-the-top, show-offy homes. I do, though I connot begin to imagine daily life in a palace like this. I mean, you always have servants around, so you're never really home alone, are you? Did John and Mable (his first, and best, wife) feel free to prance about in their underwear? Bathrobe and slippers at least?

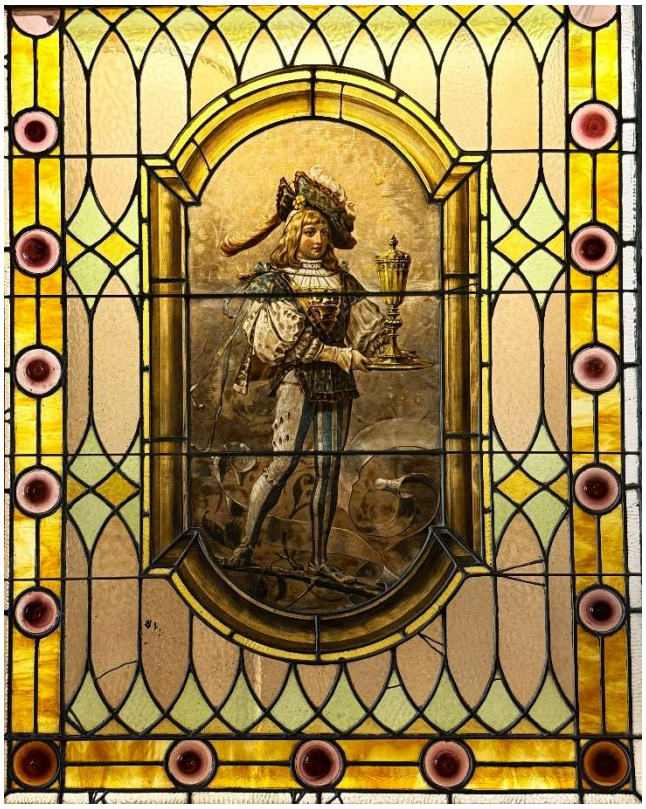
Anyway, *our* tour then took us to where the cheapskates could not go. First, the speakeasy bar. Remember, the stock market crash that precipitated the Great Depression happened only three years after this abode was built. It was illegal to sell or make alcoholic bevs. But John, being a well-to-do, was able to tiptoe around the law.

He secretly distilled his own bourbon and had The Gentlemen's Taproom installed behind secret doors so he and his guests could drink it. The shape of the bar rail is what lent the room its name (see photo, next page). There were dark walnut walls, with stained glass windows and wall decorations from Europe and the Far East. It was small, but it must have been a fun room.

The other bonus was The Play Room, a long and low upstairs chamber with various game tables at various times, and fun murals painted on the curved ceiling.







The “torpedo” bar in The Gentlemen’s Taproom, with some of its art





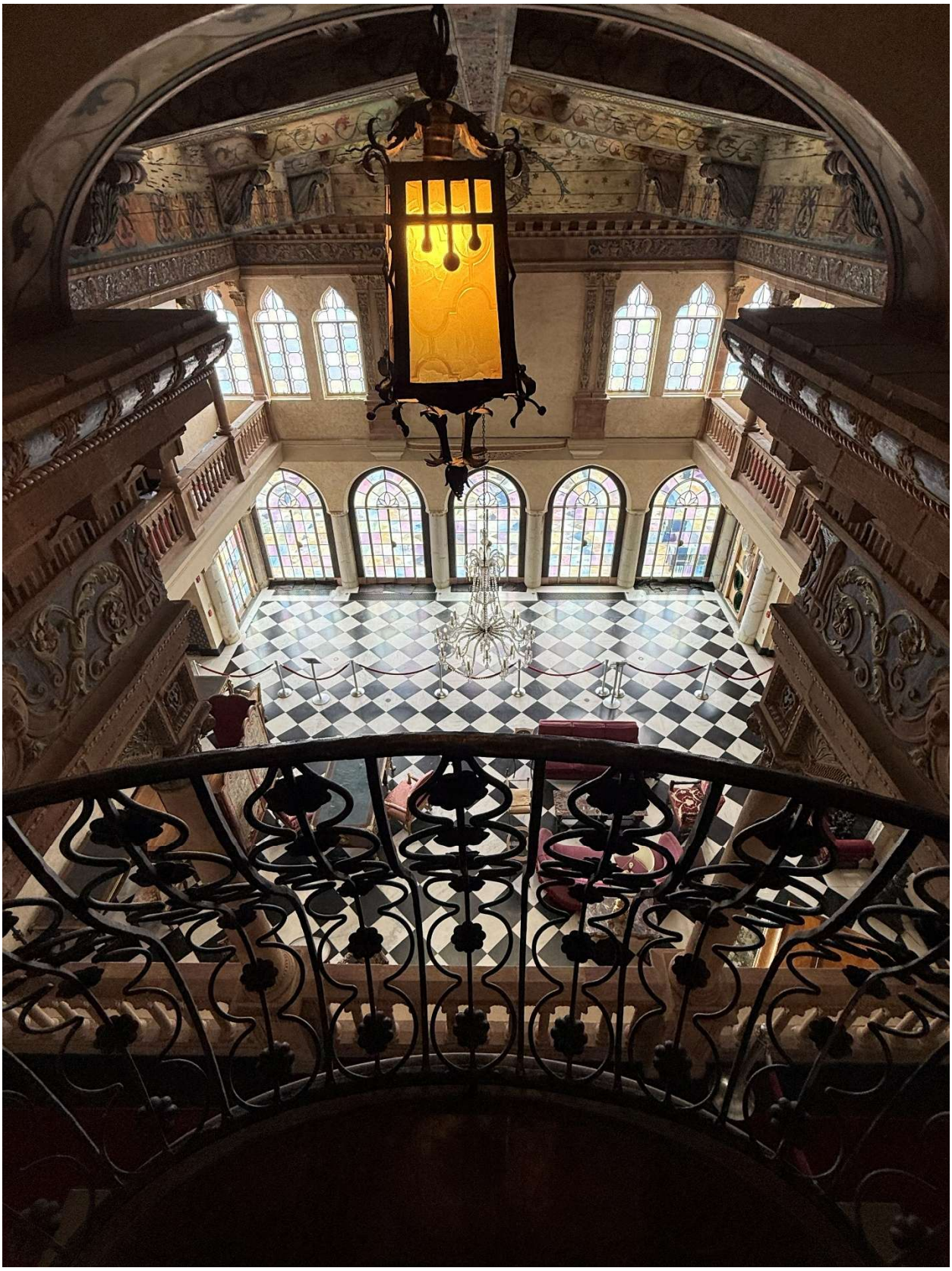
More of the fixtures and accessories of The Gentlemen's Taproom



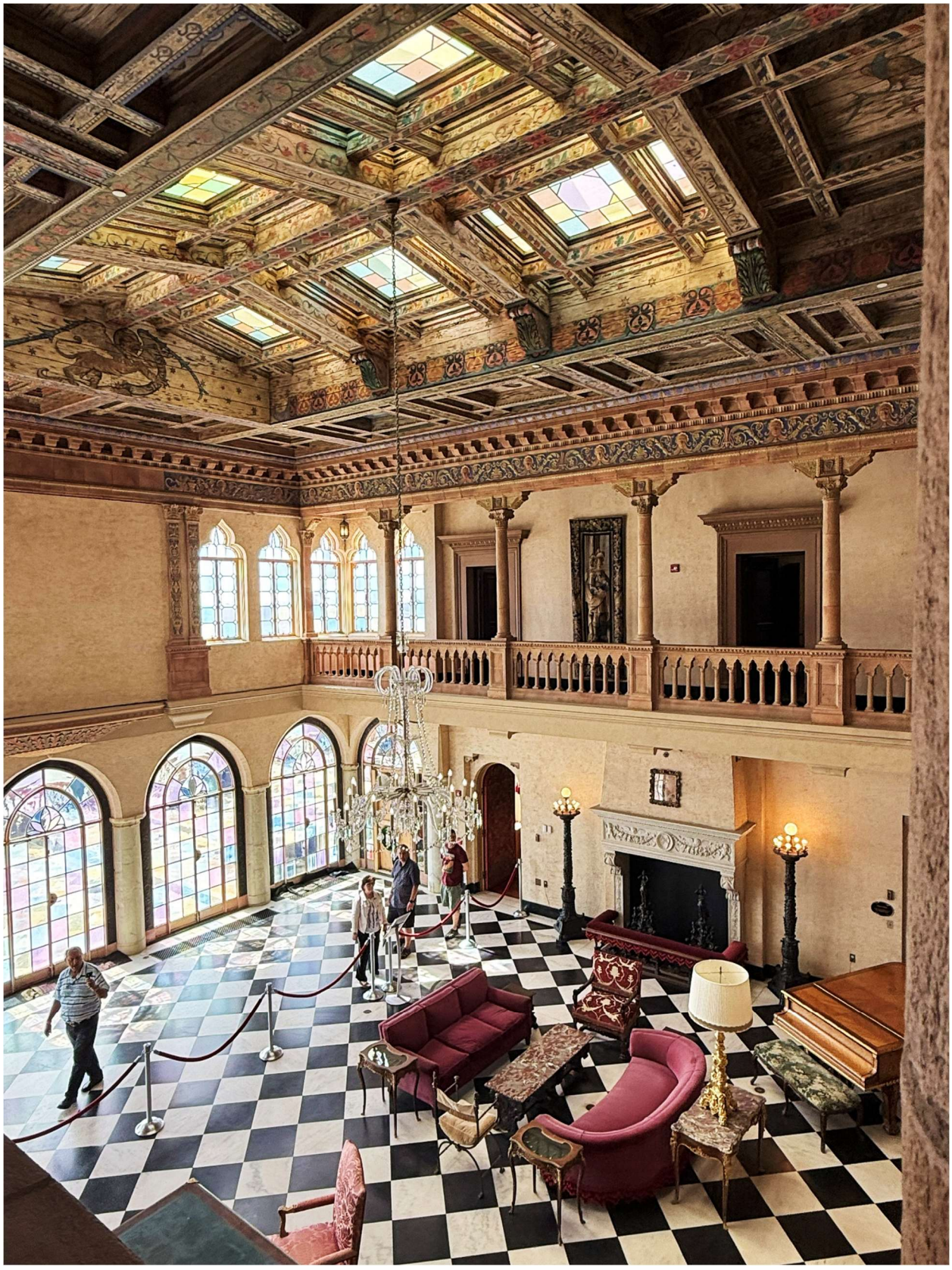
The Play Room, with a billiard table (covered) in the far end



Ceiling murals in The Play Room



The Great Room, from a small upper-level balcony











The Banyan trees on the property are spectacular







It was a good tour. RM26 was off to a rocking start.

And it was a short ride to get to Stop #3, in St. Petersburg (no, Florida) the next morning…