

**CORAL CASTLE**

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Magic, Madness or Marvel?

HISTORIC CORAL CASTLE JUST MIGHT BE A LITTLE BIT OF EACH

BY KAREN F. BUCHSBAUM

The Coral Castle is the kind of place locals can pass dozens of times and never stop to visit. It always seems a little too kitschy, too old-fashioned, as if maybe it's just another quirky sideshow on the long list of Florida's infamous tourist traps.

That kind of thinking is dead wrong. Listed on the National Register of Historical Places since 1984, the Coral Castle's story starts in the 1920s with a 5-foot, 100-pound Lithuanian immigrant named Ed Leedskalnin. For 20 years, he toiled alone, building the mysterious, unusual monument to a lost love. Using simple, homemade tools, he capitalized on what he learned from his family's

tradition of stonemasonry and his early years in the United States working in mines and on lumber camps and farms.

But Leedskalnin didn't completely lose his head to lost love; he turned the site into a money-making attraction, charging 10 cents for admission and 2 cents for a hot dog. In 1936, growth and development near his 1-acre site pushed him 10 miles north to the castle's current site in Homestead. He was savvy enough to position his new location just off U.S. Highway 1, giving the state 7 of his 10 new acres to help build the highway.

Today, the site is often featured on reality TV programs about mysticism and aliens, but visitors need not believe the crazy rumors and speculation about magic, the supernatural and aliens. Leedskalnin clearly understood how to use physics and engineering to his advantage and how to sell his attraction. No one ever saw him working to put the rocks in place. Always building or moving pieces at night, he crafted seemingly impossible walls, sculptures and furniture from massive pieces of local coral rock. He quarried and carved slabs weighing 6, 9, 18 and 23-plus tons and moved them with pulleys and counterweights, using a system he kept secret and took to his grave. When he moved pieces from his first site, locals saw a tractor pulling the sculptures up the road, but never being loaded on or off.

Within thick surrounding walls, he built a castle tower with a workshop and austere living quarters. Enhancements included rocking chairs, reading chairs to catch the sun at just the right angle, a sundial, tables, beds, a Polaris telescope to spot the North Star, a fountain and more. Showing early awareness of the benefits of promotion, and recognizing the site's growing popularity as a great photo opportunity, Leedskalnin built a stand to

accommodate local photographers.

The entrance features a 3-ton triangular gate that even a child can easily rotate as it is balanced on the axle of a Model T Ford with a Coca-Cola bottle's neck on the end.

Visitors should carve out about two hours to explore. It's a great spot for a fun physics lesson—kids won't even know they're learning. Admission includes a one-hour tour, during which guides bring Leedskalnin's story to life.

Leedskalnin died in 1951 at age 64, and probably would be pleased his work has been recognized. The Coral Castle is indeed a bit quirky, but quite interesting. ■