



A Tesla Cybertruck parked in Palm Beach on Jan. 7.

## **MAGA Madness Descends on Palm Beach**

**Blue-blood locals don't know what to make of all the blockades, Cybertrucks and glitz.**

By Holly Peterson | Photographs by Saul Martinez for WSJ  
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[220 Responses](#)

Beyond the discreet gates of frou-frou hotels and patrician country clubs, a tsunami swells from Mar-a-Lago's gilded lobbies. The flotsam includes MAGA partyers in rinse/repeat celebration mode and a stream of Black SUVs for Donald Trump and his entourage. These centipede-like motorcades shut down traffic instantly, regularly and without warning.

New security measures, introduced after the assassination attempts over the summer, have made travel by air, land and sea in Palm Beach a testing affair whenever Trump's in town. The president-elect now crosses blockaded bridges like Brezhnev's Soviet convoys speeding through Moscow's emptied thoroughfares.

For blue-blood locals who have crafted an otherwise frictionless existence here, these daily disruptions are maddening. Hell hath no fury like a blue-haired lady in a magnolia Lilly Pulitzer dress insisting on order.



Illustration: Peter Arkle

“The number one topic at any meal is parking and traffic,” says Tom Quinn, a partner at the Venable law firm in Washington, D.C., and a fixture on the Newport-Palm Beach axis, who’s owned a home here for five decades. “Wealthy people are used to paying their way out of travel inconveniences. When they can’t, they blow their top.”

Yachts are now foiled by drawbridge delays. Private fliers to Palm Beach will have a painful choice: either submit to a TSA check or divert to another airport. Anyone who insists on having their Maybach drive straight to the Gulfstream steps will find themselves landing in nearby Lantana. One macher explained to me the tragedy of this compromise: “Stepping from car to plane is the number-one sweet moment of feeling like the most legit bigshot of all. You gotta consider that.”

Palm Beach sits at the center of a narrow barrier island, 18 miles long and three-quarters of a mile wide at its thickest. Grand estates on some of the slimmest stretches are bookended by Lake Worth lagoon and the Atlantic. Marjorie Merriweather Post, the heiress, magnate, and one-time wealthiest woman in America, built her lavish estate here in the 1920s and named it “Mar-a-Lago,” Spanish for “sea to lake.” Trump bought it in 1985 for \$8 million, a song.

The two-lane S Ocean Blvd, the island’s north-south artery, separates many palatial homes from the sea. (Worry not: underground tunnels offer easy beach access.) It was bad enough when Tesla Cybertrucks began roaring past the apple green Rolls-Royces that rarely glide faster than 20 m.p.h. Worse, whenever Trump’s around, the Secret Service blocks the section of this boulevard that stretches alongside Mar-a-Lago, effectively splitting the island in two.



Elon Musk accessorizes with a black tie and son at the Mar-a-Lago New Year’s Eve bash. Photo: marco bello/Reuters



Trump's centipede-like motorcades shut down Palm Beach traffic instantly, regularly and without warning. Photo: Saul Martinez/Getty Images

This means the billionaires with estates within this mile-long zone need a special pass to get home. Everyone else living or working on either side of this zone has to drive over a drawbridge to the mainland, then back over another drawbridge onto the island again. What once took nine minutes can now take an hour, depending on the time of day. There's a local saying on bumper stickers, "In Palm Beach, We Don't Honk." Good luck with that, Tripp and Muffie.

Local officials have threatened to shut down Mar-a-Lago or yank the special agreements that allow for parties there. "In my mind, if the road is closed, the Mar-a-Lago Club is closed," declared Palm Beach Mayor Danielle Moore at an August Town Council meeting. Good luck with that, too, Danielle.

Despite the hassles, most everyone here reports that they and their wallets are pleased to know that 45 will soon be 47. The headaches certainly haven't kept others from migrating like geese and competing, daggers out, for rare plots of pricey real estate. Enterprising developers may soon ensure that skyscrapers outnumber palm trees in West Palm Beach. So the moneyed Misérables persevere—and party hard—beyond the barricades.

In these festive pre-transition days, it isn't uncommon to juggle several cocktail-party invitations a night here, and that's on weekdays. The local attire is like none I've ever experienced. When I invite neighbors for impromptu cocktails and the *de rigueur* "Palm Beach cheese puffs" at my condo, grown men arrive in pressed button-down shirts and coral-colored pants with embroidered sea turtles. For the women, it's about achieving the perfect matchy-matchy look, with bamboo and turquoise earrings to reference the bamboo sandals and baby-blue dress. The ambition for everyone, it seems, is to look like an Easter egg.

Mar-a-Lago hosts a “disco night” several nights a season, which I’ve experienced for myself. Given talk that the membership initiation fee has been climbing steadily from \$200,000 a few years ago, I did not expect the club’s ornate furnishings and oversize vases to look like someone had exploited a going-out-of-business sale on Manhattan’s Seventh Avenue.



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Out on the veranda dining area, well past the metal detectors, we ran right into the Donald himself. In person, he's King-Kong huge, with the graciousness of a birthday boy at his own party. "Welcome!" he greeted enthusiastically.

At the bar, I met a gregarious chap who called himself Mr. Bang Bang. His jacket was Pepto Bismol pink and his diamonds were plentiful. He proudly flashed his Cartier panther ring the size of a boulder and a diamond "H" belt buckle. (Authentic Hermès? I'm not so sure.)

Down a long marble staircase, past fountains with water-spewing swans, lies a baroque hall-of-mirrors salon, complete with Versailles-inspired gilded molding. The public got a glimpse of this room in the photos of classified documents stored at Mar-a-Lago that circulated in 2023. But instead of being piled with boxes, the stage had fluffer dancers in disco outfits to motivate sauced-up guests who needed zero encouragement.

Trump loves his music. At the Trump International Golf Club in West Palm, where a Tiger Woods-style peanut gallery is often waiting for him, he has been known to approach the 18th hole with Andrea Bocelli's "Con Te Partirò" ("Time to Say Goodbye") blasting from the loudspeakers.

At Mar-a-Lago, Trump likes to use his iPad to control the club's playlist. This can make for some unexpected transitions, such as Sinéad O'Connor's "Nothing Compares 2U" followed by a Phantom of the Opera ballad. But at Mar-a-Lago, people don't question Trump's choices, tempo or otherwise. Revelers just dance on, gamely if awkwardly.



Ryan Williams, left, and Trump-supporter Felipe Calderon pose for portraits in Palm Beach.

"Trump turns it up pretty loud," says Philanthropist Sharon Bush, who lives in Palm Beach and frequents Mar-a-Lago. "Everyone is in such a good mood because we were so afraid he might lose. He always tells me I'm his favorite member of the Bush family."

For New Year's Eve, Mar-a-Lago hosted a \$5K-a-plate bash, complete with a wedding band and white flowers everywhere. Elon Musk, who's been seen lying around the pool lately, donned a tux and a kid on his shoulders. He was there for Thanksgiving, too, which was when Jean Shafiroff, a philanthropist and socialite known for her glam gowns and long Audrey Hepburn gloves, decided to say hi. "I'm not scared of him!" She says. "I told him it was amazing what he's done. He's a genius!"

Cybertrucks aside, the famed Worth Avenue still feels like a film set from a more luxurious Truman Show. Giddy shoppers spent the holidays buying vintage Rolexes and velvet slippers while Andy Williams crooned Christmas classics from outdoor speakers. A store called Trillion sells cashmere sweaters—Bernie Madoff reportedly had one in every color—and seemingly every shop carries monogrammed cocktail napkins with stitched little pineapples or King Charles puppies. In Palm Beach one learns that a Bentley can be lipstick pink and a men's blazer can be pink and green and made from terry cloth (to be worn with swim trunks around the pool, of course).

The sartorial choices of longtime Palm Beachers may be a steroidal variant of preppy, but the objective isn't about "getting attention," insists Ryan Williams, a Palm Beach insider and former Mitt Romney staffer, who owns four such terry blazers. Rather, it's about reflecting "the aesthetic and motif of the area that's existed for decades." He adds that "there is a fine line between tasteful pastels and garish colors, just as there is a difference between actual style and the kind of over-the-top, sequined dragons on jackets that have been making appearances on the island lately. That's definitely not the real Palm Beach."

In an atmosphere increasingly crowded with newcomers and hangers on, some take comfort in knowing what was exclusive here remains exclusive. Buccan restaurant co-owner Piper Quinn is one of 20 male "Coconuts," making him a member of the oldest men's club in Palm Beach, "a hundred years going." The Coconut Ball, hosted by this esteemed fraternity every New Year's Eve, is the most coveted invite of the season.

I've been told that a number of deep-pocketed men have tried to finance these balls in the hopes of joining the club. But one can't apply to become a Coconut, Piper explains. "You must be asked. It's just not one of those clubs that you can join because you'd like to." Money doesn't buy everything, apparently. Even in Palm Beach.



Blockades around Mar-a-Lago have turned nine minute drives into hourlong journeys.



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*Holly Peterson is a journalist and the author of six books, including the novels “The Manny” and “It Happens in the Hamptons.”*

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