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Plan to park in South Florida? Raid the piggy bank

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MARSHA HALPER / Miami Herald Staff

A driver exits the parking garage at the Hampton Inn & Suites Miami Brickell Downtown on Thursday, March 29, 2012. The hotel, at 50 SW 12th St., has an amenity for drivers even if they are non-guests: \$3 hourly parking in its garage, and the first 15 minutes are free. Hampton Inn's open-to-the-general-public garage parking is catching on. General Manager Eduardo Chapoval says the garage was at capacity on St. Patrick's Day.

Jay Rooney seeks out street spots, takes public transportation and stays away from valet — anything he can do to avoid the high cost of parking.

"I love downtown, I love Brickell. I don't go as often as I would just because parking is too crazy," said the 27-year-old. "I used to work on the Beach too and that was, forget it, that was impossible."

It's a fact of life in some parts of South Florida: Parking on a budget is almost out of the question. As the destination has grown more popular and the number of upscale hotels and restaurants has increased dramatically, so has the ubiquity of high-priced parking.

In a report released this year based on data collected in the United States and Canada,

the National Parking Association said that the average top price for overnight valet parking was \$27.57. We've got that number way beat.

A Miami Herald survey of some of Miami Beach's trendiest spots reveals an average cost of \$36 for overnight valet parking, with several hotels clocking in at \$40. For just a few hours with validation, the price could drop to as low as \$10 — but without that stamp, a few hours could set you back more than \$20.

The National Parking Association's city-by-city central business district breakdown, last compiled in 2010, shows that the average maximum daily cost of weekday parking in Miami up to 12 hours is \$22, compared to \$35.33 in New York City, \$29 in Chicago and \$25.70 in Los Angeles.

While many of the region's busy tourist areas offer reasonably priced parking garages within blocks of hotels and restaurants, visitors with a trunk full of luggage — or locals rushing to a business meeting or social event in four-inch heels — often can't make the schlep.

Which means they're at the mercy of valet parking, with all the cost, risk and potentially long waits that can entail.

When Miami Heat star LeBron James' mother was arrested last year after an incident in which she slapped a valet parking attendant at the Fontainebleau Miami Beach, many Miamians could relate to her frustration. (The misdemeanor battery charge was later dropped as part of a plea deal.)

As a rule, Nicholas Ekonomou avoids the valet option.

"I hear horror stories; I had friends in college that were valets that used to take cars for joy rides," said the 44-year-old Miami resident, who works in real estate. "I don't valet my cars, I just don't."

So when he headed to the Epic Hotel a week ago for dinner with friends, he left his red 1964 Porsche 356 — which he'd driven only a handful of times since he took delivery of it two weeks earlier — safely out front, loath to hand it over to anyone else.

What happened next could have come straight out of a car buff's horror film: A Maserati GranTurismo driven by a valet careened out of the garage and hit a 2012 Jeep Cherokee, which crashed onto the back of the restored Porsche.

The driver, who works for the hotel's valet operator, USA Parking, told police the gas pedal got stuck. He was cited for careless driving.

Officials with USA Parking could not be reached Thursday afternoon.

To make matters worse, Ekonomou said, he watched another valet driver jump onto the hood of the car to look at the aftermath of the crash. Then he couldn't get a tarp to cover the convertible until rain has already poured into the leather interior for more than an hour.

While the price of everyday parking is far lower than the six-figures-worth of damage in that sad incident, the cost can still cause budgetary headaches.

Rooney, the bargain parking hunter, will soon give up his eternal quest for a cheap spot. He's moving this summer to San Francisco to get a master's degree.

"I'm selling my car before I leave," he said. "One of the things that I'm most looking forward to is not having to deal with anything car-related — parking absolutely."

For now, he doesn't mind parking in the Design District or Wynwood, where spots are even occasionally free. Turns out there are some pockets of parking relief.

In downtown Miami, the Mandarin Oriental, Miami charges \$13 for valet with validation from the restaurant; with spa validation, parking is free.

The Conrad Miami is free with validation.



Also downtown, the Hampton Inn Brickell charges \$18 for overnight self-parking — not cheap when compared to other Hampton locations, but a bargain for the area. The hotel also offers spots for \$3 an hour.

other businesses.

The Hampton's developer put in more parking spots than required — 210 total for a 220-room hotel — in order to capture some of the overflow from Brickell-area restaurants, condos and



"During St. Patrick's Day, we were completely sold out, our parking was completely sold out," said general manager Eduardo Chapoval. "People are finding us. During the day, mostly it's visitors to the condo buildings around us."

In Miami's Design District, home to popular art walks and some of the area's top dining destinations, developer and primary landowner Craig Robins instituted \$3 valet parking throughout the district as a way to entice locals and visitors to a once-sleepy area.

Rudy Rodriguez owns NPS2 Valet Services, which handles valet in the Design District. As a former valet provider in South Beach, he said the limited supply of parking facilities there translates to high cost for valet companies — and steep prices for customers.

Interviewed before the Epic parking incident, Rodriguez said he knows his profession gets a bad rap: the clichés about drivers rifling through cars for valuables, the interminable waits, the YouTube videos of valets going on reckless joyrides.

He warns the drivers he uses that he has zero tolerance for lying, cheating and stealing.

And he cautions them:

"Drive like you're driving your grandmothers."

Miami Herald staff writers Patricia Mazzei and Kylie Banks contributed to this report.

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