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## Malecon replica gives Cubans blast from the past

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Hector Gabino / El Nuevo Herald

Hundreds of people gathered at the new Malecón de la Ermita, a replica of the famous Malecon of Havana on Sunday, May 13, 2012.

Eneida Flores and her three sisters had a Saturday night tradition in 1940s Cuba.

Every week, they would go for a stroll by the seawall known as the Malecón of Havana on the city's north shore.

They ate churros, had iced lemon drinks and mingled with the crowds enjoying the ocean breeze.

On Sunday, the 85-year-old woman could again hear waves crashing, but this time she was not facing Havana's bay, she was looking out on Biscayne Bay.

"We have a little piece of Cuba here," said Flores. "Whenever you feel a little nostalgic, you can come and sit here and feel rich."

Flores was able to experience a bit of her homeland as she went to see a small replica of Havana's seawall inaugurated Sunday as part of an expansion project of the Our Lady of Charity Shrine in Coconut Grove, a Miami landmark that serves as a spiritual haven for Cuban Catholics.

For decades, exiles would feel the lure of the seawall behind the sanctuary — separated from their motherland by a mass of water. Now, they have a place to sit and savor the nostalgia.

"We wanted to give maximum safety to the thousands of pilgrims who visit us, especially families with children, because it was always dangerous to come close to the sea," said rector Juan Rumin Domínguez.

"We thought of elevating the existing wall and making it a replica of a symbol of Cuba's capital city, a place of encounter with the identity and the culture of a large part of this community," he said.

The seawall's unveiling was timed to coincide with Mother's Day to honor the Virgin Mary.

But not all attendees who visited the replica can claim having laid eyes on the original. Some said they wanted to see the seawall to get a taste of what their parents and grandparents remember so well.

Alenny Alfonso, an 11th-grade Cuban American student at Pinecrest Preparatory Middle-High,

had her picture taken sitting on the wall. "I find it interesting that my parents were able to see the seawall in Cuba and that I get to see it in Florida," said Alfonso, 16, who has never visited the island. "To be able to be here makes me feel more connected to what my parents felt when they were children."

Alfonso also said that the site would be a draw for young Cuban Americans because of its picturesque ocean view.

That is the aim of the shrine's religious and lay leaders. The second phase of the project will transform the parking lot that now encircles the sanctuary into a square where parishioners can socialize before and after Mass.

The construction of the original seawall in Havana dates back to 1901, under a temporary U.S. government on the island. Today it extends several miles from the mouth of the bay to the Chorrera at the estuary of the Almendares River.

Across from the initial section of the seawall stands the fortress known as El Morro, and further down into the southwest is the fortress known as La Cabaña, both built by the Spanish centuries ago.

But in Miami, the 400-foot replica seawall is adorned by a background of Brickell skyscrapers and the Rickenbacker Causeway. Even so, attendees said they still felt the Cuba of their memories.

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