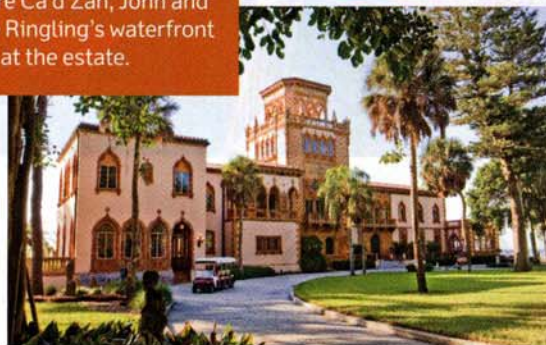


# Ringling's Tiniest Circus

The world's largest miniature circus at Sarasota's Ringling Estate rivals any show under the big top. By **Annette Thompson**



LEFT: People seem to stroll through the midway to the big top, made to look like The Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus between 1919 and 1938. RIGHT: Circus center rings typically measure 42 feet in diameter—this one is a 3/4-inch scale miniature. BELOW: Explore Cà d'Zan, John and Mable Ringling's waterfront home at the estate.



Step right up to the biggest show around—it's smaller than you think.

At the new Tibbals Learning Center on the Ringling Estate in Sarasota, Florida, you can join me in gawking at one of the world's largest miniature scenes. The tableau re-creates a traveling show, complete with railroad tracks and 55 railcars; 8 main tents; at least 1,300 tiny clowns, aerialists, cooks, trainers, roustabouts, and visitors; 152 wagons; and more than 800 animals—in a 3/4-inch scale. If this scene were life-size, it would cover more than 16 acres.

**In the Center Ring** Take a stroll through the Howard Bros. Circus exhibit, and marvel at the show-must-go-on vignettes: a clown putting on his makeup, John Ringling smoking a cigar, elephants enjoying a wash down, and a dining tent feeding 900 workers. There's so much to take in, you'll be surprised by how much time you spend looking at it.

**The Ringmaster** This isn't your mother's dollhouse. The spectacle of a circus motivated Howard Tibbals, the exhibit's creator. The owner of a hardwood flooring company from Oneida, Tennessee, Howard's fascination with Ringling's circus began when it visited his grandmother's

town when he was only 5 years old. By the time he was a young man, Howard was planning the details of his own model circus.

He chuckles when you ask him why he didn't name it for Ringling and says, "They wouldn't give me permission to use their name when I began the project, so I named it after myself." But that didn't stop him from donating his masterpiece to the

## Counting on the Circus

Here are a few of the details included in the Howard Bros. Circus.

- Every piece of the circus exhibit can fit onto wagons that stack on the train's flat cars.
- Inside the miniature wagons and tents, the faucets turn, toilets have miniature toilet paper rolls, and there are even dollars and coins in the cash registers.
- The dining tent includes 900 plates, knives, forks, spoons, and glasses. Food fills the plates.
- The big top holds bleachers and 7,000 folding chairs to accommodate 13,000 people.

Ringling Estate. Just like the seriousness of his massive mini circus, Howard doesn't clown around about making people happy.

He's been creating the circus model for more than 50 years, and he's not done yet. Howard's fascination with details keeps his vision precise. For instance, he taught himself to sew so he could complete the big top tent. He plans to construct 26 Pullman sleeping cars to carry the circus workers and put a few more horses into the show.

Me? I'll keep returning to watch as the show continues to grow. ●

**Ringling Estate:** including the Tibbals Learning Center, The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, Cà d'Zan Mansion, gardens, and Circus Museum. **Admission:** \$19. [www.ringling.org](http://www.ringling.org) or (941) 359-5700.