

Hot stuff

ABC's 'Grand Hotel' puts the sizzle in summer

By Kyla Brewer
TV Media

With its stunning hotels, sizzling-hot beaches and even hotter nightlife, Miami is a haven for people looking for a taste of the high life. Yet, life in Miami isn't all fun in the sun, and a new series set in a posh hotel explores the dark side of the sunshine state.

Academy Award nominee Demián Bichir ("A Better Life," 2011) stars as Santiago Mendoza, the owner of Miami Beach's last family-run hotel, in "Grand Hotel," airing Monday, July 22, on ABC. Inspired by the popular Spanish TV series "Gran Hotel," the drama offers viewers a modern take on the classic upstairs-downstairs story as it follows the lives of the Mendozas and their wealthy guests, along with those of their loyal working-class staff. The original Spanish series was a period drama, but ABC has updated the American version of the show and set the action in multicultural Miami, an area brimming with Latin American culture.

While the gorgeous hotel provides a luxurious setting for the series, it was quickly revealed in the June 17 pilot that the Mendoza's business was in trouble. The family has been plagued by escalating debt and scandals, not to mention explosive secrets.

A welcome respite from a summer schedule laden with reality TV shows, "Grand Hotel" is a prime-time soap for today's discerning TV fans, rife with a mysterious disappearance, an unexpected pregnancy and maybe even murder. Eva Longoria ("Desperate Housewives") — who executive produces, directs and appears in the series — has promised that the new show will deliver plenty of summertime drama.

"'Grand Hotel' is going to have a lot of twists and turns — big twists, big turns, big surprises — almost every episode," Longoria said in an official ABC Q&A video.

"What will keep people coming back is falling in love with the journeys of each of these characters and really caring about their arcs and where they're going, and then also discovering who they were. Some of them will have a past that catches up to them."

Longoria guest stars as Beatriz Mendoza, Santiago's first wife and the original owner of the hotel, who appears in a series of flashbacks. Her family had owned the Riviera Grand Hotel for generations, and the business was passed down to her husband after she died. According to official records, Beatriz died of a heart attack, but "Grand Hotel" plot twists soon cast doubt on that conclusion.

In addition to Bichir, the main cast includes a bevy of beautiful, talented performers. Roselyn Sanchez ("Without a Trace") plays Santiago's second wife, Gigi, who also happened to have been Beatriz's best friend. She butts heads with Alicia (Denyse Tontz, "The Fosters"), Beatriz and Santiago's adult daughter, who recently returned to the hotel after graduating with an MBA from Cornell. Alicia's brother, Javi (Bryan Craig, "General Hospital"), is the hotel's resident playboy. In Gigi's camp are her twin daughters: the self-obsessed Carolina (Feliz Ramirez, "Bull") and the decidedly more awkward Yoli (Justina Adorno, "Seven Seconds").

Hotel manager Mateo (Shalim Ortiz, "Heroes") bridges the gap between the affluent "upstairs" characters and the staff members. While he serves as Santiago's right-hand man, he also secretly works for the hotel's creditors. Helen Parker (Wendy Raquel Robinson, "The Steve Harvey Show"), known as "Mrs. P" to her colleagues, is the hotel's non-nonsense head of staff.

As for the "downstairs" crew, the dutiful hotel staff is portrayed by a diverse group of up-and-coming actors. Mrs. P's son, Jason (Chris Warren, "High School Musical," 2006), works at the hotel



Denyse Tontz as seen in "Grand Hotel"

as a waiter. He befriends Riviera newbie Danny (Lincoln Younes, "Home and Away"). What Jason doesn't know is that Danny has been secretly investigating the disappearance of his sister, Sky (Arielle Kebbel, "The Vampire Diaries"), one of the hotel's line cooks who went missing after a heated run-in with Gigi. Meanwhile, pregnant hotel housekeeper Ingrid (Anne Winters, "13 Reasons Why") lies about her unborn child's paternity.

The show also boasts an impressive roster of recurring actors, including Jencarlos Canela ("Tele-novela") as rapper El Rey, Adrian Pasdar ("Heroes") as Felix, Katey Sagal ("Sons of Anarchy") as Teresa, and Freddie Stroma ("Time After Time") as Oliver.

In true prime-time soap opera style, "Grand Hotel" features plenty of romance, notably a forbidden dalliance between Danny and Alicia, which blossoms despite Mrs. P's warnings

to Danny that the hotel owner's family members are off limits. Meanwhile, an affair between El Rey and another character causes friction in the Mendoza family, and a scandal threatens to derail an employee's career.

Critical response to the series has been mixed so far. In a June review, Variety's Caroline Framke called "Grand Hotel" an "easy, breezy summer watch." Early ratings reports have been modest for a summer series. The first two

episodes of the show's inaugural season pulled in more than three million live viewers per night, though those numbers are expected to rise when DVR viewers are taken into account.

For fans of prime-time soap operas like "Dynasty" and Longoria's former prime-time hit "Desperate Housewives," her new series may be worth a look. Check out a new episode of "Grand Hotel," airing Monday, July 22, on ABC.