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TRAVEL

Downtown Miami: More Than a Gateway to the Beach

Heads Up

By ELAINE GLUSAC OCT. 13, 2017



Brickell City Center is the new anchor for the downtown Miami area known as Brickell.

Rolando Diaz for The New York Times

From a tourism perspective, the city of Miami has long been a gateway to Miami Beach, the sand-fringed barrier island lined in glamorous resorts. But in the past several years, downtown Miami has been undergoing renovation, first as a cultural destination – its acclaimed Perez Art Museum Miami opened in 2013 – and more recently as a leisure destination with the recent opening of new hotels such as the SLS Brickell, Langford and East, Miami, restaurants led by the Uruguayan import Quinto La Huella and bars including the rooftop Pawn Broker.

Set to deliver more visitors directly to downtown, the new Brightline train connecting Miami to Palm Beach is scheduled to open by year's end. The privately funded, high-speed line will run from MiamiCentral Station, an 11-acre downtown development that will include offices, with a market-style food hall and shops to follow in 2018. Brightline's streamlined express trains, offering free Wi-Fi and

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extra wide aisles to accommodate strollers, are designed to reach Fort Lauderdale in 30 minutes and Palm Beach in an hour. Construction of an extension to Orlando expected to begin next year.

“Everyone depends on cars here, so we have to make it attractive,” said AnneMarie Mathews, a former spokeswoman for Brightline. “On the other hand, everyone is frustrated by traffic.”

Though Hurricane Irma in September temporarily flooded downtown Miami, the city has rebounded and the train remains on track to open later this year. Collectively, downtown’s developments make for a lively urban core with many attractions — except for the beach — within walking distance.



Phillip and Patricia Frost Museum of Science, with free Metromover electric train passing by.
Rolando Diaz for The New York Times

Downtown Miami is already manageable without a car, as I discovered on a recent stay at the 126-room Langford Hotel. Just a few blocks from the new train station, the hotel opened in a 1925 former bank last year with a rooftop bar, Pawn Broker, serving daiquiris along with views of the expanding skyline.

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From the Langford, the area's cultural attractions are a quick walk away, including the Phillip and Patricia Frost Museum of Science, which opened in May. Next door to the Perez, the 250,000-square-foot Frost encompasses a planetarium, an aquarium devoted to the Gulf Stream, and exhibits on the Everglades and space travel. A few blocks up Biscayne Boulevard lies the Adrienne Arsht Center for the Performing Arts, opened in 2006.

"To know Miami is to know downtown," said Paul George, the resident historian at the HistoryMiami Museum, who leads downtown tours. He pointed out the 1926 Moorish-influenced Olympia Theater and 1920s skyscrapers such as the Dupont Building. "There's more history and more archaeology downtown than anywhere in metro Miami."

Much of downtown's redevelopment lies south across the Miami River in an area known as Brickell, accessible on foot or via the free Metromover electric train operated by the county transportation authority. Brickell's new anchor, opened last November, is the \$1.05-billion Brickell City Center, which includes a 500,000-square-foot luxury mall. Spread over three city blocks, the center puts a tropical spin on new urbanism, with doorless entryways at ground level to encourage pedestrian flow and bridges built above the streets to maintain public access.

"We used to joke that Miami was a suburban city. Today it's a real city," said Bernardo Fort-Brescia, a founder of the architectural firm Arquitectonica that designed the Brickell City Center. "Everything is new and new is good here. People are open to new ideas."



Dishes at Bazaar Mar, one of two restaurants at the SLS Brickell hotel. Rolando Diaz for The New York Times

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Global brands such as OndadeMar beachwear from Colombia and Giuseppe Zanotti shoes from Italy are mall tenants. Even some of the restaurants are imports, including Big Easy Winebar & Grill from the South African golfer Ernie Els.

The complex also houses the luxury hotel East, Miami, the first North American venture from Hong Kong-based Swire Properties. Its 5th-floor restaurant Quinto La Huella is a spinoff of the original bohemian beachfront grill in stylish José Ignacio, Uruguay, with an umbrella-shaded terrace and an authentic Uruguayan grill crisping everything from squash to grass-fed beef.

Among other newcomers, the SLS Brickell hotel features interiors by the French designer Philippe Starck and an Italian restaurant from the popular Miami chef Michael Schwartz. The W Miami opened last summer with a cocktail lounge on the 50th floor overlooking Biscayne Bay.

Much of the recent redevelopment is related to a 2009 master plan developed by the Miami Downtown Development Authority, a quasi-governmental agency financed by property taxes, to capitalize on the waterfront setting, promote the city as an international business center and remodel its major streets. It released a demographic report last fall counting close to 90,000 downtown residents, up 150 percent since 2000.

Many projects are yet to come — the master plan runs to 2025 — including a redesign of Biscayne Boulevard to feature a grand promenade similar to Las Ramblas in Barcelona.

As Mr. George, the historian, puts it: “Downtown is coming back and still has its best days of comeback ahead of it.”