



# SURF & TURF

South Beach is prettily seductive — but Miami's edgier parts now deliver its nicest vices, from sassy Cuban grooves to Downtown bar-hopping after dark. **Nick Redman** explores

Photography: **Scott Baker**

Cocktail party: clockwise from top left, drinks are big on Ocean Drive; iconic signage; the skyline of the Brickell financial district, aka the 'Manhattan of the South'; Asian light bites to accompany your wine at Sugar, the bar at the top of East hotel; the

picture-postcard Art Deco facades of Ocean Drive, South Beach; a bird's-eye aspect of the communal lobby at Life House Little Havana hotel; working out on South Beach; detail of one of the lifeguard stations on the sands



# In Miami, it's dogs that seem to enjoy the vices these days.

After an afternoon exploring Coconut Grove, I'm getting my head around the local yappy hour: a canine happy hour, when pets can upgrade their chicken and rice bowls with a Cuban cigar, or 'chew-gar', as the staff at the Spillover call it. 'Almost all the restaurants in the Grove have dog menus,' says Nicole, a resident who's been my guide. Her Jack Russell ('Jack') eyes its prize as Nicole and I share virtuous oven-cooked heirloom cauliflower.

All's serene on this balmy spring day in the Grove, an enclave of jewellers and yachts on the edge of Biscayne Bay. We've seen Regatta Harbor, lined with mangroves. We've wandered along Grand Avenue and Main Highway, where live oaks dapple the sidewalks with shade. We've even tried (and failed) to flag down a Freebee, the new golf-cart-style service introduced to whizz locals around (Don Johnson's *Miami Vice* Ferrari it isn't). Ironically, it was in search of gritty city colour that I'd Uber'd to Coconut Grove from the throngs and thongs of South Beach. Somehow its name held the promise of a TV drama: skateboarders, streetwalkers, larger-than-life types... And yet, the Grove, like the beachfront, could easily be a big, blissful, mainstream Caribbean resort.

For all the pushy backstory – the crime, the drug busts, the killing of Gianni Versace – my wanderings have so far reinforced just how much Miami *isn't* the scary TV-cop-series place it was in the '80s and '90s. I drank Martinis last night 40 storeys above the glittery city at Sugar, a kooky tiki-cocktail nook set in shrubbery atop the hotel East, itself a fine glitzy Asian-brand import. The moment was rare, even if I could have been anywhere, so high-rise-international was the outlook over the financial district, Brickell, 'the Manhattan of the South'. From this viewpoint it appeared like an armada of cruise-ship monsters upended: stunning yet sanitised, the shiny new self-appointed capital of North-meets-South America.

I didn't want to see Miami and get it in the neck, exactly – but the whole point of crossing the Pond for me is exposure to urban-US excess: horn-beep and street-hustle; late-night loucheness and offbeat types. In fashion shoots and movies, Florida's capital of sun and sin invariably comes off like some glam-*fatale* time warp, where ceiling fans stir the potted palms portentously while the bar band plays shuffly salsa and guys in zoot

suits peer shiftily over Mojitos, waiting for 'The Man'. I'm craving that filmic frisson and, while seduced by beautiful, laid-back Coconut Grove, I'm ready now for a part of Miami with more welly than its electric buggies.

I got a first whiff of overpowering pleasantness upon checking in at my hotel, the Betsy, on Ocean Drive, in South Beach. This is the famous shorefront district of pastel Art Deco hotels and bars that reinforced the city's as-seen-on-MTV bad-girl image – helped by the likes of J Lo and Madonna (ever ready to gouge out an unwary eye with her pointy bustier). Taking my first walk beside the sands, though, I got more of a vanilla-Vegas vibe, mixing among snowbirds in matching baseball caps and parties of off-the-leash young weekenders, diving into their Jacuzzi-sized Margaritas. All great fun, but big-city gritty?

South Beach deserves due homage all the same, and the Betsy was *the* place to pay it, with its faux-colonial lobby of foxtail palms, low sofas, a giant mirror framed in zebra print and a retrolicious cocktail bar: without doubt the most elegant, grown-up hotel on Ocean Drive. An ice-cream-cool slab of streamlined interwar modernity, it basked in understatement, with big alfresco burgers on the veranda, which invited you to idle for hours, and low chairs serving as stalls for the ballet that is beachy Miami.

A pink ice-cream truck glided past, topped with a giant white cat. A pneumatic pedestrian gyrated by, then another, with a bum like blown bubble gum. Who could fail to love Ocean Drive? Even the blip-beat of identikit R&B from cafes was agreeably hypnotic. Boyfriends and girlfriends snapped each other against spaceship-sized vintage cars, candy-coloured lifeguard stations and angular hotels where, not so long ago, 'Instagram' could have been the name of a cocaine rapid-delivery service.

Born in 1896, when the railroad arrived, Miami grew into a naughty whirl of a girl: a playground for escapees from the cold formality of the north, purpose-built to be the Florida Mediterranean, with 'dreams set in concrete, terracotta and stucco' as one historian put it. During Prohibition, from 1920 to 1933, South Florida was one of the 'leakiest' spots in the USA, as rum runners dropped the Cuban crates discreetly – but directly – onto the beach in places such as the Surf Club. Today, that former den of iniquity is a luxury Four Seasons hotel, north of >

MIAMI

Atlantic avenue:  
aerial view south  
down Ocean Drive,  
with the expansive  
sands of South  
Beach by  
Lummas Park





South Beach in idyllic Surfside, peopled by clean-cut success stories, relaxing in chinos and floaty dresses.

So I was pleased to find a generous dash of decadence in Peacock Alley, the Four Seasons' atmospheric vaulted corridor that leads to the beach. Elizabeth Taylor, Dean Martin, Liberace... Monochrome photographs told the tale of Miami's maverick mid-century years. It felt only right to raise a glass of Louis Roederer Champagne in the soigné new-classic restaurant Le Sirenuse, to the strains of Frank and Ella. And the vice went into overdrive when a second helping of saucy rigatoni arrived, peddled by white-jacketed Arturo, the persuasive head waiter.

Next day, I crossed the causeway from Miami Beach, bound for Little Havana, to find a city moving to an edgier rhythm. My base here, Life House Little Havana, was a new home-share-style place. Its lobby, lined with books and chairs around a communal table, made you feel part of the furniture – and the fun. In Latino shades of cigar, tobacco and coffee-cream, bedrooms oozed Cuba: a battered case as bedside table here, a vintage Kodak camera there. When dusk glowed orange, guests met in the rattan-colonial backyard, lit by candles in lanterns. Over salsa-tinkle from the speakers, chat drifted like smoke. The free wine had grown dangerously low in the bottles before Happy Hour was halfway through.

Little Havana is well accustomed to lunch trade – not least for the cheese, pork, ham, mustard and pickle

'midnight' sandwich at Versailles Restaurant, a famous local window onto Cuban life, with regulars glued to the TV for news of The Island. Personally, I felt perfectly at home after dark. OK, once I passed a cop car a block from the hotel, and a handcuffed suspect under scrutiny from officers. But I couldn't have been better placed for the nocturnal fizz of Calle Ocho, the main vein, neon-bright with signs for money-changing and hot chicken.

At Ball & Chain, a recent recreation of a spot that ran from the '30s to the '50s on the same site, I ordered a Cuban spring roll beneath posters for Chet Baker, Count Basie and others who'd been here long before me. Not wishing to jinx the couples liquidly draped about each other on bar stools, I forwent the cocktail of the month, a Bad Romance. Around 9pm, the band snapped into life in the corner, all fat organ chords and savage drum snares. I saw the sticks ticking away, white in a spotlight, and ducked when the salsa tutors started touting for partners. Maybe I *should* have had that Bad Romance – for courage.

Luckily Café La Trova, a smart new kid on the block, left things to the pros. As bejeaned friends in skyscraper heels drank Papa Dobles, the band played *trova* – the old salsa of strolling players – below laundry on a balconied stage. Harmonies were angelic and spiritual, borne on the swishing conga rhythm, long into the heat-blurred night.

Waking to sun through slatty blinds, I planned the day over breakfast Colombian style at a Life House tip-off. >

#### BEST TIMES FOR TROVA

The band starts at 9pm on Fridays and Saturdays, 8pm Thursdays, and 7pm Wednesdays and Sundays. Don't miss the daily Happy Hour – it's three hours from 4pm to 7pm!



## MIAMI

Action stations: opposite, one of South Beach's jazzy lifeguard lookouts. This page, clockwise from left, live music at Café La Trova; ales

on sale at Veza Sur Brewing Co; Wynwood murals; the historic Peacock Alley, part of Four Seasons' Surf Club hotel



BARELY A DECADE AGO, DOWNTOWN WAS TOO DANGEROUS TO VISIT AFTER DARK. NOW, IN ITS MIDST, THE DEFUNCT PHARMACY WAS REOPENING AS A RESTAURANT, MUSIC JOINT AND BREWERY





Cream of the crop: lobby at the Betsy, South Beach, one of the smartest Art Deco hotel refurbishments on Ocean Drive



map: Scott Jessop

Sanpocho, built around a parking lot. It was a big sprawl of a diner-store, where the server spoke Spanish and loved it when customers did, however poorly – which was me, ordering refried beans and rice. Here was one of those perfect only-in-America moments: ordinary yet edgy. Watching cars curl in to park, I felt like an extra in *Breaking Bad*, although the only threat to my existence was the corncake offered me, lethal with butter and salt.

I opted to go north for more illicit pleasures – outré art and pricey retail. Planes raced into the mid-am sky above me on the Uber ride to the Design District, and flinty glass high-rises were pin-sharp to infinity against a blue day. Sweeping around one curve of freeway after another, revealing more tough urbanity, I felt the beginning of the endlessness of America, that shiver of risky possibility, the urge to hitch a ride with some passing long-haul truck straight out of a movie, the irresistible danger of a stranger.

The new Institute of Contemporary Art was certainly sexier than its serious name: a sensory realm of white rooms to drift through, distracted by grainy, arcane video screens and labially informed ceramics. But the wider Design District was merely cookie-cutter retail heaven for label addicts, such as you find from LA to Shanghai.

Fortunately Wynwood, half an hour's walk south, felt artfully rougher. Once a wasteland, its old warehouses now shouted with psychedelic graffiti, as if a bunch of Ikea stores had decamped to Woodstock and done LSD. Walls bore funky murals, and hip met hops at ale house Veza Sur Brewing Co, with its geek-chic mini-brewery sprouting boffiny tubes. In the hushed tones of a dealer, the barman indicated a number with a kick: ABV 7.2%. I had a glass, then another, and glowed. I'd found it, my Miami vice, my gateway drug to its new wild frontier: craft beer. It was all downhill, or Downtown, from here.

Walking on East Flagler Street the next day – my last in Miami – I saw an empty Art Deco pharmacy, formerly a famous branch of Walgreens, bearing a banner: 'Witness the new Downtown!' I'd come to pay my respects to the city's origins here in 1896 – the year Henry Morrison Flagler, a founder of Standard Oil, unveiled a key station on the Florida East Coast Railway. His plan: to create a new American Riviera in a place immune to freezes.

Downtown had been depressed for decades, explained my guide, Dr Paul George. The area had, he said, been a victim of 'white flight': the gradual migration of the car-owning middle classes out to the suburbs, lured by big malls and better living. Downtown's fate spoke for itself, in boarded-up '30s department stores and skyscraping Neo-Classical relics, many empty now. Barely a decade ago, it was dangerous to come here after dark.

Now, in its midst, there were green shoots: that defunct Walgreens was set to open as a restaurant, music hall and brewery, hence the banner. At night, among the faded Florentine-style civic buildings on and off Flagler, I found an upbeat scene going on, as drinkers flocked to a select few new scuzzy-chic ale houses. Steered to two of them – Mama Tried and Lost Boy – I entered designer-dive-bar Nirvana, equal parts vice and nice: disco globes, pool tables and draught local beers in imperial pint glasses.

Way after midnight, I reached Jaguar Sun, a terminally trendy little newcomer hosting a barfly or two (I recall) in shades. I grinned, gingerly, and the bartender put me at ease. 'I like that smile,' he said, catching my eye as I scanned the ales, 'and you look like you need a drink.' ■

## Get Me There

### Go independent

**BA** flies to Miami several times daily from Heathrow, with returns from £365. Low-cost carrier **Norwegian** flies from Gatwick, from £305 return. Try a meta-search site such as **kayak.co.uk** for flights from other airports: Edinburgh and Manchester, say, from £540 return, via Philadelphia, with BA codeshare partner American Airlines.

### Where to stay

**The Betsy** ([thebetsyhotel.com](http://thebetsyhotel.com)); doubles from £305). **Four Seasons Hotel The Surf Club** ([fourseasons.com/surfside](http://fourseasons.com/surfside)); doubles from £475); try sister property **Four Seasons Hotel Miami**, too, in Brickell (doubles from £289). **Life House Little Havana** ([lifehousehotels.com](http://lifehousehotels.com)); doubles from £91). **East** ([east-miami.com](http://east-miami.com)); doubles from £190). All rates quoted are room-only.

### Go packaged

**BA** ([ba.com](http://ba.com)) can organise four nights at East hotel, in Brickell, from £689pp,

with Heathrow flights. **Carrier** ([carrier.co.uk](http://carrier.co.uk)) offers five nights at the Betsy on a 10-night fly-drive, including five in the Florida Keys, from £2,145pp, room-only, with car hire and flights.

### Where to eat & drink

**The Spillover** ([thespilllovermiami.com](http://thespilllovermiami.com)) has mains for about £12. **Le Sirenuse** ([sirenusemiami.com](http://sirenusemiami.com)) has mains for about £23. **Ball & Chain** ([ballandchainmiami.com](http://ballandchainmiami.com)) shimmies until late, with bar dishes for about £8. **Café La Trova** ([cafelatrova.com](http://cafelatrova.com)) does delicious Cuban cocktails; small plates cost about £9. For craft beer, try **Veza Sur Brewing Co** ([vezasur.com](http://vezasur.com)), **Mama Tried** ([mamatriedmia.com](http://mamatriedmia.com)), **Lost Boy** ([lostboydrygoods.com](http://lostboydrygoods.com)) and **Jaguar Sun** ([jaguarsunmia.com](http://jaguarsunmia.com)), which also does good cocktails.

### Further information

Every Saturday, the **Coconut Grove Food Tour** ([miamiculinarytours.com](http://miamiculinarytours.com)) is a 'digest' on foot; £60pp with tastings. The **Downtown Walking Tour** with Dr George costs £23 ([historymiami.org](http://historymiami.org)). See official site [miamiandbeaches.com](http://miamiandbeaches.com).