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South Beach happily lives up to the hype

South Beach, which is a neighbourhood of the City of Miami Beach, is one of the world's 'bucket shop' places.

Also known as SoBe, this self-styled American Riviera has the beach itself and the adjoining Lummus Park straddling the distinctive art deco Ocean Drive.

The combination has created a veritable Mecca for young socialites, and those who will not let age impede their hedonist pursuits.

South Beach's reputation as an iconic destination up's the hype to almost fever pitch - and then more than matches it.

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Miami is much more, but South Beach is often enough

By Ashley Gibbins



When many talk of visiting Miami they are, in reality, referring to South Beach and, inevitably, Ocean Drive.

One of the world's top tourist hotspots, it attracts those with the desire and energy to exploit the plethora of bars, restaurants and nightclubs along Ocean Drive itself.

Then there is the beach itself, to relax and, this being Florida, you know the weather is going to be just great.

Visiting South Beach ticks off a place that should appear on any dedicated travellers 'bucket' list.

More to Miami

That said, I must stress that Miami offers a great deal more than South Beach.

Its downtown is a modern, vibrant metropolis, layered with art, culture and fine dining.

And each of Miami's historic neighbourhoods also offer a distinctive and fascinating character of its own.

But for this feature, and many visitors to the area, we are on South Beach.

Sunrise on the sand

The beach here is an undulating expanse of white sand sloping to the warm Atlantic Ocean.

Depending on time and tidal conditions, the ocean either ripples along the shoreline or comes in as crashing breakers.

We found the best time to be on the beach was at sunrise when it is all but deserted, save for the scuttling seabirds and those on early morning exercise regimes

The sun rising slowly over the horizon creates a mystical feel, and it is not unusual to see some sitting cross legged facing it in serene meditation.

The lifeguard towers

This is also a good time to admire the selection of Miami's iconic lifeguard towers that were first constructed by architect William Lane in 1992.



Hurricane Andrew had devastated the area and Lane thought the individually decorated towers would create an interest and support the economic recovery.

How right he was. With new towers supplementing some of Lane's original structures they have become symbols of Miami Beach's free-spirit.

With the sun getting up a head of steam, the beach comes to life. Uniform rows of sun beds and beach umbrellas mushroom and are quickly occupied.

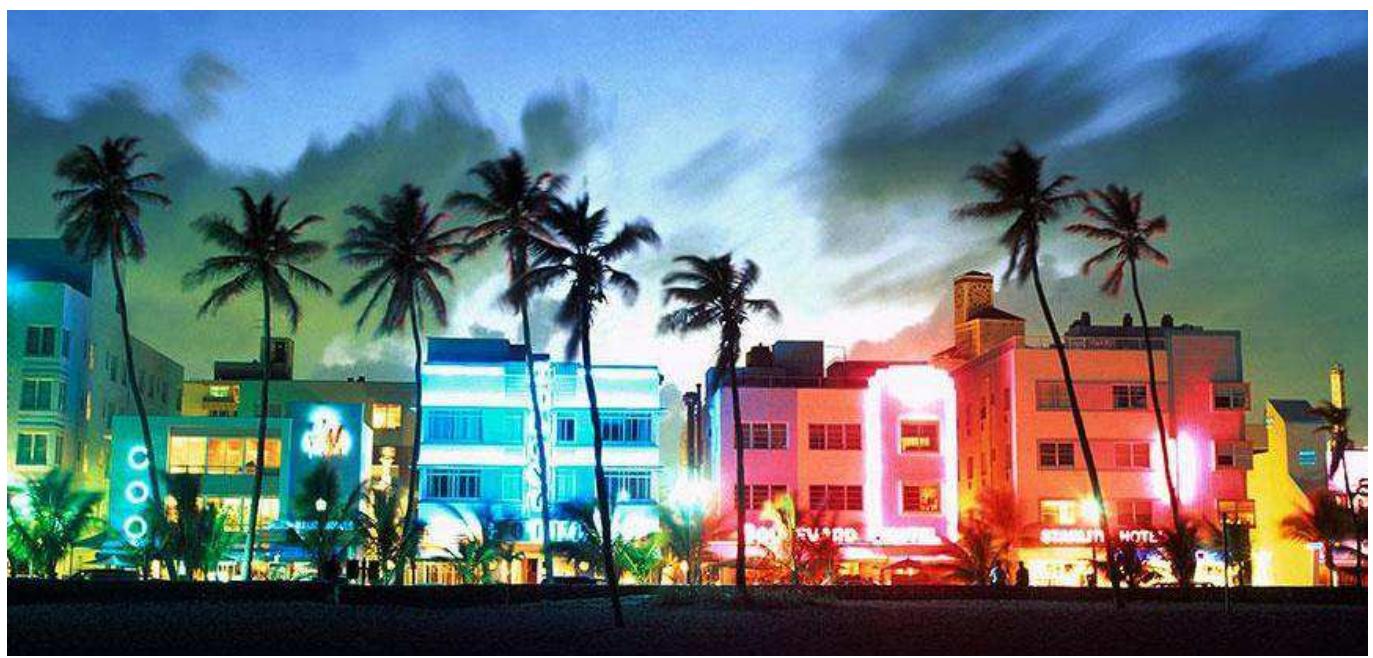
This is the time to get, that authentic South Beach tan, and catch up on the sleep that was not on the agenda for much of the night before.

Lummus Park

Lummus Park links the beach and Ocean Drive and is on the US Historic Places Register.

It is a place where the active walk, cycle, jog or skateboard, and the rest of us admire those who use the park's outdoor gym to hone stunningly sculptured bodies.

There really is only one Ocean Drive



If there are those who visit Miami and do not leave South Beach, there are, in turn, those who come to South Beach and do not make it the 50 or so yards from Ocean Drive to the beach itself.

We met a group of young women from the 'Big Apple' who were on the last day of three and deciding whether to forego a cocktail in order to take in the ocean.

It did not garner much discussion.

The Ocean Drive that is the magnet for most runs for 10 blocks from 5th to 15th Street in a flow of bars, clubs and restaurants.

These are located on the ground floor of the Drive's iconic art deco architecture with its bright pastel pallet of colours.

The result is a 'film set' feel that shimmers under the Florida sun, during the day, and is floodlit with neon after dark.

It is no surprise that Ocean Drive regularly forms the stage set or backdrop for movie and music video makers.

A rap music video was being shot while we were there, amid much excitement by someone apparently very well known.

And then there are the cast of performers and the audience for the daily extravaganza that is Ocean Drive.

This is a place that encourages and positively embraces personal self-expression and, as such, it is no wonder Ocean Drive is very gay friendly.

Wining and dining al fresco

The choice for wining and dining is considerable with casual, al fresco seating along the sidewalk and a more sophisticated option inside.

These pervade a leisurely feel from lunch time through afternoon cocktails with things livening up during evening dining.

As the evening draws on so the parties take off on Ocean Drive and continue into the early hours.

To entice customers, the bars and restaurants will usually offer happy hours and specials on the menu.

There is usually someone looking to catch the eye and pounce, in the nicest way, on any indication of interest.

Having made a choice on where to have a drink or meal, tourists will inevitably opt for one or more of the Ocean Drive signature cocktails, which come festooned with fruit and bright curling straws.

The other key component of the Ocean Drive experience is the live or 'taped' music that prevails - much of it with an infectious Latin beat.

This cranks up as the evening wears on and the nightclubs get into full swing.

For those with the stamina to stay the pace these provide the opportunity to party 'till the proverbial cows come home.



España Way

For those looking for a change from Ocean Drive, without losing the essence of South Beach, there is the nearby España Way.

Conceived as the recreation of the romantic Mediterranean villages of Spain and France, it offers sidewalk restaurants shaded by awnings.

Get to South Beach at least once

South Beach is a place one should experience at least once.

Located less than 30 minutes from Miami International Airport it can provide an excellent short break at the start or end of a longer trip to the Sunshine State.

It will then be a case of seen it, done that and bought the tee-shirt or the start of a lifelong affiliation that will take you into disgraceful old age.



A cultural oasis in a frenetic destination

By Ann Mealor

It is a little difficult to imagine the sophisticated Betsy fitting into the frenetic whirl of South Beach - but it does.

It was built in 1942, by L Murry Dixon who was responsible for many Miami Beach Art Deco hotels, and is the one remaining example of his Florida Georgian Architecture on Ocean Drive.

In recent years, *The Betsy*'s owner Jonathan Plutzik, a New Yorker come 'naturalised' Floridian has restored and expanded this boutique hotel in stunning style.

In doing so he has also created a cultural hub on Ocean Drive and a magnet for live music, artistic works and literary event.

It makes for a cool, calm and sophisticated oasis amid the otherwise fast paced ambience of Ocean Drive.

A welcome home feel

The Betsy stands at the north end of Ocean Drive in the architecturally stunning Art Deco District, and has a real 'welcome home' feel.

It provides a sophisticated counterbalance to the fast paced SoBe lifestyle just outside its doors.



Sun, sand and the Atlantic Ocean is just across the way, and views of the sea can be enjoyed from a number of bedrooms in the 'Colonial' wing of the hotel.

Rated the 2017 Top Resort Hotel on Miami Beach by Travel + Leisure, *The Betsy* reopened in March 2009 after a multi-million dollar restoration of the historic Betsy Ross (Betsy Ross sewed the first American flag).

A stunning example of Florida Georgian architecture, the 'Colonial' wing retains an old world charm with its dark wood Venetian blinds, ceiling fans, zebra framed mirrors, coffee table art books and chess sets.

The pink orchids, green palms and wonderful *Fortuny Sheherazade* chandeliers add a touch of 1930s glamour to this spectacular wing.

Bigger and better

The Betsy, which doubled in size to 130 rooms in December 2016 after expanding into its newly renovated Art Deco Wing, has kept its intimate feel.

This did give it a new rooftop pool, library, a new event and lounge spaces and a second restaurant, *The Alley Pizzeria*.

Rooms here have a beach-chic theme with walnut wood floors, wicker and teak based furniture, hand selected velvet, cotton and linen fabrics and decorative brass and mirrored features.

The stunning Skyline Penthouse & Terrace can be found here, for those wanting to splash out on a very special stay

The library, with its interesting and substantial collection of books, is the ideal 'I want to be alone...with a glass of wine' place.

Overlooking the ocean

Our bedroom was in the Colonial Wing and overlooked the Atlantic.

I enjoyed the fine toiletries, Malin & Goetz, the cosy bath robes, crisp linens and of course the view.

I never tire of listening to, and gazing out at, the sea.

We also made full use of the grand hotel bar, especially during happy hour.

Not only were the drinks great value but Vilario, the Italian pianist on one evening, was wonderful - and so talented.

Jazz is played in the Lobby Salon two nights a week, but there is always some form of entertainment going on.

Breakfast at The Betsy

Breakfast in the LT Steak & Seafood restaurant proved to be a real treat.

The house speciality is undoubtedly crushed avocado infused with lemon on sourdough topped with feta cheese and a generous portion of smoked salmon. Delicious!

Two pools

The hotel has two pools and two rooftop Ocean Decks, one with a Wellness Garden and Spa and the other with panoramic views of the Miami skyline and the shimmering evening sunsets.



A champion of the arts

The Betsy, however, is not content with being a truly first class hotel.

It's a hotel with a heart and passionate about championing the arts and artists.

An exhibition of quirky dog portraits by New York based artist, Eric Ginsburg, adds a colourful, modern twist to the décor as does the 'behind the scene' collection of black and white photographs of pop icons including *The Beatles* and *The Rolling Stones*.

Not only is there a Writer's Room, where aspiring authors can stay free of charge to finish their works, but it has also supported and initiated a range of festivals including the *Miami Summer Music Festival* with opera and jazz performances; *Escribe Aquí*, a bi-lingual literature festival, and an annual three-day A Cappella event.

The Betsy is also involved in a number of community education and conservation programmes, including 'adopt a beach' where the Hotel is responsible for maintaining a specific area of the sand.

Dog friendly

The Betsy is also dog friendly and supports the local 'Dogs for Adoption' scheme.

Funds are also donated further afield to the SPCA in Zimbabwe.

Service excellence

Finally, I must praise the whole *Betsy* team, who were helpful, knowledgeable and friendly - especially those on the front desk.



This really did make a difference to our stay. They helped us find appropriate car parking (which is expensive in Miami), directions to the best local shopping and even batteries for our suitcase scales.

Our luggage had gained a few pounds during our stay – just like us!

More information

www.thebetsyhotel.com

A snapshot of the South Beach, Miami



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