



# Visiting the famous, the curious

**Like most American cities, Miami has an unremarkable downtown buffered by middle-class suburbia and edged by islands of opulence, but its modern revival and its character make it different**



Hacienda hideaway:  
Madonna's Miami house

BY PHIL TRIPP

**M**IAMI attracts the rich, the famous, the curious and the gorgeous. The city has stripped its older districts of the tarnish of recent years and has shined them with a mixture of boutique shops, elegantly

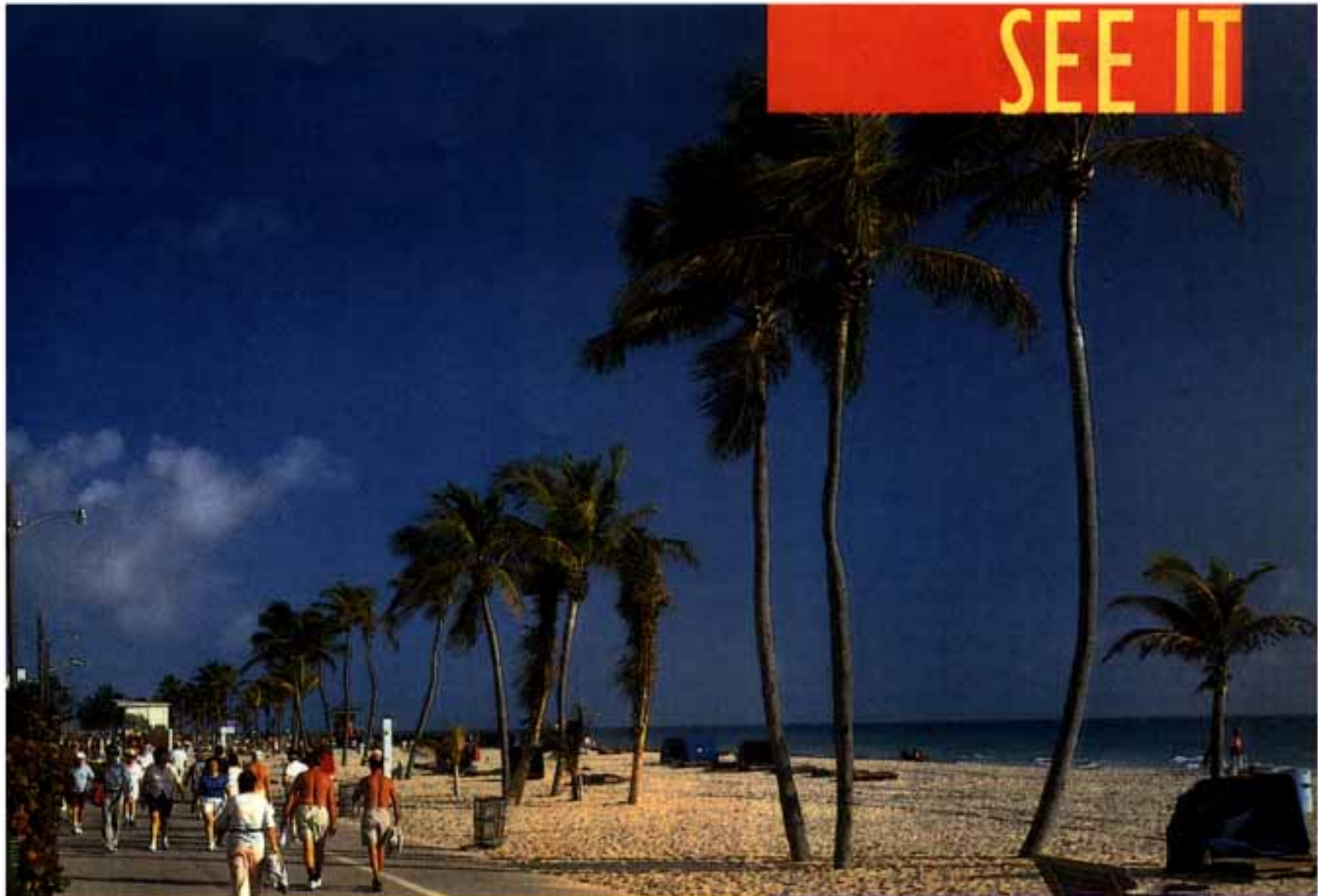
casual restaurants, up-market galleries and hip cafes. There is a new vibrancy in a city that plays host to an influx of celebrities from Sylvester Stallone to Madonna. The once rundown Art Deco district of Miami Beach is a refurbished magnet for visitors. Tourist crime has dropped 85% in the past three years, a corrupt local government has been booted from office, and you are more likely to be run over by a rollerblading supermodel off the catwalk than to be done over by a work-release Scarface fresh from the cellblock. Hard bodies on trendy Lincoln Avenue and Ocean Drive have replaced hardened criminals of earlier times.

No longer is Miami the cocaine capital and the paradise of the smuggler. It has repositioned itself as the place tourists like to visit.

Miami Beach is actually 25 seamlessly connected islands, and enclaves such as Coconut Grove, Coral Gables and Bal Harbor are status addresses, contrasting with the dangerous slum Liberty City and the Cuban barrio of Little Havana.

Coconut Grove is South Florida's oldest settlement and was a sleepy, bohemian, non-beach suburb that, in

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## and the gorgeous

On the beach: Retro style and tropical summers have made Miami a magnet for tourists

10 years, has yuppified itself from hippie to hip to cool hangout. The ponytail-and-mobile-phone set stake out South Beach, the bottom one-third of Miami Beach, where crumbling Art Deco apartment buildings were restored in the early 1990s when the older residents were priced out by development or driven out by the noise of construction and nightlife. In 1980, the average age in South Beach was 66; by the early 1990s it had dropped to 46.

There are probably more Art Deco buildings concentrated in South Beach than anywhere else in the world. Ocean Drive is a feast of pastel colors and funky neon, portholes and cantilevered ledges on rounded, cream plaster-coated apartment buildings that seldom exceed four floors. Deco bas-relief carvings accentuate the 1930s look and a cavalcade of vintage cars, lovingly restored by Cuban car fanatics, cruise all day, adding to the area's retro feel. Rejuvenated hotels in the Deco district are the rage. Three music entrepreneurs operate the hotels that dominate the top end: The Tides, owned by Chris Blackwell of Island Records; the Delano, of former Studio 54 owner Ian Schrager; and the Albion, revamped by Mira Rubell.

### THE CITY, STRIPPED OF ITS TARNISH, HAS A NEW VIBRANCY



Schrager added the monolithic Delano to his collection of boutique hotels (Paramount and Royalton in New York, Mondrian in Hollywood) using the same rock star architect, Philippe Starck, who changed the theme of all three properties from hospitality to entertainment. Starck's fantasy treatment embodies massive billowing gauze curtains with oversized and overstuffed furniture in the tall, dark wood foyer, a vast veranda overlooking the extra-shallow pool (with furniture in it) and the underwater broadcasting of classical music. The 238 rooms are glaringly white, matched in starkness by the creamy lavish rooftop aqua spa.

The Tides, built in 1936 and featured on more postcards in its heyday than any other Miami hotel, is the latest addition to Blackwell's Island Outpost resort chain. Its 112 original rooms have been converted into 45 1930s-style ocean-front suites with panoramic views and blackout curtains for late sleepers. Terrazzo tile dominates its Jamaica-motif lobby, restaurant and bar, but the attraction for most adults is its topless pool, usually packed with supermodels and trophy wives.

Capping the newly refurbished Albion are six three-walled, open-air penthouse suites with the

signature designs of Carlos Zapata: high-modernism steel and silvery green organza. But it is the 20-metre-high glass water wall in the industrial-look lobby that stops traffic and overpowers conversation. Its aquatic theme includes portholes in the bar opening the way for underwater views into the mezzanine-level pool. Several tonnes of sand have been dumped on the courtyard deck, turning it into a faux seashore.

The Albion is the cultural heart of Lincoln Road, where artists and gays, rollerbladers and dancers, instrument-toting musicians, African percussionists and Caribbean steel drummers mix with Latin pop stars. It is a whirl of action and table hopping among the 130 restaurants in a 10-block area, each one staking a claim to extend its ambience outward with rows of tables bustling until 1am or so.

Bizarre combinations of food abound in a city where dinner tends to start at 10pm. Cuban/Chinese is a trend at present, and the hot property is Pacific Time in Lincoln Road, run by model and chef Jonathan Eisman. His creations range from honey-roasted Chinese duck with fresh plums, plum wine and Peking pancakes to a dessert of Creole battered bananas, accompanied by shaved coconut and topped with lemon-grass syrup.

Chef Allen's is another popular spot that often tops media foodie lists with its French/Cuban disciplines. The herb-crusted barbecued snapper is accompanied by yuca mojo, Cuba's classic dish of cassava in fresh garlic salsa, while the elegance of a delicate Florida pompano fish is highlighted by white truffles en papillote.

Bang! is a newcomer. It has a showpiece wood-burning oven that chef Robbin Haas uses to roast an incredible foie gras, cheese-stuffed peppers and smoky cream-crab pizzettes. But for the real Miami crab experience, the claws of the local crustacean variety are always cracking at Joe's Stone Crab, a Biscayne Street tradition with takeaway for those too ravenous to wait in line for a table. And wait you must.

For Caribbean cuisine, there is Norma's on the Beach and no one else comes close. She founded one of the legendary restaurants in Kingston, Jamaica, and lent her culinary expertise to this gem. The red, green, and yellow rasta salad appetiser is a tangy combination of artichoke hearts and peppers, while cold smoked marlin offers a different taste of the islands.

## Miami sizzles

**ANointed the ultimate hot new place in the United States, with sun-saturated beaches by day and salsa-charged dancing at night, this Florida city owes its searing reputation to the dual cultures of Latino emigres and gay refugees driving out senior citizens from their ghetto of South Miami Beach.**

## Miami steams

**Warm currents and salty breezes rising from the Caribbean lap Miami to the south-east, while the swamplands of the Everglades are the tropical sweat glands of the city to the west. Its sunny climate makes Miami the cruise-ship capital of the world and a sparkling economic hub for Latin America. But be warned: the heat is oppressive from June to August.**

Breezin': The warm Caribbean winds lap the shores of Miami



Among the entrees, filets of seared jerk tuna are exuberant and mouth-watering, and a tequila liqueur sauce gives grilled Bahrain grouper an intriguing sweet-spicy zing.

Coffee is a 24-hour drink in Miami, fuelling the fast



**Deco deluxe:** South Beach probably has more Art Deco buildings than anywhere else in the world



## Miami simmers

**A CULINARY BOILING POT, MIAMI HOSTS THE COOKING OF SPICY CULTURES FROM THE CUBANO RECIPES OF ARTERY-CLOGGING PORK-AND-THREE-BEANS DISHES, TO FIERY JAMAICAN JERKED-FOWL-AND-PEPPERS CREATIONS, HAITIAN VOODOO-TINGED GOAT'S HEAD SOUP AND MEXICAN TRIPE STEW.**

## Miami smokes

**STOREFRONT WINDOWS OF BOUTIQUE MANUFACTURERS AND ELEGANT CIGAR BARS FEATURE OLIVE-SKINNED MEN HAND-ROLLING TOBACCO LEAVES AROUND FRAGRANT SECRET BLENDS ON WORN, GROOVED TABLES OF EXOTIC WOODS. THE CELEBRATION OF THE CIGAR STAINS THE AIR EVERYWHERE, EVEN THOUGH TRADE SANCTIONS HAVE BANNED AUTHENTIC CUBAN CIGARS.**

## And sometimes, Miami suffers

**A MAFIA REFUGE IN THE 1960s, RETREAT FOR RETIREES FROM THE NORTHERN SNOW STATES IN THE 1970s, BACKDROP TO THE GARISH MIAMI VICE TV SERIES OF THE 1980s AND SCENE OF THE CRIME WAVES AND TOURIST CAR-JACKINGS OF THE 1990s THAT ENDED WITH THE MURDER OF FASHION ICON GIANNI VERSACE ... MIAMI HAS HAD ITS SHARE OF BAD PRESS BUT TIMES HAVE CHANGED.**

pace of a youthful city. Cafe Cubano is the traditional cuppa — strong, sweet, milky, yet dark and slightly spicy. Two landmark cafes are News Cafe in Ocean Drive, with its own little hip booster, and Pert Sauger in Collins Avenue, which is not only a great Cuban restaurant but also a fine source of the popular Cuban coffee, cafe con leche.

A parade of models walking by is a reminder of the constant foot traffic in parts of Miami. Early in the morning the direction is from cafe strip to beach, where the main sport becomes people-watching. Miami Beach is well groomed, hundreds of metres wide, and has a new play area at Fifth Street, called Lumps Park, to attract families. Just below Miami Beach are the gentle sloping sands of Fisher Island. The designers of the Fisher Island resort made the beach by hauling shiploads of sand of the right color and texture from the Bahrain atoll.

If a freshwater dip is desired, visitors can head for the 70-year-old Coral Gables resort, the Blither Hotel, which has the country's biggest hotel pool, holding more than 2.7 million litres of water. In the 1930s heyday of the pool, Johnny Weissmuller and Esther Williams, the film originals of Tarzan and Jane, staged glamorous aquatic shows to crowds along the lawn and in front of the private cabanas occupied by the rich. The allure of the Blither now is the Friday night alfresco dining and smoking experience — Cigars under the Stars — where a Cuban hand-roller lovingly crafts the cigars.

But at some point everyone wants to get away from the hum of the city. Locals head, not north on the

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**Florida fauna:**  
An unmistakable emblem of Miami

shopping-strip highway to Disney World, but south over a chain of bridges leading to Florida Keys, the 144-kilometre chain of islets. Key West, at the end of the road, is the best known. Ernest Hemingway lived there, and it was the haunt of singer Jimmy Buffett's Margaritaville. The hidden secret of the Keys, however, is Little Palm Island, a two-hour drive south of Miami.

With 15 thatch bungalows nestled among hundreds of coconut palms, Little Palm resembles a Pacific hideaway. In countless magazines it has been voted one of the top 10 retreats in the US. The suites are elegant, each with an enclosed outdoor shower in addition to lavish indoor bathing facilities. There is no TV, no phone, no cars and a world-class restaurant that attracts the local yachting set. Oh, and no cars either, because the only access to the secluded island is the resort's mahogany launch. Day trippers are not allowed, so most of the visitors are flamingoes, sea eagles and pelicans.

If swampland adventure is the goal, visitors can head west from Miami on the flat Tamiami Trail, past the airport-size Sawgrass Mills outlet mall and layers of condominiums to where the road narrows to its original width and character, snaking into the Everglades. Alligators bask by the roadside, rows of pink flamingoes stand on one leg in frozen formation, old tourist traps of the 1950s retain their kitsch aura and Indian tribal people hawk moccasins and other tourist treasures in rundown fibro stores.

Fishing is a religion out here, followed closely by fan-driven air boats hot-rodding over the marshy swampland. Crab shacks are the food churches, with tables covered in newspapers and a large hole in the middle mounted on trash cans serving as the altars. The sacraments of a cold beer in one hand and a stone crab claw dripping with pepper sauce in the other are de rigeur for watching the sun drop behind the 10,000 islands into the vast Gulf of Mexico beyond. ■

### WHERE TO STAY:

**DELANO**, 1685 Collins Ave, Miami Beach, Florida 33139. Phone: (0011 | 305) 673 2900. Fax: (0011 | 305) 532 0099.

**ALBION**, 1650 James Ave, Miami Beach, Florida 33139. Phone: (0011 | 305) 913 1000. Fax: (0011 | 305) 674 0507.

**THE TIDES**, 1220 Ocean Drive, Miami Beach, Florida 33139. Phone: (0011 | 305) 604 5000. Fax: (0011 | 305) 604 5180. E-mail: outpost800@aol.com

**LITTLE PALM ISLAND**, 28500 Overseas Highway, Little Torch Key, Florida 33042. Phone: (0011 | 305) 872 2524. Fax: (0011 | 305) 872 4843. E-mail: getlost@littlepalmisland.com

**BLITHER**, 1200 Anastasia Ave, Coral Gables, Florida, 33134. Phone: (0011 | 305) 445 1926. Fax: (0011 | 305) 448 9976.