



Miami Beach

The International Flair of SoBe

Leave the Kids at Home, Bring Your Finest Duds, and Enjoy Miami's European-Styled Beach

[WRITTEN BY LISSA POIROT]

I'm the type of traveler who visits foreign countries armed with basic phrases — good morning/afternoon, how much, thank you — so that I may make an effort to speak the language of the country I am visiting. But as I encounter store clerks and wait staff on Miami's South Beach, I am at a loss for words. This cosmopolitan beach is such an international hubbub that I'm never sure which language is appropriate. Besides the occasional tourist that looks decidedly American — a rarity here — I've encountered at every turn people from France, England, Germany, the Caribbean, Brazil, Japan and Italy.

SoBe, as it is called, for like a Hollywood celebrity, a catchy nickname is a must, is nothing like traditional American beaches, where families pack the shores for a little R&R under the sun. There are no clam shacks and ice cream huts, no Lily Pulitzer-clad women or Tommy Bahama-wearing men, and very few children laughing gaily in the surf. Instead, this Miami beach feels straight out of the pages of a European magazine. This is a playground for the trendy, the wealthy and those wanting to be seen. Everywhere you turn are beautiful hard bodies of men and women who look as if they spend hours at the gym, as well as under the sun. Barely-there bikinis are the mainstay of its fashion, and although its illegal to go topless on these beaches it doesn't stop a third of the women who are more concerned with gaining an even tan than obeying the law. Music spilling out of the hotels and restaurants aligning the beach's hip and packed Ocean Drive continues the international flair as techno beats and Latin rhythms let you know you aren't in Kansas anymore.

What's Old is New

Miami Beach first became an international playground during the 1930s, as Art Deco-styled hotels popped up on the shores of this narrow island off the coast of Miami. After Cuba's revolution in 1959, immigrants flooded the island and lent it a Cuban flair, including

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PHOTO COURTESY OF MANDARIN ORIENTAL MIAMI

Above: The 5-star Mandarin Oriental Miami's Oasis Beach Club and beds





The Miami skyline from across Biscayne Bay



Escapache seafood salad at The Tides' La Marea restaurant

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The newly refurbished Tides Hotel recalls retro, Art Deco Miami Beach

music, fashion and coveted cigars. But as with all things trendy, interest waned and a new “it” destination was found, sending Miami Beach into disarray. Just 20 short years ago, pastel paints were peeling off of derelict hotels and shops, and street-walkers and drug dealers owned the night. But as one of the only spots in the country to still house its original Art Deco frame, investors returned and refurbished aging hotels, bringing life back to the shores, and soon after, people from around the world were rediscovering Miami Beach. Today, the city of Miami Beach and its stretch of beach — SoBe — along the waters of the Atlantic Ocean, are home to a number of celebrities, from Madonna to Matt Damon, Jennifer Lopez to Sylvester Stallone, and Will Smith to Donatella Versace. Hotels lining its famed streets — Ocean Drive, Collins Avenue and Lincoln Road — are at high occupancy throughout the year, including the summer months when the temperatures and humidity are high. No matter the weather, people come to SoBe to party and live the good life.

Speaking of celebrities, as I check into the newly refurbished boutique The Tides Hotel, with just 45 oceanfront rooms, I am informed by a proud staff member that Jennifer Aniston and Owen Wilson, in town filming a new movie, just dined in the hotel's La Marea restaurant last week. Opulently decorated with golds and creams and mixed textures like marble and woods on floors and walls, The Tides is a throwback to retro Miami, and its patio restaurant overlooking the ocean from cushioned couches under umbrellas makes an ideal perch for people-watching while savoring fresh martinis kept chilled in the Miami heat by homemade fruit popsicles on a stick of cinnamon. Chef Pietro Rota, an Italian newcomer to SoBe, knows how to cater to the celebrity lifestyle after six years in West Hollywood. Utilizing organic and fresh foods, Chef

Rota keeps his preparations light, allowing the freshness of the foods to capture the flavor of his Mediterranean menu, which is the perfect complement to the international environs surrounding The Tides. (Be sure to order the Escapache seafood salad, a wonderful presentation of octopus,

clams, mussels, calamari, shrimp and scallops on a bed of arugula.)

After enjoying lunch and people watching, it's time to hit the beach, where The Tides provides a sectioned-off area of private sand. While service is provided, Miami Beach laws prevent alcohol from

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being served, so no more of those aforementioned martinis here! The water, a deep, dark blue that disguises any fish lurking beneath its powerful waves, is warm, and we spend most of our time just soaking in the sun on the coarse honey-colored sand. The beach stretches more

than a mile and is dotted with colorful life-guard stands of varying shapes, some with circular dimensions, others square boxes. The beach hosts a number of events each year, and during our stay is the AVP beach volleyball association's Miami Open, which brings even more hard, tanned bodies to

the shores of the Atlantic. But as SoBe is the place to see and be seen, soon we were off the sand and walking Ocean Drive to feel its energy. Walking past countless restaurants, and through most of them as they fill the sidewalks with their outdoor seating, my neck was spinning as I checked out the luxury cars easing down the road, the fashion on the women strutting their stuff, and to my husband's dismay, even the buff men walking past. Just a few blocks away is Collins Avenue, with its strip of upscale chains such as Armani Exchange, M•A•C and Versace, and Lincoln Road, where the pedestrian streets are flanked by upscale boutique shops and more outdoor restaurants provide a place to sit behind oversized black sunglasses sipping more daytime martinis.

A Hint of the Orient

SoBe has enough energy that there is no need to leave the island, unless it is to hop the bridge to Brickell Key, where the 5-star Mandarin Oriental awaits. Although it's not the boutique lifestyle found at The Tides, the Mandarin is known throughout the world for its luxury accommodations and signature spa. The hotel has repeatedly been named one of the best hotels in the world, and open, airy rooms overlooking the bay include 10-foot ceilings, marble bathrooms with oversized tubs and separate showers, and Bose stereo systems. Checking into the renowned The Spa at Mandarin Oriental Miami, I am greeted by a friendly and accommodating staff who whisk me away to one of its six VIP suites. Riding a private elevator to the room, I literally stopped in my tracks before entering. Vaulted floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking Biscayne Bay provide the view, which a sunken tub, glass-enclosed shower and chaise lounge are positioned to catch. Partaking in the two-hour signature Kundalini Journey treatment, a

combination of aromatherapy, color and gemstone therapy, and sound therapy, as well as a massage combination of Ayurveda, Thai, Swedish and other techniques, I was truly relaxed, pampered and indulged by time it ended.

Dinner at the Mandarin's Azul restaurant is a special occasion for residents of Miami Beach and Miami, and sports cars and limos pull up to the valet with long-legged beauties and well-dressed men stepping out. Entering the open and airy restaurant, a wall of water awaits with king crab legs and lobster greeting my husband — who decided then and there he would be having fish for dinner. With views of the bay, as well as an outdoor patio catching the sea breezes, the happening dinner spot feels intimate and quiet. Trust the wine sommelier who approaches before your server to pair the right glass of wine with your meal, or in my case, a rose Champagne to accompany my “I-can't-believe-I-ate-the-whole-thing-delicious” ribeye steak. From fresh-from-the-sea dishes like homemade squid ink orrecchiete with Turks & Caicos conch, roasted tomatoes, basil and Italian sausage to the “colossal” crab claw, appetizers will melt in your mouth before dinner arrives. And, since this is the Mandarin Oriental, they have perfected sushi, so a visit to the Café Sambal sushi bar is a must for sushi lovers, and popular amongst locals, as well.

Although removed from Miami Beach, you may still enjoy SoBe's energy, combined with the Mandarin Oriental's cater-to-you amenities, by visiting Casa Casuarina, the former mansion of Gianni Versace located directly on Ocean Drive. Sadly, it is at the front gate of the opulent mansion where Versace was shot while returning home from a breakfast run, and tourists are always lingering about to take photos, but inside Mandarin guests get a

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The Mandarin Oriental's renowned spa's VIP suites feature stunning views of Biscayne Bay.

peek into the home while enjoying the hotel's services. A skip across the street and private beach cabanas await, also serviced by the hotel. Or if SoBe's throes of stylish folks get to be too much, return to the hotel to enjoy its Oasis Beach Club, which provides a quiet, private beach with padded, oversized day beds, cabanas, an infinity swimming pool and butlers ready to serve you.

When looking for beach with glitz and glamour at every turn, it's no wonder SoBe remains tops on the world's best beaches. Leave the kids at home and head to Miami to enjoy some the international flavor and flair — as well as some fruity concoctions under the Florida Sun. **PN**

FOR MORE INFORMATION

The Tides & La Marea Restaurant

1220 Ocean Drive

Miami Beach

800-439-4095

www.thetideshotel.com

Mandarin Oriental Miami, Azul & The Spa

500 Brickell Key Drive

Miami

305-913-8383

www.mandarinoriental.com