



(Above) At Walt Grace Vintage, rare guitars line the walls of the space.

(Below) Dominos is a popular game in Little Havana in Miami.



(Left) After a revitalisation, Espanola Way, a cobblestone-walking area lined with 1920s Mediterranean revival buildings, is alive with restaurants, cafes and dancing in the street.

PHOTOS: COURTESY OF ESPANOLA WAY, JUDITH RITTER



SUNDAY TIMES GRAPHICS

GETTING THERE

Singapore Airlines (www.singaporeair.com) flies non-stop to Newark three times weekly. From Newark, hop on one of American Airlines' three times daily non-stop flights to Miami. Another possibility for Miami-goers is Air Emirates' 25-hour flight to Fort Lauderdale. From Fort Lauderdale, take a 30-minute commuter train (www.gobrightline.com) or airport shuttle (www.supershuttle.com)

GETTING AROUND

Greater Miami does have public transportation, some modes more efficient than others.

- **Bus:** The Metrobus system (bit.ly/2YkLh2z) offers multiple options and an online route planner.
- **Trolley:** Miami also has a trolley (bit.ly/2xpyoLG) that is fun, colourful and often free.
- **Bike:** Citi Bike (citibikemiami.com) is Miami's bike-share programme and, with 1,000 bikes and 100 stations, a fun and efficient way of travelling.
- **Water taxi:** The water taxi (water-taximiami.net/schedule-route-map) will not get you everywhere you want to go, but being out on the water is fun in itself. Hop on and hop off and see some of the city's interesting sights.

WHAT TO READ

Miami's local culture and news outlet is Miami New Times (www.miaminewtimes.com) for live music, new restaurant openings and cultural events.

SPECIAL EXCURSIONS

If you have extra time on your hands, here are a few extra things to do:

- **Visit Stiltsville,** once an offshore little community reputedly where all sorts of vice occurred under the aegis of folk like Al Capone. There are just a few shacks on stilts left, but half the fun is getting there by boat (oceanforceadventures.com/stiltsville-tours).
- **Take in Florida's largest movie prop rental and fabricator,** Movie Prop Rental (movieproprentals.net), and see giant plaster dinosaurs, human-sized red mushrooms, fantastical furnishings fit for royalty and a treasure trove of other movie props. To get on the insider tour and see how props are made, contact Jerry Blohm in advance.
- **Gastronomie alert.** For a quick taste of many of South Florida's favourite foods all in one place, head to the brand-new food hall, Time Out Market (www.timeoutmarket.com/miami). The line-up includes a dozen local chefs, including award-winning pastry chef Antonio Bachour, chef Norman Van Aken and chef Jeremy Ford.
- **A local secret for cinema buffs and music fans** are the free outdoor movies and concerts projected on the wall of Miami Beach's New World Center, home to the New World Symphony. For the schedule, go to www.nws.edu

WHERE TO STAY

The Betsy Hotel (www.thebetsyhotel.com) is front and centre across from the lowliest stretch of Miami Beach and is full of surprises. It has the amenities of a South Beach luxury boutique hotel, two pools, a rooftop spa, culinary excellence and impeccable service, but also the most unusual and compelling cultural programming with jazz, chamber music, art and seminars for its guests. The Betsy weds luxury hospitality with community service and supports many charitable projects, including a book club in disadvantaged schools, hotel meeting space for non-profit groups and support for immigrant and other marginalised communities. Budget-conscious travellers might choose Freehand Miami (freehandhotels.com/miami), an upscale hostel of sorts. It is clean and comfortable, and within walking distance to the bohemian life in her adopted home of Montreal, Quebec.

MUSIC, MURALS AND MIAMI

Clubbing meets culture in this American city, where stellar museums rub shoulders with hip neighbourhoods

Judith Ritter

I love Miami. In fact, I even kind of gush about it.

Friends are surprised. I am not the type for lavish late nights or the feverish crush of stylish Art Basel gatherings. But I do find the dazzle of this extraordinary confection of a city mesmerising. My favourite early morning Miami view is from my wicker perch on the veranda of The Betsy. It is a splendidly restored, small Art Deco hotel with a passion for poetry and the arts and perfectly located right across from a long sandy beach, a runner's dream.

From The Betsy's front porch, I sit with my steaming coffee, music of Cuban legend Ibrahim Ferrer drifting in the warm breeze.

Here, I watch the early-morning return of the party people, still glittery but now stylishly dishevelled from their bacchanalian night. As they head home to sleep, I plan my adventures starting with a trip to a small nearby museum.

Miami has stellar museums, but I choose the lesser-known Wolfsonian, a small welcoming space affiliated with Miami's innovative, public Florida International University.

Each gallery is packed with artefacts of the history of industrial

design. There are cameras, clocks, shiny toasters and phonographs from the early 20th century. The mix of serious design history and playfulness is compelling.

The Wolfsonian's cafe-cum-design store is also a great place to meet student artists, design aficionados and shop for handcrafted Deco-inspired items by local artisans. My search for a mid-morning snack takes me on a 10-minute walk along the not-yet-gentrified Washington Avenue. It is lined with shops whose mannequins sport beachwear, sunglasses and T-shirts with cheesy sayings.

A little farther along where beachwear yields to tattoo establishments and hookah parlours is Charlotte Bakery. It is always packed with regulars lined up for little cups of dark Cuban coffee and a choice of a dozen varieties of Latin America's hand-rolled small pies and stuffed pastries.

There is a Venezuelan arepa domino stuffed with black beans and white cheese, a Colombian cassava and cornmeal pandebono with sweet guava and the sensational Argentinian fluted-edged torta pascualina with spinach and ricotta.

Regulars at the counter and little high-top tables have endless easy conversations in Spanish and English, sharing their favourite snack suggestions and even their own immigration stories with visitors.

MAGIC IN LITTLE CUBA

The Latin vibe in Miami, a city sometimes called the "capital of Latin America", is palpable and profound.

With limited time to explore, one way to get a feel for one of the most influential of Latin cultures is to head to Little Havana, the enclave where exiled Cubans first settled in the 1950s after fleeing Fidel Castro's Cuba.

A half-century later, despite the influx of other immigrant newcomers to the area, Little Havana, if no longer the residential hub, is still the political and social heart of the Cuban community.

The focal point is Calle Ocho (SW 8th Street) and the heart of Calle Ocho is most certainly Maximo Gomez Park, also known as Domino Park. There, dozens of people are hunkered down at tables playing dominos with the same passion, sticky soundscape, laughter and sighs of anguish as in mahjong.

Even in the early afternoon, music wafts out from nearby restaurants and bars.

The legendary Ball & Chain, a stylistic recreation of a 1930s Miami nightclub, is the noisiest and most vibrant.

Its live band play while elderly Cuban exiles, their hipster grandchildren and visitors like me can dance inside and outside on the sidewalk to old-school live Cuban jazz

and cantineros (bartenders) serve tropical fruit and rum drinks.

After working up some salsa heat, it is a relief to step just next door and cool off at Azucar, a hole-in-the-wall ice cream shop with flavours such as platanos maduros (sweet plantain) and mamey, the curious cross between pumpkin and sweet potato.

That sugar rush provides enough energy for one to take in the all-in-one Cuba culture stop, Cubaocho. It is an art gallery with a pre-1958 collection of paintings and objet d'art, a bar with live music and a back wall that is a floor-to-ceiling library of classic Cuban books.

There, where the aroma of cigar tobacco leaves mixes with the odour of cafe cubano, Mr Peter Bello, a fourth-generation cigar-maker, with his son watch over the creation of Cuban cigars.

Master roller Artocha Mena sits meditatively while carefully transcribing precious, delicate leaves into fine cigars, oblivious to on-lookers while Mr Bello's elderly mother and father keep an eye on the whole shop from the back of the room.

The community in exile has flour-

ished and though now joined by newcomers from other Caribbean and Latin countries, the spirit of the area is still Haitian.

The area's epicentre is most certainly the Little Haiti Cultural Complex with its art gallery, theatre, marketplace and outdoor stage where bands direct from Port-au-Prince, such as Tropicana and NuLook, perform and crowds dance compas, a steamy sort of merengue.

With its wood panelling, tiled floors, vibrant turquoise plastic table cloths and lazy ceiling fans, this cosy cash-only haunt is famed for its goat and oxtail dishes, Haitian cuisine staples.

The name "Little Haiti" was coined by the late community activist Vitor Juste and his son, Carl, an internationally respected photo-journalist, still lives there.

Today, with Little Haiti under the gentrification gun, the younger Juste is determined that the area's character will be saved by the arts.

As we walk through the neighbourhood on the way to his studio, he points out magnificent street art on the walls of concrete block buildings around the Cultural Complex, including that of renown muralist Serge Toussaint's Welcome to Little Haiti, Wilfrid Daleus' Mural by street artist duo, The Color Dreamers.

There are plenty of places in the neighbourhood for a taste of Haiti. All official tours lead to the celebrity magnet restaurant, Chef Creole, with its legendary whole steamed red snapper and walls covered with photos of famous visitors from singer-songwriter Erykah Badu to musician Wyclef Jean.

Another more low-key and locally adored hot spot is New Piman Bouk.



(Above) Four old, 23m-high silos have been turned into giant art-covered spray paint cans by local artist Danny "Krave" Fila. PHOTO: DANIEL FILA

(Left) Photographer Carl Juste (left) is a strong champion of the arts in Little Haiti, which has many walls of concrete blocks covered in murals.

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and custard pie to key lime and guava.

Top off the pie with a milkshake and head to Walt Grace Vintage for cars and guitars.

On one side of a sprawling room, rare cars line the shiny floors. On the other side, rare guitars cover the walls.

It is an emporium of nostalgia, a fantasy land for vintage-loving gearheads and would-be Joan Jett and Jimi Hendrixes.

Wynwood is also a haunt for late-night revellers, but the quieter and more intimate alternative venue is rooftop lounge No. 3 Social.

Inside, sofas are arranged to create small comfy enclaves for conversation and, outside, the large deck offers killer views of Miami's midtown.

Back in Miami Beach, my sanctuary hotel, The Betsy, awaits, but there are a few more early evening stops for those who, like me, prefer D-I-Y fun versus straight out past-your-bedtime debauchery.

Just two blocks from The Betsy is Espanola Way, a cobblestone-walking street lined with 1920s Mediterranean revival buildings with wrought-iron balconies and red-tiled roofs.

Espanola Way was Miami's first commercial area and home to the city's earliest cohort of bohemians and artists.

With a recent revitalisation, the area is now alive with restaurants, cafes and, my reason for being there, dancing in the street.

Thursday evenings are for salsa with a live band and enough cover for even awkward amateurs like me to feel for a few moments that I positively sizzle (or sort of sizzle).

After salsa, you may want to drown your sorrows or self-inflicted salsa humiliations at one of Miami Beach's very local nightspots such as Mac's Club Deuce, Miami's oldest bar.

There, I paused to inhale a bit of the old divey ambience with the regulars who shoot pool and love the blinking neon and worn familiarity of the place.

For Miami's bronzed and bejewelled partygoers, the night is young. But back at my hotel, I dial back the frenzy.

I may check out the string quartet playing in the library, stop in the lobby lounge for a game of chess or just take up my post on the veranda and watch the party people head out for hip watering holes and another night of Miami razzle-dazzle.

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