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South Beach: Pretty in pink and ready to party

Sun, surf, sand and plenty of pastel Art Deco style give Miami's South Beach lots of pizzazz

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By Marlene Parrish, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

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South Beach



The Betsy, with its traditional Colonial architecture, stands out from most of South Beach's Art Deco-style buildings.

MIAMI BEACH -- Want to go to South Beach right now? Go online. Punch in Google Earth and pull up the Western Hemisphere, zoom down to Florida, focus on this city, then zip over to its southern tip, just a snatch of beach, less than two square miles. We're here: South Beach, nicknamed SoBe, the world-famous Art Deco District.

The architecture is straight out of the 1930s. Building facades, painted in pastels of palest peach, yellow, mint, pink and baby blue, are frosted in white. By night, buildings are outlined and accented with a rainbow of neon lights. This is a neighborhood ready to party.

With much to see and many things to do, you can read up before you arrive or take a guided tour. But if you aren't pinched for time, just open your eyes and start walking.

Look around. Art serious or tongue in cheek, architecture and industrial design are all around you. Poke your head into hotel lobbies and restaurants. See Deco, touch sculpture, hear music and watch the drama of life in and on the street. The cars cruising up and down Ocean Boulevard count as performance art.

About the Author

Marlene Parrish has had a life-long professional relationship with food and cooking as a cooking teacher, restaurant reviewer, marketing director for a restaurant group, food stylist and nationally syndicated columnist. Currently, she writes about food and travel for the Post-Gazette. As co-leader of Slow Food Pittsburgh, she promotes fresh, local and sustainably grown food as well as the pleasures of the communal table. Marlene has a bachelor's degree from Carnegie Mellon University and a master's in journalism from Point Park University. She is a member of the International Association of Culinary Professionals, the Association of Food Journalists and Les Dames d'Escoffier.

To be practical, keep in mind that most restaurants add a 15 to 18 percent gratuity to the tab, and that local buses run frequently up and down Washington Avenue. And, please, remember the sun screen.

Here are some highlights from a recent getaway my husband and I took to celebrate an anniversary number with a zero in it.



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The Betsy Hotel

There are more face-lifts on the buildings in South Beach than on the tourists. The Betsy got one of the better ones. Architect L. Murray Dixon was responsible for most of the famous Art Deco-style hotels. But as a counterpoint to the Deco buildings, he designed the Betsy Ross Hotel in a traditional Colonial architectural style, with a four-column portico and shuttered windows. It opened in 1942 and was added to the State Registry of Historic Places in 1970. But, alas, age takes a toll. Between 2003 and 2009, the building underwent a complete renovation, including the name. The hotel is now The Betsy South Beach. And it's gorgeous. Best to view it from across the street. See the original name still up at the roofline.

Can't afford to stay there? Instead, just sit awhile in the lounge over a cocktail.

1440 Ocean Drive. 1-305-531-6100

www.thebetsyhotel.com

BLT Steak at the Betsy

The Betsy's house restaurant is BLT Steak, short for Bistro Laurent Tourondel Steakhouse, an elegant bistro. Sit inside, away from sidewalk distractions -- fumes, muffler roars and passersby. Steaks and chops are thick and juicy although a rack of rare Colorado lamb might be the best-of-show. Everything tastes better than you can ever make yourself. You'll rave to the folks back home about the complimentary huge gruyere popovers, warm pate and the basket of wee orange blossom madeleines. The service is spot-on, too.

1440 Ocean Drive. 1-305-673-0044

www.bltsteak.com

Deco Drive Cigars

This shop could rouse the spirits of Groucho, George Burns and our own Art Rooney Sr. The shop caters to the cigar aficionado. A walk-in humididor stocks cigars made from tobaccos grown in Honduras, Nicaragua, Mexico, Brazil and, well, you get the idea. A "Cuban" cigar roller makes fresh stogies on site, Monday and Wednesday evenings. What better way to finish off a fine evening than puff a cigar, strolling beach-side under the swaying palms? Note: That's not romance talking; they're swaying because it's windy. Be sure to pick up lots of matches.

1436 Ocean Drive. 1-305-672-9032

www.decodrivecigars.com

The Wolfsonian Florida International University Museum

Sometimes it rains in Miami. That's a sign telling you to walk over to the Wolfsonian. This museum and research center holds an extraordinary collection of modern art and design from the mid-19th to mid-20th centuries. The collection includes graphic, industrial and architectural design, furniture and decorative arts, paintings, sculpture, political propaganda as well as furniture, books, travel brochures and postcards, all chosen to provoke emotions and manipulate the mind. My favorites are familiar household artifacts such as alarm clocks, toasters and dishware. Its motto is Thinkism, the notion that what man makes, makes man.

1001 Washington Ave. 1-305-531-1001 (closed Wednesdays)

www.wolfsonian.org

Art Deco Welcome Center

The center is run by the Miami Design Preservation League, whose on-going efforts have saved South Beach from the developer's bulldozer. It sells all kinds of collectible souvenirs, very Deco, also very cool. But this shop is in no way a tourist trap. I didn't see a single shot glass. It specializes in reproductions of antique postcards, vintage deco travel posters and household items with a streamlined look. It's easy to covet everything from splashy oilcloth placemats, 1930s linen totebags, jewelry and buckles to lots of doodads. A small ceramic bathing beauty would make a fun paperweight. The center offers an assortment of tours.

1001 Ocean Drive

www.mdpl.org

Lincoln Road Pedestrian Mall

This granddaddy of pedestrian malls just turned 50. It was a tough sell, long ago, to close off Lincoln Road to cars. In 1960, Morris Lapidus, an architect who was often called the King of Kitsch, was hired to do the redesign. He butted heads with the 109 shop owners, who were convinced they would lose business if customers couldn't park in front of their stores. Mr. Lapidus famously said, "A car never bought anything." He then closed the road to traffic and changed the landscaping. The mall, now 11 blocks long, runs from Washington Avenue to Alton Road. It includes a multi-plex movie theater, galleries, shops, restaurants, cafes, fountains, and Books and Books, an independently owned bookstore. There are often street performers and live music. Wear comfortable shoes, and bring lots of cash or plastic.

www.lincolnroad.org

The beach

I almost forgot the beach! And that's what you come for, right? Sun, surf, sand, blue skies, balmy temps. The beach is man-made, and the designers sure knew how to build it -- almost 100 yards wide, soft white sand, lots of sandbars, and you can walk along the shoreline 'til you drop. Some hotels have deals with the beach concession guys to provide chairs, towels and umbrellas. Locals tend to hang out around the beach at Third street. The beach at 12th and 13th flies the rainbow flag, and women can go topless anywhere along the sand. You'll see sexy, beautiful people but mostly, you'll see the likes of the rest of us lumpy normal people.

Me? I tend to sit under an umbrella in T-shirt and crops and strum my ukulele.

Great way to spend a vacation.

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