



# CAPITAL OF COOL

With an abundance of galleries, hip hotels, Frank Gehry landmarks and one of the best art events in the world, Miami is enjoying a renaissance.  
**Andy Round** tries to keep up



Colonial quaint  
White is right at The Betsy, a landmark  
property on Miami's South Beach

A gridlock of stretch limos, sports cars and stacked SUVs snakes up to the Fontainebleau Hotel like an automotive beauty pageant. Leggy girls in short dresses click across the fluorescent blue floor of the lobby, followed by slick-haired guys with rolled-up sleeves and high hopes. Surveying the crowd are gorilla-sized 'hosts' in sharp suits and pneumatic hostesses barely wearing their glittery dresses.

It's Saturday night in Miami. I'm outside LIV, the hottest club in town, and it feels like a bizarre experiment in social engineering. There is no queue, no organised entry, just a handful of hosts waving iPads at the well-dressed herd and unclipping the velvet rope for those who look right.

Inside this split-level, bass-shaking super club, with its VIP glass cubicles, nose-bleedingly expensive drinks, velvet roped sofas and rows of champagne bottles, staff that look like they're slumming it between Victoria's Secret shoots serve customers that could have walked off the set of *Entourage*. Depending on your attitude, this is either the most depressing two-dimensional experience of your life or the most exciting Saturday night to have ever leapt off the society pages of *Vanity Fair*.

But it's Miami, right? This is where neon comes to die and everyone looks hot on the beach. Well, yes and no. Versions of Miami clubs like LIV have been around since the roaring 20s, when Miami was a magnet for Hollywood's silent-age superstars and New York's freshly minted millionaires. What is fascinating now is the way the city has recreated itself as a capital of cultural cool.

Much of this is down to the success of Art Basel Miami Beach (ABMB). Just nine years old, the four-day exhibition-cum-party is now one of the most dynamic contemporary arts events in the world. "In 2010 ABMB attracted a record 46,000 visitors," says the Basel's Maïke Cruse. "It's getting bigger and bigger every year."

"The event has a great reputation for breaking new artists," says Johnny Wong, a curator at the Peter Tunney Gallery. "But it's as much about the social scene as the art and both are really vibrant. Plus if you are European there is no better reason to come and enjoy some Miami sun in the winter."

The event has transformed the city, from the giant pink snail art installations that populated the beach when I visited, to more long-standing developments such as the regeneration of formerly depressed districts like Wynwood. Dozens of galleries – for example, the celebrated collections of Margulies, De La Cruz and Rubell – as well as numerous artists' studios

now occupy the low-rises, and graffiti is actually commissioned from über-artists like Shepard Fairey (the man behind the Obama 'Hope' image), and permanently displayed at the Wynwood Walls, a project of the super entrepreneur Tony Goldman.

New restaurants in the district, such as Wynwood Kitchen & Bar, conceived by Goldman's daughter Jessica, flaunt their edgy credentials and are stuffed to the rafters with cutting-edge art, while a five-minute drive north brings you into the freshly minted 'Designer District,' where thriving independents such as Tushka Art Lampshade Studio, Unlimited Nude and Decorators Plumbing share block space with internationals Kartell, Christian Louboutin and The King is Dead. Unsurprisingly, the nearby college is Miami's Design and Architecture Senior High.

But the greatest symbol of cultural confidence is to be found on Miami Beach. In January 2010, the New World Center officially opened for business. Designed by Pritzker Prize-winning architect Frank Gehry, this extraordinary building is the home of America's Orchestral Academy, the New World Symphony (NWS).

Gehry's swooping architectural style is in place here, but unlike his iconic Bilbao Guggenheim, it shows through in the structure's interior devices—the huge glass walls of the exterior and the giant white spaces designed to tempt audiences by revealing the musicians through sky-high windows or by projecting their performances on exterior walls.

"The building and the new park in front really creates a landmark for Miami," says Craig Hall of the NWS. "We are lucky it actually happened at all, but Gehry used to babysit Michael Tilson Thomas, our founder, and they grew up together to become close friends."

In addition to concerts, teaching musicians and exchanging techniques online live around the world, the centre will also work actively to introduce classical music to the community through free shows, events with DJs and through schools.

It's ambitious, exciting and light-years away from the days when Miami Beach was a place where the district's famous art deco buildings were either hastily adapted as 'god's waiting rooms' for America's elderly or infested by small-time wannabe Tony Montanas.

Now, thanks to the tireless work of the Miami Design Preservation League, these wonderful buildings gleam with fresh confidence and retro cool, and it still feels like you're on a film set as you walk around. And of course you are. Beyond the slip-on shoes and pastel shirts of *Miami Vice* there are the backdrops to *Goldfinger*, *The Birdcage* and too many 90s fashion shoots to count.

"Photographers and filmmakers have always loved the light around South Beach. The beach and hotels were always perfect settings for drama"



**New World Center**  
Frank Gehry's modern structure is home to America's Orchestral Academy, the New World Symphony

Turn right out of the mansion and it's worth following Ocean Drive to the yoga-friendly park of South Pointe, where seven-storey monster cruise ships roll in from the Atlantic and the seafood at the seaview terrace of Smith & Wollensky comes in giant portions. "Photographers and filmmakers have always loved the light around South Beach," explains the Preservation League's Kent Hamrick. "The beach and hotels were always perfect settings for drama."

They still are. Take The Betsy, for example. This glorious colonial-plantation-house-style boutique hotel offers probably the best Ocean Drive people-watching potential in town (the BLT restaurant), chic seaside-feel rooms (with giant jars of jelly beans, art books and TVs in bathroom mirrors), a rooftop bar (with a spa) and, wonderfully, an extensive show of iconic rock'n'roll photography (collections change regularly).