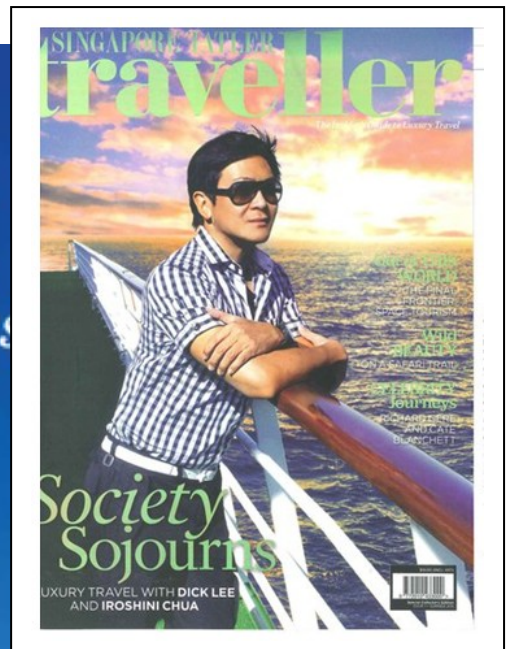
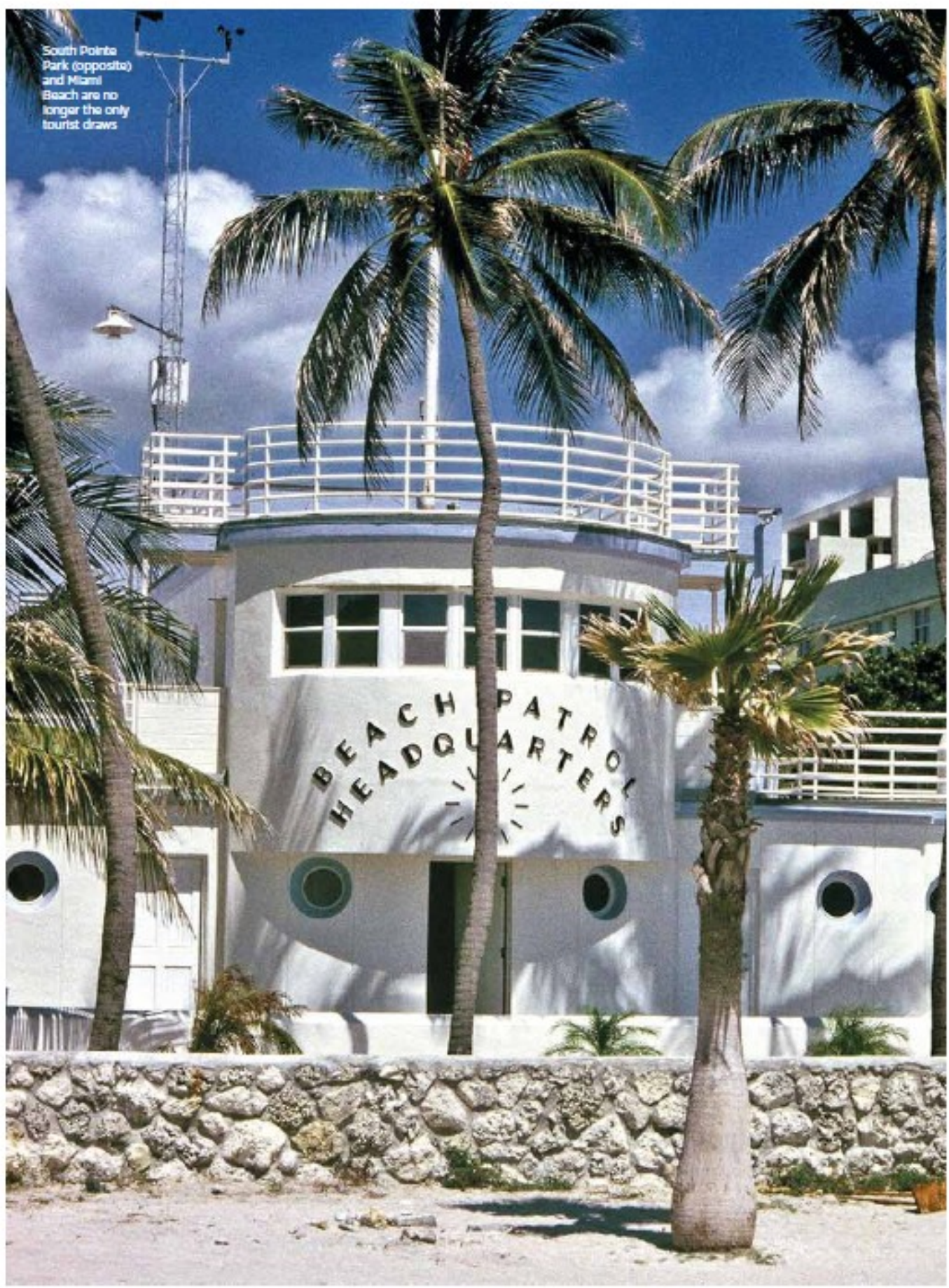


Once upon a time Miami was a place where neon crawled off to die. Now energised by the success of Art Basel, the city is rapidly becoming a capital of cultural cool, says Andy Round



MIAMI reloaded

South Pointe Park (opposite) and Miami Beach are no longer the only tourist draws

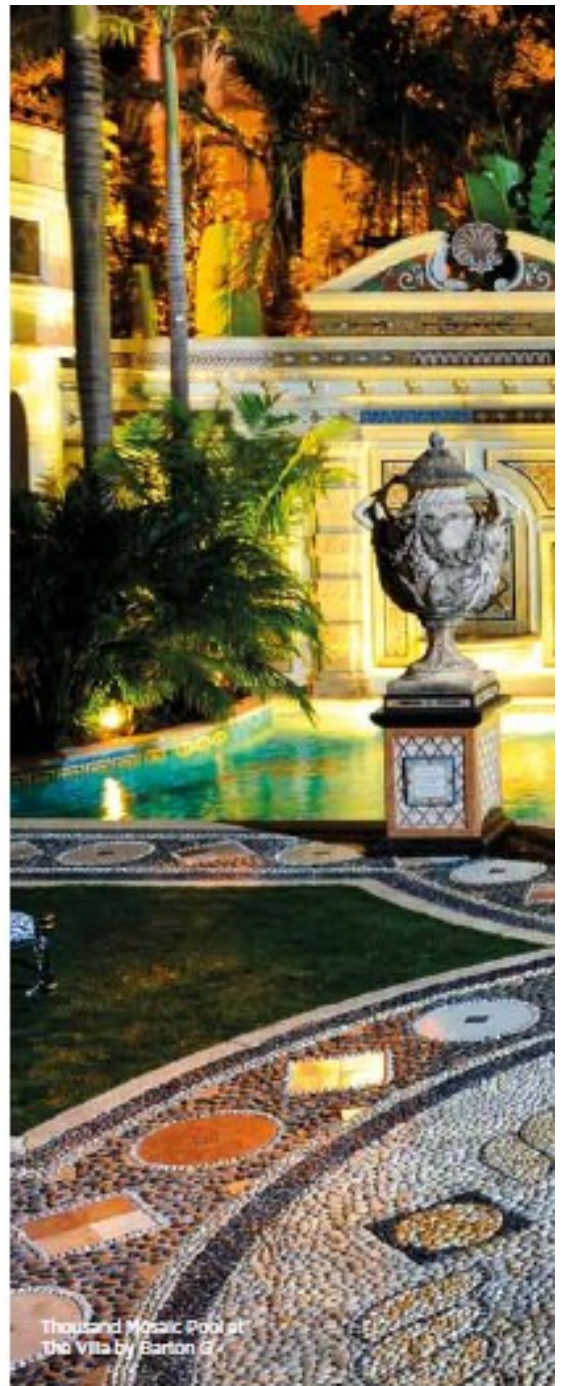


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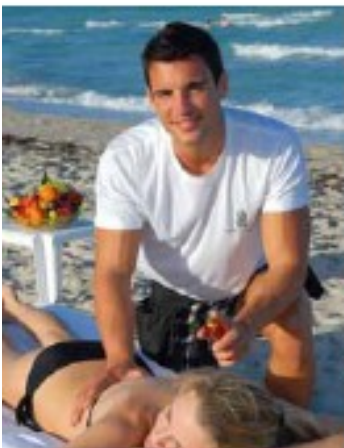
A GRIDLOCK OF STRETCH LIMOS, SPORTS CARS AND STACKED SUVs snake up to the Fontainebleau Hotel like an automotive beauty pageant. Clicking across the fluorescent-blue floor lobby are long-legged girls in short dresses and high heels followed by hair-slicked guys with rolled sleeves and high hopes. Surveying the crowd are gorilla-sized hosts in sharp suits and pneumatic hostesses barely wearing glittery dresses.

It's Saturday night in Miami and 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 these hosts waving their iPads at the well-dressed herd and unclipping the velvet rope to those that they like the look of. Inside this split-level, bass-shaking super-club with its VIP glass cubicles, nose-bleedingly expensive drinks, velvet-roped sofas and lines of champagne are staff that look like supermodels slumming it between shoots serving customers. Depending on your attitude, this is the most depressing two-dimensional MTV experience of your life or the most exciting Saturday night to have ever wandered 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. It's what I expected, what I didn't expect was the way the city has reinvented itself as a capital of cultural cool.



Thousand Mosaic Pool at The Villa by Barton G





WHERE IT'S ALL HAPPENING

How about this for a role call of honour: Art Basel Miami Beach is one of the most important contemporary events in the world; the coolest hotels on earth march down South Beach; uber-chic fashion boutiques are materialising all over the city; Bilbao Guggenheim's architect Frank Gehry has designed a new concert hall, and some of the world's most exciting galleries are springing up faster than you can say, "Isn't that Banksy?"

Even Versace has been reinvented. The former Ocean Drive home of the murdered couturier has just been transformed into an

The New Miami

Beach culture (left) meets sizzling nightlife in a unique way. Fontainebleau Hotel's Liv (right) is just one of the clubs heating up the party scene



exclusive The Villa by Barton G, a 10-suite boutique hotel by events impresario Barton G Weiss with rooms costing up to US\$2,100 a night. Sam Garcia, a friend of a friend of the club lounge guy at The Ritz-Carlton, gives me a private tour (it's closed to the public). "And the tiles of the pool are plated with 24-carat gold," Garcia says with a smile as immaculate as his suit. "The work had to be redone three times before Mr Versace was happy."

I nod as a frock-tailed butler brings me a pot of Earl Grey. His accent, cut-glass British. "Perhaps some scones with fresh cream, sir?" Of course, thank you Jeeves.

Garcia's grin widens as he then divulges how the walkway to the beach would be carpeted with Versace towels to prevent pampered feet being burned on hot sand; where Elton, Linda and Naomi used to stay; how on Madonna's 31st birthday the material girl's cake was so huge they had to use a crane to haul it over the villa's wall; and that the beds are so gargantuan (10 feet by 12 feet) that it takes three people to turn down the sheets.

It's quite an insight, but a short stroll from the tourists photographing themselves outside the villa's gates, is Miami's newest altar to cultural cool: the New World Symphony Center. Overlooking a newly reclaimed public park, it's designed by Pritzker Prize-winning architect



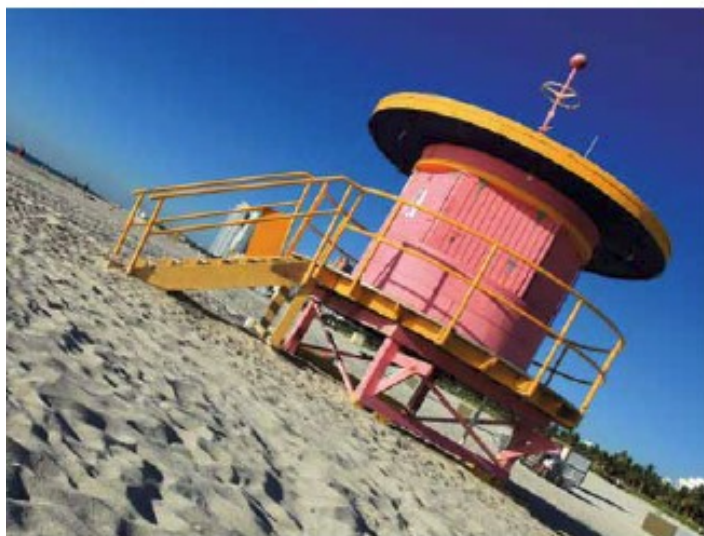
Culture Culture

The spectacular New World Symphony Center (above) is designed by Frank Gehry. A wide sandy beach (left) takes you away from the frenzy of downtown Miami

Frank Gehry. This extraordinary building is the home of America's orchestral academy, the New World Symphony. Gehry's swooping architectural swirls are all in place here. But unlike his iconic Bilbao Guggenheim, they are interior devices – the huge glass walls of the exterior and the giant white spaces are designed to tempt audiences in by revealing 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 our founder Michael Tilson Thomas 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.



ARTS INVASION

It's ambitious, exciting and light years away from the days when Miami Beach had become a place where the district's famous Art Deco buildings were either hastily adapted into "god's waiting rooms" for America's elderly or infested by small-time wannabe Tony Montanas living a Scarface organised-crime nightmare supplied by Pablo Escobar.

Now much of the city's new energy is down to the success of Art Basel Miami Beach. Just nine years old, it has become one of the most dynamic contemporary arts events in the world. "In 2010 ABMB attracted a record 46,000 visitors," says Basel's Maïke Cruse. "It's getting bigger and bigger every year." This December, 250 galleries are expected to exhibit works by at least 2,000 artists.

"It's a huge social scene and during the event nobody sleeps," says Suzie Sponder of the



The Wynwood Walls



The Betsy hotel

Posh Nosh

Chic eats are plentiful in Miami, such as the newly-opened db Bistro Moderne (right), helmed by culinary superstar Daniel Boulud



EATS

1 | SOYKA

In the converted 55th Street Station is this popular favourite that has been serving up some of the best comfort food in Florida for 12 years. The seared salmon is a major crowd-pleaser (www.soykarestaurant.com).

2 | SUSTAIN

This new kid on the culinary block offers eco-conscious cuisine, décor and seasonal produce (www.sustainmiami.com).

3 | SUSHI SAMBA

In the heart of fashionable Lincoln Road is Sushi Samba, which offers a fusion of South American and Japanese cuisines and excellent people-watching potential.

4 | DB BISTRO MODERNE

More upscale is db Bistro Moderne at the newly opened Marquis Miami hotel. It's chic and cheerful, wild about seafood and under the inspirational guidance of NYC super chef Daniel Boulud (www.marriott.com).

5 | DILIDO BEACH CLUB

For great Mediterranean food and even better beach-boardwalk watching, the Dilido Beach Club at The Ritz-Carlton, South Beach is perfect (www.ritzcarlton.com).

Miami's Beauty
It boasts the highest concentration of Art Deco buildings in the world



Vizcaya Museum and Gardens

Greater Miami Convention and Visitors Bureau. "And who wouldn't want to leave Europe in winter to party in warm Miami?"

The event transforms 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 – such as the celebrated collections of Margulies, De La Cruz or Rubell – as well as numerous artists' studios now occupy the low-rises and graffiti is commissioned from artists such as Shepard Fairey (the man behind the Obama "Hope" image), and permanently displayed at the Wynwood Walls, a project of super-entrepreneur Tony Goldman. "I think this must be the only place in the world where you can put graffiti on the walls and the prices of property actually goes up," says Johnny Wong, a curator at the nearby Peter Tunney Gallery, with a laugh.

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 thriving "Designer District" where fashionable independents, such as Tushka Art Lampshade Studio, Unlimited Nude, and Decorators Plumbing share block space with internationals such as Kartell, Christian

Louboutin and The King is Dead. Unsurprisingly, the nearby college is Miami's Design and Architecture Senior High.

Ah yes, architecture. With the highest concentration of Art Deco buildings in the world, Miami is a photogenic delight and it still feels like you're in a film set. And of course you are. Beyond the slip-ons and pastel shirts of the series Miami Vice here are the backdrops to Goldfinger, The Birdcage and just about any fashion shoot from the 1990s. "Photographers and film-makers 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 hotel, for example. This glorious colonial-plantation-house-looking boutique hotel offers probably the best Ocean Drive people-watching potential in town (at the BLT Steak 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, during my visit an extensive show of iconic rock 'n' roll photography (collections change regularly).

The Art Deco glory of The Ritz-Carlton, just an ice-cube's throw away from The Betsy, offers a tanning butler (yes really and he has a smile the width of Miami Beach), a multi-million-dollar art collection (mainly Miros) and a boardwalk restaurant that is a front-row seat to the passing



Fontainebleau Hotel



High Style
Stylishness permeates throughout this bustling city, right down to the elaborate tableware at The Villa by Barton G (above)

beach theatre of rollerbladers, bikini girls, board-carrying lifeguards and assorted Segway riders, cyclists, skateboarders and joggers.

On my last night in Miami I follow the neon to the Delano Hotel where the lobby has been designed by Philippe Starck and the chairs are by Marc Newson, Man Ray and even Salvador Dalí. It's less frenetic than Liv and there are fewer famous basketball players, but popular activities still include wearing sunglasses at night, pretending to be a supermodel (or maybe not, was that really Eva Mendes?) and trying to catch the eye of the immaculately dressed bar staff. Outside running the length of the huge pool are softly illuminated cabanas, dramatically lit palms and a moonlit night that can only be improved by the clink of ice in a drink. I ask for the cocktail menu.



SHOPPING

1 | BAL HARBOUR SHOPS

Glitzy, ritzy and determinedly upmarket, Bal Harbour Shops faces the Atlantic Ocean and backs onto Biscayne Bay. Forty five years ago, it was the first venue outside of New York for brands such as Gucci, Louis Vuitton and Bulgari. All those brands are still there, in addition to Saks Fifth Avenue, Marc Jacobs, Neiman Marcus, Versace and Fendi.

2 | THE VILLAGE OF MERRICK PARK

This shopping-dining-entertainment centre boasts palm trees, manicured lawns and enough retail therapy to satisfy the most demanding fashionista. Stores include La Perla, Julcy Couture, Carolina Herrera and Gucci.

3 | COLLINS AVENUE SHOPPING DISTRICT

Armani, Polo Sport, Tommy Hilffiger, Guess, Sephora, Nicole Miller, Intermix and Versace dominate this district just one block from Miami Beach.

4 | DESIGN DISTRICT

Just a 10-minute drive from offices of Miami Downtown is the newest kid on the retail block, the pedestrian-friendly Design District. There are designer fashion favourites such as Louboutin but also contemporary art galleries (such as Fusion, United Nude), interior design outfits (like Fendi Casa and Kartell), and wonderful places to eat (Sra Martinez or Michael's Genuine Food & Drink).