



MUCH ADO about miami

BY SHANEY HUDSON

Miami shifts gears yet again – this time building a reputation as one of America’s hottest destinations for the international art world. From eye-opening architecture to bespoke bars, galleries and glamorous hotels, this Florida city surprises at every turn.

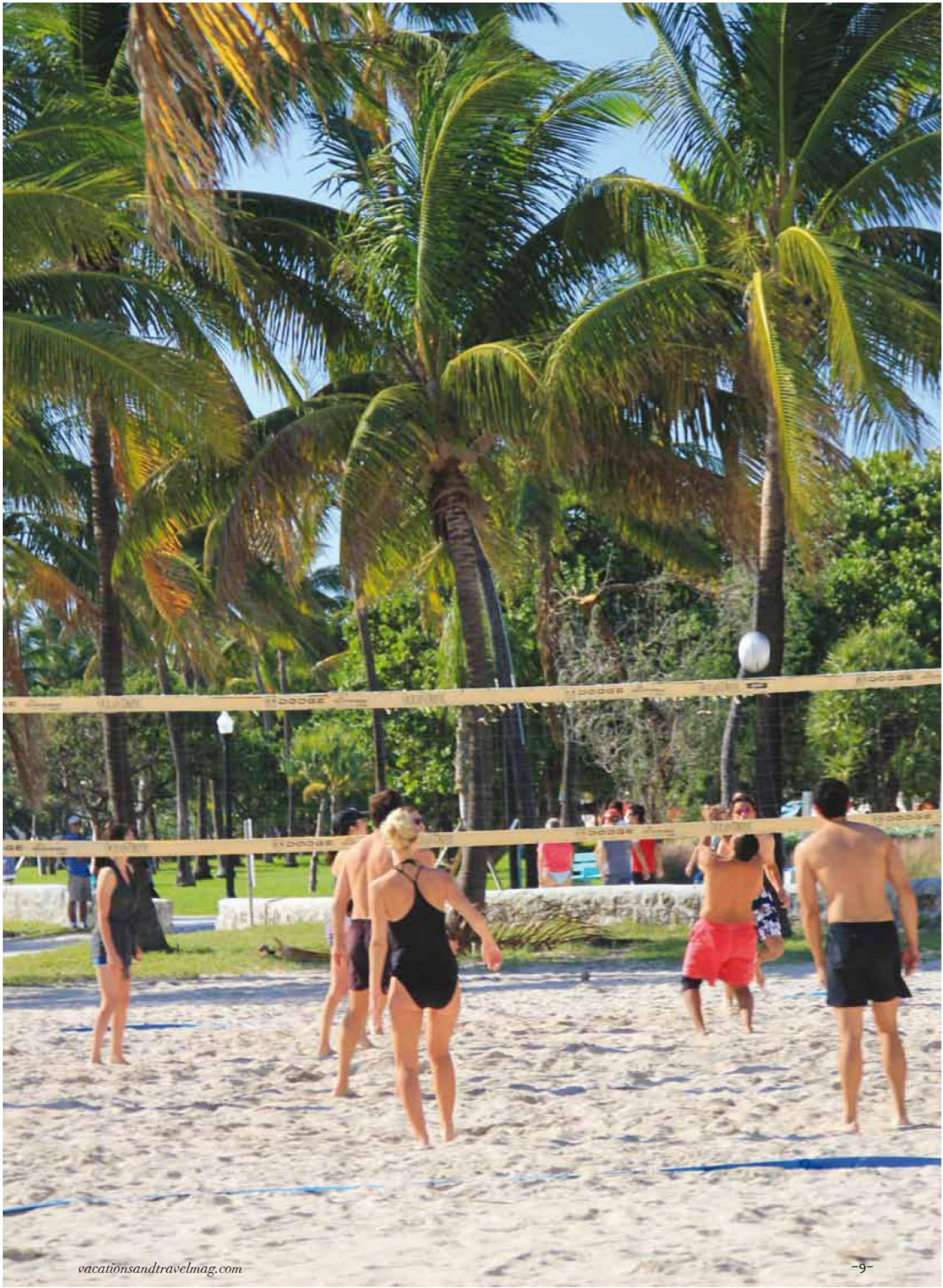
Every time I come to this city, I kiss the ground,” a friendly stranger walking along the boardwalk tells me in passing. “This is a place that reinvents itself over and over.” I have to agree.

From its humble beginnings as a place of sugarcane, maize and tropical fruit plantations – banana, coconut and avocado – to its role as a base for training soldiers and defending against German U-boats during World War II, Miami is a city that knows how to shed an old skin and grow a new one. Today, it offers a glimpse of grunge through its blissful seaside location and long days of sunshine – and has one of America’s most interesting design, art and architecture scenes thanks, in part, to its phenomenal concentration of Art-Deco buildings.

I can’t help but smile as I arrive at the headquarters of the Miami Design Preservation League, whose name seems more suited to comic-book superheroes than to a group of

local volunteers committed to preserving their city’s architectural heritage. Established in 1976, the MDPL has identified more than 1,000 buildings of architectural and historical significance, had South Beach listed on the National Register of Historic Places, and fought to protect the area’s buildings from demolition. The league also runs popular daily tours that visit each volunteer’s favourite buildings and offer insights into Miami’s growth during the Roaring Twenties and Great Depression.

I’m on a tour with John Bachay, who gives us a brief overview of Miami’s three distinct architectural styles before we set out. There’s Mid-Century Modern (or MiMo), popular in the 1950s, characterised by establishments such as the Rat Pack-favoured Fontainebleau Hotel with its “staircase to nowhere” (it leads, in fact, to a small coat-check room above the lobby). There’s Mediterranean Revival, based on the American ideal of a Mediterranean home: arched windows and columns, clay





barrel roof tiles, wrought-iron features and rough stucco walls, best exemplified by the former Versace Mansion on Ocean Drive. And then there's the Art Deco I've come to see, a style that encompasses everything from art to architecture to homewares and incorporates eye-catching curved edges and corners, stepped rooflines, glass blocks and porthole windows.

Bachay takes us straight to Ocean Drive, arguably home to Miami's best example of the architectural style: The Carlyle. It looks familiar – small wonder, given that the hotel has starred in numerous TV shows and movies including Brian de Palma's *Scarface* and Mike Nichols' 1996 flick *The Birdcage*. While The Carlyle, in common with many Art-Deco buildings, has pastel highlights today, it was originally painted all white, as a cool barrier against the harsh tropical sun.

While a lot of fuss is made about the exterior of Miami's buildings, it's worth peeking inside them as well. Bachay takes us into the Essex House Hotel and Suites, home to one of the best-preserved Art-Deco murals in South Beach – a depiction

of the Everglades – framed by a marble fireplace. He also points out the historic black-and-white prints of the hotel that adorn the walls, a gift from the U.S. military to South Beach accommodations that hosted soldiers during WWII.

Like any good resort area, Miami has always been a place for pursuing pleasure, including the consumption of liquor and gambling. In the U.S.'s prohibition era (1920-1933), during which bans on making and imbibing alcohol were imposed nationwide, Miami's hotels played a big part in drinking and gambling rackets. While the three red arrows pointing past reception on the polished concrete floor at the Essex House might be just a design flourish, Bachay and others speculate that they once discreetly pointed the way to the hotel's hidden gambling den.

A few blocks over from the Essex is the Lincoln Road mall, where most visitors head to shop, dine and people-watch. Lately, the mall has become a destination for architectural aficionados keen to see South Beach's latest landmark – a car park.

“The red arrows pointing past reception on the floor at the Essex House might be just a design flourish, but many speculate they once pointed the way to the hotel’s hidden gambling den.”



ECHO OF DECO

This page, clockwise from above: The Betsy hotel’s intimate B Bar; gracious Art-Deco stylings at the Leslie Hotel; a Grand Suite at The Betsy; one of the best ways to explore South Beach is by bike.

Opposite page: Another sunny day in Miami.

Opening spread: Volleyball on the sand at South Beach.



“Cruise ships steam into port like bloated skyscrapers and, even though it’s winter, the water envelops me like a liquid blanket, warm and reassuring.”



Of course, 1111 Lincoln Rd. isn't just a car park – the modern, multi-purpose building by Herzog & de Meuron (the brains behind Beijing National Stadium, aka the “Bird’s Nest,” designed for 2008’s summer Olympic Games) features an angular concrete-and-glass design; it’s the antithesis of the Deco stylings of the Essex House hotel and The Carlyle, and has locals divided on its worth.

I glimpse the building from the back of a Vespa as I head over the century-old causeway that connects Miami Beach to the mainland. I’m on my way to explore the fashionable Wynwood Art District with Roam Rides, a South Beach-based scooter company that runs art tours around the neighbourhood.

Also known as Little San Juan for the large number of Puerto Ricans who migrated here in the 1950s, the old fabric warehouse area has had dozens of its decaying concrete shells and empty lots revitalised by street artists. In recent years, Wynwood’s walls have been transformed from grey slabs into wonderful murals by local and international graffiti crews. What started as an underground movement has become an urban art phenomenon, with the precinct’s colourful walls paving the

way for a host of new art galleries, bars, cafés and designer clothing outlets, as well as high-profile international art shows such as Art Basel and Pulse. We ogle walls painted by big-name artists such as Banksy but to me, the black-and-white works of Miami artist Jona Cerwinske and the primary colours of Argentine artist (Adrian) Sonni’s mural are the standouts.

With the sun on its way down, South Beach is the place to be. The trio of pools at The Setai is a popular spot for evening cocktails – and the hotel’s an attraction in its own right. Occupying a 1930s building – once the famed Dempsey Vanderbilt Hotel – the luxe property unites Asian and Art-Deco styles across two towers.

Miami’s nightlife is legendary. While most hedonists head to big-name “superclubs” – Bed, Mansion, Privé and the like – it’s the boutique nightspots, such as the B Bar at The Betsy, that attract the city’s most exclusive crowd.

A small underground cocktail bar with a mirrored ceiling that ripples when you touch it, B Bar is favoured by the crème of the celebrity crop for its privacy – it’s invitation-only – and its vintage glamour.

The Betsy is the exception to Miami’s architectural rule: the

NEW HORIZONS

Ocean views from the roof deck at The Betsy.

Previous spread: Miami's Art-Deco buildings backdrop the beach.



last remaining example of Florida Georgian architecture, it has a four-column portico and signature shuttered windows, making for a dramatic entrance. Opened as the Betsy Ross Hotel in 1942, its location on the beachfront made it a favourite with military personnel. Starting in 2006, the hotel's owners spent nearly three years turning it into one of Miami's most intriguing boutique properties. My suite is warm and inviting, with black-and-white prints by photographer Richard Bluestein on the walls and a small library of thoughtfully selected books.

Looking out my window, I gaze over palm trees to the Atlantic; I leave the shutters open when I go to bed so I can be woken by the first rays of sun spreading over the water next morning. While the Betsy's wait staff dresses tables for an alfresco breakfast, I steal outside for a swim before the hotel beach-boys start setting up deck chairs along the white-sand shore.

Cruise ships steam into port like bloated skyscrapers and, even though it's winter, the water envelops me like a liquid blanket, warm and reassuring. I turn back to the shore and watch as the sun begins to warm the Art-Deco buildings that peer over the palm trees towards the beach. I wonder how the city will reinvent itself today. •

Photography by Shaney Hudson and courtesy of The Betsy.

travel facts

GETTING THERE

V Australia, United, Qantas and Delta Air Lines fly direct from Sydney to Los Angeles, with Delta and United offering ongoing connections to Miami.

- Delta Air Lines. delta.com
- Qantas. 131-313; qantas.com
- United Airlines. 131-777; unitedairlines.com.au
- V Australia. 138-287; vaustralia.com.au

WHEN TO GO

November to March (the U.S. winter) is the best time to visit Miami. Hurricane season runs from June to November.

WHERE TO STAY

The Betsy is one of South Beach's most exclusive small hotels. Located on Ocean Drive, it's popular for its three bars, rooftop deck, spa and secluded courtyard pool. 1-305/531-6100; thebetsyhotel.com

Also on Ocean Drive, The Setai takes its design inspiration from Miami's Art-Deco history, then ups it a notch with luxurious amenities and Asian flourishes. 1-305/520-6000; setai.com

WHAT TO DO

The Miami Design Preservation League runs heritage walking tours daily. 1-305/672-2014 or 1-305/531-3484; mdpl.org

Roam Rides runs Wynwood Art District tours by Vespa. roamrides.com

FURTHER INFORMATION

For tips on taking in Miami's architectural and art sights, visit miamiandbeaches.com