

Sohoⁱⁿ



The Sun

Forget St. Barts—Miami Beach's Deco District Is the New Hot Scene

tHE DELI THAT USED TO SELL TAKE-OUT MATZO-BALL soup is gone now. Near where it was is Wings of Steel, a biker shop that sells Harley-Davidson memorabilia. In the very spot where the Famous Restaurant once dished up its legendary kreplach, the Strand, a chic restaurant founded by Gary Farmer, former manager at Indochine, features linguine with salmon caviar. A little farther up Washington Avenue, somewhere between the King David kosher deli and the Cuban greengrocery, there's Flashbacks, a kitsch nostalgia emporium where *New Yorker* editor Robert Gottlieb has been known to acquire plastic handbags. Nearby, there's La Troya (defined as "bitch" by the

By Marilyn Bethany



Soho in the Sun, *New York Magazine*, January 13, 1992, (Miami Beach Helen Mar Condominium and The Strand's Facade), p. 27.

By Marilyn Bethany
Photos: Andrew Garn

NEW YORK

BEACON



PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANDREW GARN

Young models and vintage hotels are all part of the photogenic alchemy transforming a former slum into an international mecca for the beautiful and the tanned.



SOUTH BEACH CIRCA 1940 WAS POPULAR WITH MIDDLE CLASS EASTERNERS IN SEARCH OF WINTER SUN.

store's owners), the sort of feather-and-sequin shop transvestites frequent in their tireless quest for fashion and fit. And taped to the window of the Giveaway—a store that lends new dimension to the word *variety*—there is a sign that reads SHOP-LIFTERS, BEWARE OF THE CROOK THAT RUNS THIS STORE.

Parallel to Washington, two blocks east, is Ocean Drive, a romantic avenue of small, sparkling Necco Wafer-colored hotels and cafés facing a palm-studded park and the beach beyond. While Washington Avenue is still in transition, Ocean Drive has arrived. In fact, it's precisely the sort of eye candy that makes great backgrounds for fashion photographs, and, indeed, by 7:30 A.M., there's a photographer on every block, barking instructions in German, Italian, French, Swedish, or English at models performing their ritual dance. Stylists, unmistakable in fanny packs, stand ready to smooth and pat, while assistants hold aloft Mylar reflectors that bounce buttery morning light onto the models' faces. These girls, many of whom specialize in catalogue work, may not have what it takes to become the next Linda Evangelista, but they're plenty pretty enough. Later, when they stroll in pairs past the News Cafe, all conversation will stop momentarily out of respect for youth and long legs.

This is South Beach, a.k.a. the Art Deco District. A mere one-square-mile patch on the map of 7.1-mile-long Miami Beach, the Deco District is not the part of town that would have been featured in the travel posters of the sixties. That was up the beach, where hotels like the Fontainebleau and the Eden Roc attained cultural-icon status by laying on the glitzy modern architecture and all-around excess with a trowel. "When air-conditioning was first introduced, they'd turn it up so high you could smell the Freon," recalls Allan Albert, a SoHo theatrical and televi-

sion producer who visited the hotels as a child. "Naturally, the women had to wear their mink stoles to dinner; the management had re-created the weather they'd just left up North."

In contrast, back then, South Beach was thought to be hopelessly outmoded, which in Florida usually meant that, in due course, it would be torn down. But then the Caribbean eclipsed Miami Beach as the in place to vacation, and, in the confusion, South Beach was ignored. "Fifteen years ago, I went down to Miami Beach to do a documentary for CBS," says Joe Lovett, a television producer. "The beach along Ocean Drive had totally eroded—right back to the seawall—and there were prostitutes and drug-dealers all over the place."



TODAY, LOVETT HAS JOINED THE southward march of New Yorkers who own apartments on Ocean Drive. The Deco District is in a renaissance. Up and down the beach, hotels are being bought and renovated. Movers from the worlds of art (Robert Miller, Ashton Hawkins, Roy Lichtenstein) and show business (Hal Prince, Tommy Tune, Mickey Rourke, Spike Lee) are joining the stampede of Europeans and South Americans who are pouring into Miami Beach to invest or just to play.

JFK Jr. drops in; but it is the fashion crowd that forms the critical mass: In one night over the recent holidays, Gianni Versace, Michael Kors, Wolfgang Joop, Kal Ruttenstein, and Cathy Hardwick all turned up at the same restaurant, Joe's Stone Crab, just as they all might turn up on a given night at SoHo's Jour et Nuit. In fact, South Beach, 1,340 miles south of Houston Street, has become SoHo in the sun.

"It's two and a half hours from New York, and if you know where to look, you can still buy a one-bedroom apartment for un-

Real estate is still a bargain. "If you know where to look," says a SoHo-based artist, "you can buy an apartment for under \$30,000."



der \$30,000," says a SoHo-based artist, an early pioneer who recently bought a second place. Even if the trip ends up taking closer to four hours and the brokers can't think of a thing that's listed for less than \$70,000, downtown New Yorkers by the score are flocking to the Deco District, and many are buying apartments there as weekend retreats. Instead of the typical Friday-night drive to the Hamptons or Connecticut, they hop on the 5:55 P.M. flight that lands them in the Deco District in time for a late dinner at Barocco Beach—a branch of the popular TriBeCa art-scene restaurant they might have eaten at earlier in the week.

"Sixty percent of my income comes from French and Italians, and the rest is from Manhattan," says Francis Clougherty, a realtor who moved to Florida two and a half years ago in despair of ever selling another New York loft. Clougherty, who now works for Dacra Realty in Miami Beach, says his Manhattan buyers operate on the theory that the airfare (between \$248 and \$358 round-trip) is more than mitigated by the inexpensive housing and the feasibility of managing without a car. Another reason for Miami Beach's apparent recession-resistance: "Half the apartments I've sold have been for cash, and 90 percent of the building sales are either cash or seller-financed."

A decade after Joe Lovett's damning documentary about South Beach was broadcast, he returned to Ocean Drive with quite another mission in mind. "A friend of ours had come back from a trip down there and said, 'Get down there and buy something fast,'" he says. "Ocean Drive was the cheapest waterfront property outside of Beirut."

"It's still a bargain," says New York architect D. D. Allen, who bought two apartments in the district just a year ago—one for herself, one to rent out—and recently put in a bid on an eight-unit apartment building with two commercial units that she, her partner Michael Pierce, and several friends (including cookbook author Lee Bailey and the interior designer Robert Currie) intend to turn into a bar/gallery/bodega/hotel—or whatever. Allen, who first visited South Beach just eighteen months ago, is typical in many ways of the sort of New Yorker who "got it right away."

"It's a very late-night town," she says. "You can eat dinner at 1 A.M."

IN FACT, IT'S A CARNIVAL. TO ARRIVE ON A FRIDAY NIGHT AT A hotel on Ocean Drive is to enter a party already in full swing. Pastel neon lights the night, and rock and reggae spill out of the hotels, over the verandas, and onto the sidewalks, as do the café tables, around which are squeezed the beautiful and the tanned. Jostling by on the red-painted sidewalks is as attractive a parade as can be seen anywhere in the United States—or, arguably, the world. "It makes the Croisette in Cannes look shabby," said one visitor in amazement.

This isn't the first time South Beach has boomed while the rest of the country has gone bust. Devastated by a series of hurricanes in the twenties, South Florida was hit by the Depression three years earlier than the rest of the country. By the time the

OCEAN DRIVE (FOREGROUND), FROM 5TH TO 15TH STREETS, IS THE HEART OF THE DECO DISTRICT.





ROBERT MILLER



LAUREN HUTTON



ROY LICHTENSTEIN



ROY SCHEIDER



GLORIA ESTEFAN



ELLE MACPHERSON



TOMMY TUNE



MICKEY ROURKE



JAY MCINERNEY



BRUCE WEBER

stock market crashed, the openly anti-Semitic Wasps who had founded Miami Beach had sold their South Beach holdings for pennies on the dollar to the only buyers willing to take the risk—working-class Jews.

These survivors of the *shtetls*, the ghettos, and the sweatshops then proceeded to build modest hotels and garden apartments for people much like themselves—refugees whose sensibilities had been shaped by the tenements of the Lower East Side. These immigrants had no regard whatsoever for the Wasy obsession with old-world charm. To them the past had not been kind, and they wanted to forget it—fast. Nor were they fussy about amenities. What did it matter if rooms were cramped—did rooms come any other way? Indeed, what did it matter what went on indoors at all, when outside you were in wonderland? Aesthetic naïfs though they may have been, they got South Beach right. The Tropical Deco style may be superficial, a poor relation of French Art Deco, and perhaps most of the buildings really are little more than blocks of stucco festooned with a doodad here, a splash of color there. But the cumulative effect of about 870 stylistically compatible buildings crammed into one square mile—all those pastels, all that neon—is nothing short of magical.

By the fifties, when uptown Miami Beach was enjoying its postwar boom, the Deco District was fast going to seed. By then the same couples who, years before, might have sent their children on honeymoons to the sparkling beachfront hotels were holed up in those rooms themselves, with hot plates to heat

their soup. Had the neighborhood shown commercial potential, it no doubt would have been razed and rebuilt.

Then, in the mid-seventies, a small group of Miami design buffs, led by Barbara Baer Capitman and assisted long-distance by the formidable Denise Scott Brown, a principal in the firm of Venturi, Scott Brown and Associates, began pushing to get the Deco District placed on the National Registry of Historic Places—the first step in protecting its buildings from the wrecker's ball. Still, by 1985, there was little of promise happening in the neighborhood. That was the year Tony Goldman, a New York real-estate entrepreneur and owner of SoHo's Greene Street Cafe, happened across the MacArthur Causeway and onto Ocean Drive. "The minute I saw it, I realized that I was looking at the American Riviera," he says, "the first truly cosmopolitan resort in the United States."

Back then, that was quite a stretch. Though suitably registered, the Deco District still looked like a sprawling, half-abandoned nursing home—the sort that begs for investigation by some local Action News team. Many of the shabby hotels had been shuttered. At others, the only sign of life was a row of folding beach chairs on the veranda on which, amid crumbling stucco and peeling paint, the last of the ancient retirees took their daily sun. One measurable contribution made by the invasion of impoverished Cubans who'd come in 1980 was to lower the median age of Miami Beach's citizenry from nearly 66 to something closer to its current 45. Another was to send crime soaring out of control.



"The minute I saw it, I realized I was looking at the American Riviera," says Tony Goldman, an early developer of South Beach buildings.

Detail photographs by Andrew Garn.



PRINCE



JOHN F. KENNEDY JR.



SPIKE LEE



ROBERT GOTTLIEB



ANNE BANCROFT AND MEL BROOKS

Celebrity sightings are critical to sustaining the temperature of any hot spot. In South Beach, luminaries need not be residents; just by turning up from time to time, they lend credibility to the trend.

dESPITE THE SQUALOR, GOLDMAN WAS ABLE TO ENVISION the neighborhood healed and whole. "I was ready, I was in love, and I was buying," he recalls. In fact, he bought his first building then, and another one each month for the next year and a half. "Tony came back to New York all excited about this property he'd bought in Miami Beach," says Mark Soyka, a longtime associate of Goldman's. "He tried to persuade me to go have a look. I said, 'Sorry, I don't have a white belt and shoes to match.'"

But he did go and ultimately stayed, first to supervise the renovation of Goldman's properties, then to open a business of his own. "It was the wild, wild West," says the Israeli-born Soyka. "We were forever chasing crack addicts out of the buildings." Nonetheless, something about the place resonated for him. "The weather, the humidity, the ocean, the sand—I'd found Israel in America."

Soon, other investors joined in, many of them Europeans, for whom favorable rates of exchange make Florida a steal, and South Americans, who have their own reason to cleave to the big city across the causeway. Long the southernmost urban outpost in the United States, the city of Miami (a separate physical and political entity from Miami Beach) had, in recent years, become the unofficial capital of Latin America, as well.

Unlike a lot of other speculators, who've since treated South Beach like a Monopoly board, Goldman brought a civic booster's vision to the enterprise. He understood that to work as a promenade, the sidewalk in front of the hotels would have to be widened to fifteen feet. He also knew that Lumus Park would have to be replanted and its infrastructure shored up. Goldman and the people who rallied around him pushed to have the requisite bond issues passed and ordinances put in place to prevent

panhandlers and street vendors from polluting the thoroughfares.

Goldman also understood that any Riviera worth its salt air is about more than attractive buildings, palm trees, and sand. It takes people, particularly young and beautiful ones, walking along that widened promenade to make a glamorous resort.

"All over Miami, I'd noticed the kind of production vans they use on fashion shoots," says Goldman. "I learned that the Germans liked Miami for shooting catalogues. So I got in touch with a German catalogue company and made them an offer they couldn't refuse." Eventually, he would also persuade the Zoli and Ford model agencies to locate their Miami branches in two of his beachfront buildings. The result—a steady stream of beauties pouring in and out all day long—is perhaps his masterpiece.

"Fashion photographers always have to go someplace where it's warm in the winter," says Frances Grill, owner of Click Model Management. "In November and December, they're shooting spring."

For years, the destination of choice was the Caribbean, where the weather is virtually fail-safe. But there were drawbacks—not the least being getting models through Immigration and clothes through customs. "Miami is a city," says Grill. "You can have your film developed, have Xeroxes made, send faxes, rent equipment and props, and hire new girls if the ones you come down with aren't working out."

And if the weather fails, which it can in Miami? "Then you use Miami as your headquarters, but you get on an airplane and within an hour you're someplace else. From Miami, going back and forth to the islands or Mexico is no big deal."

SOME ARE DRAWN TO SOUTH BEACH BY THE DECO AND the drugs and the boys and the beach and the proximity to European and South American glamour and wealth. The European photographers command respect because they always get the most gorgeous girls. And the South American millionaires are interesting because they are so fantastically and exotically rich.

Others find it to be the Prozac of resorts. "All my life I've gotten depressed in the winter," Joe Lovett says. Not anymore. While their friends who weekend in Connecticut are battling the cold and making polite chitchat at dinner parties—about frozen pipes to the person on

Illustration by Ross MacDonald.



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and the boys and the proximity to European and
South American glamour and wealth.*



Whatever their similarities, every restaurant has an angle all its own. The Century, for example, whose chef, Phil Foglietta, used to be at Chelsea Foods, is notable for what it doesn't serve—next to no dairy, no red meat or pork. The Strand, which Gary Farmer and his partners recently sold to several Frenchmen, has, along with the usual \$17 grilled tuna, a meat-loaf-peas-and-mashed-potatoes entrée for \$7.25 that appears to be an allusion to the Famous Restaurant days. At A Mano, they concentrate on crossing traditional Cuban flavors with upscale presentation. And Barocco Beach... well, Barocco Beach serves more or less the same stuff—linguine with squid ink—to more or less the same crowd as the TriBeCa branch. But at the beach it's done in the lobby and on the veranda of the Park Central Hotel, which, for my money, makes it the hippest-looking restaurant in town.

In South Beach, hip-looking counts for a lot—more than comfort, more than polish, more, for the moment, than money. Hotels like the Park Central were never luxury palaces. Built for the middle class, they still carry middle-class price tags (\$125 a night is average for an oceanfront room), and the service is predictably basic—more Left Bank than Plaza Athénée.

Nonetheless, the likes of Lauren Hutton and Peter Arnell are regulars at the Park Central, and JFK Jr. and his pals also apparently have found its failings forgivable. It could be argued that with that kind of scenery, only the blind would have cause to quibble

over iffy water pressure and the like. Besides, if it were slick, a guest arriving at breakfast on Rollerblades might turn heads.

WHERE IS SOUTH BEACH HEADED? UP, certainly, though as it rises its mood will undoubtedly change. "A lot of people smell gold," says a longtime resident. Among them, apparently, is Ian Schrager, who is rumored to be negotiating to buy the Eden Roc hotel. He'd better hurry. In addition to Deco, a second aesthetic is creeping into South Beach. Call it Philippe Starck Modern or Raging Royaltonism. Chris Blackwell, CEO of Island Records, used it in the lobby of the Marlin, his recently completed hotel/condominium on Collins Avenue. And Yossi Friedman, the architect who did rehabs on the Helen Mar condominium and the Strand's façade, is "talking to the Europeans" about doing a hotel north of Ocean Drive that will be "on a par with Morgans or the Paramount."

"Progress will change things," Mark Soyka allows, "as long as it doesn't get too Palm Beachy and too groomed."

Too Palm Beachy hardly seems the most likely pitfall. "There's already a bridge-and-tunnel problem on weekends on Ocean Drive," Friedman says, "kids from Miami hanging out." Commerce based on the pleasure principle is always slippery, and it's hard to imagine a construct more fragile than cheap chic. Better come and get it while it's hot.

ON OCEAN DRIVE, ALL'S QUIET ONLY AT DAWN.

