

MIAMI

A return to the era of romance in the city of pastel dreams

For a moment, forget what you think you know about Miami Beach. Forget the high-fashion crime glam you see on *Vice*, forget the drug murders from *Scarface*, forget the memories you may have of ladies with purple hair and pink umbrellas teetering by on walkers. Instead, picture yourself on a porch of one of the newly refurbished art deco hotels gazing at the turquoise Atlantic with the wind kissing your face and the quiet clack of reedy palms soothing your ears. You might just see Fred and Ginger go waltzing by.

Romantic, you say? Very. But Miami Beach was built in the 1930s as one of the most romantic spots in the country, an antidote to lift rich vacationers from the gloom of the Depression. From the theatricality of its sun-bleached buildings to the streets named for local heroes—Jackie Gleason, Arthur Godfrey, Miami Sound Machine—it's hard to let the pressures of everyday life annoy you here on this shimmering island of sand and schmaltz, lost in its own time.

Had I painted such a woozy landscape five years ago, you would have said the sea air had rotted my brain. Back then, the average age topped 65, and the southern tip of the island, known as South Beach (SO BE to aspiring trendies), was among the poorest neighborhoods in Florida. Palm-lined Ocean Drive was a strip of rotting hotels that wafted a musty burp each time their rusted doors creaked open. Their once shiny terrazzo porches were shrouded with natty carpets and filled with pensioners sitting on aluminum chairs. Deserted shops, garbage-strewn lots, unemployment and chronic crime caused residents to moan that the paradise to which they had retired had turned into purgatory. "God's Waiting Room," they called it.

But now, after decades of decline, things have started to change. Some renowned art deco hotels like The Waldorf Towers, The Edison and The Carlyle (all of which now rent rooms for about \$140 a night) are once again crowded with smiling tourists sipping tall tropical drinks, and their lobbies buzz with Calvin Klein models and fashion photographers. Ten new restaurants have posted menus; dozens of shopkeepers have brought empty storefronts to life with galleries, graphics studios and small boutiques. In the last two years, investors have pumped over \$165 million into the area and every day truckloads of Cuban workers spill into town and splash pastel-trimmed buildings with designer colors of the '80s: taupe, teal and terracotta.

But while the surface is looking brighter, behind the



BY JOE DOLCE PHOTOGRAPHY BY HENNY GARFUNKEL

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The Strand
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Nautical narcissism: Hot-shot developer Gerry Sanchez had his big face mosaicked on the bottom of the pool at The Edison Hotel. Right, Memphis meets Miami in the Tropics Restaurant in The Edison Hotel, designed by Victor Farinas.

scenes there's a battle raging for the beach. On one side, a few historically conscious developers have formed an unlikely alliance with preservationists to return the art deco buildings to their former splendor; on the other, city fathers, whose eyes are fixed only on the bottom line, would rather raze paradise, pave it with parking lots and cram it with high-rises.

The sides were drawn in 1975 when a group of citizens led by Barbara Capitman, a 67-year-old ex-New York advertising copywriter, founded the Miami Beach Design Preservation League. Together with five others, she fought to landmark one square mile of art deco buildings in South Beach as a National Historic District. In 1979, her dreams came true and Capitman started making big plans. "We had a vision of a mixed community where the elderly could co-exist with artists, tourists and people from Latin America," she says. "We imagined ice cream stands, juice bars, dances under the stars and a return to romance."

But Capitman's vision started to sour a few years later when she and her two sons bought two dilapidated deco hotels, The Cardozo and The Carlyle. They raised enough cash to rebuild the hotels, but hit a snag when the banks, who had written off South Beach as a hopelessly depressed area, refused to grant loans to see them through their lean years. Just as their hotels were starting to catch fire, bankruptcy forced the Capitmans to board up their doors.

Development in the district reached a standstill until Gerry Sanchez, a Cuban-born, New York-based building restorer, hit town two years ago. Learning from Capitman's



The Strand Restaurant: where the elite meet to eat.

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mistakes, Sanchez set out to prove he could turn concrete into gold. He bought The Cleveland Hotel, gave it a quick face lift and flipped it for a cool half million-dollar-profit. Today, he owns seven prime properties, cruises town in a smoked-glass Rolls Royce and fancies himself the messiah of Miami Beach. He even had his face painted on the bottom of the pool of The Edison for posterity. "Christopher Columbus was a great developer, and so is Gerry Sanchez," he says, gently twisting history.

Pre-dating Disney, deco blended elements of ancient Egypt with the sleek lines of the machine age.

At this point, however, the line between the good guys and the bad starts to fuzz. As gentrifiers like Sanchez continue to fix and flip buildings, they are also raising rents and ruthlessly turning the long-time residents—the elderly—into urban refugees. When asked where the old people figure into his grand scheme, Sanchez glibly told me that there are plenty of vacant apartments on the beach. Then, with a wolf's grin, he rolled his eyes up to the blue skies: "Or maybe they'll go to a better place," he said.

Those who know Miami Beach know that speculation is nothing new on an island where the cash crop has always been cash, and where dreams have always been turned into money-making fantasies. They also know that respect for the past will have little bearing on the future, because in Miami Beach, history began only yesterday.

Back in 1913, a self-made millionaire, Carl Fischer, had the idea to build paradise in a mosquito-infested mangrove swamp a few miles off of mainland Miami. For 10 years, he dredged the swamp and built up the bay bottom, importing everything from spindly coconut palm trees to each last grain of sand. Soon 35-mile-long Miami Beach became a boom town, built exclusively as a playground for the rich. A sign recently uncovered in a restoration on Espanola Way expressed the town's ugly sentiment toward



Mall's well that ends well: Guillermo Gonzales, jewelry designer (left), and Juan Valdez, co-owner of the '50s furniture store, So Be It, located on Lincoln Road Mall. Gonzales, whose studio is across the street, says, "Lincoln Mall was supposed to revive the arts community that moved to Coconut Grove years ago. The rents went up there, so they're moving back to the Beach. Now the rents are going up here."