

Sunny Isles Beach

Miami's uptown North Beach is a year-round Florida Riviera

BY ROCHELLE LASH, SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE MAY 1, 2013



The New port Fishing Pier in Sunny Isles Beach will re-open in June after a total overhaul.

Photograph by: Mike Tribby / Sunny Isles Beach

Stylish snowbirds are heading north. The hot area in Miami is Sunny Isles Beach, an uptown enclave that is a 25-minute drive from South Beach's rave of babes, bars and boutique hotels. Sunny Isles is a narrow barrier island of broad sand beaches and marinas, with an almost unbroken strip of modern condos and hotels, suburbia gone vertical along a sparkling Atlantic oceanfront.

Called Florida's Riviera, the island community was all the rage with Frank Sinatra's Rat Pack in the 1950s, when the Thunderbird was the motel of choice and the Rascal House Deli fed big appetites.

Sunny Isles Beach tourism is having a second debut with a sprinkling of new luxury hotels, several gourmet options and easygoing fun for families. More than 600,000 Canadians vacation in South Florida annually and about 35 per cent stay in the Aventura/Sunny Isles Beach areas. The region also attracts a worldly crowd of Russian tycoons, European sun-seekers and South American jet-setters.

"We are truly a small, international city," said Norman Edelcup, Sunny Isles' mayor. "It's sophisticated, but still family-oriented. People come from many continents, all year round, not for a wild time, but for

the ocean, the beach, the sun and good cuisine.

Still, it's an evolving scene with many quirky Miami-style vignettes. On Sunny Isles Boulevard (163rd St.), the Kaballah centre flourishes between the tanning parlour and the sushi place. And the Rascal House, where the Jewish community once devoured pastrami-on-rye, has morphed into the Epicure Gourmet Market & Café, where I spotted two Botoxed Brazilian women lunching lightly on ice water and yogurt, resplendent in Christian Louboutin spike heels and Hermès handbags.

The globalism has created a mix of styles and prices. At the top end, the influx of newcomers has catapulted some prices sky-high. You might spot lavish 30-metre yachts in the Sunny Isles Marina, ready to cruise the Atlantic. And the condos of Mansions at Acqualina start at \$7.7 million U.S. for a three-bedroom and rocket up to \$55 million for a six-bedroom penthouse with eight bathrooms, billiards and fitness rooms and a private swimming pool.

On the modest side, Sinatra has left the building, and you can score a room for \$89 in summer at what is now called the Days Thunderbird Beach Resort Hotel. And Sunny Islers can have low-budget fun on the beach, at outdoor yoga in a park or dropping a line from the Newport Fishing Pier for Florida's plentiful red snapper, grouper and kingfish.

My bro', photographer Steve Lash, and his wife, Sandi, tapped into the Miami area well before the latest surge and we recently breezed through together. Almost all of the action is spread along Collins Ave., the iconic thoroughfare that links Miami Beach's communities. Near South Beach, we saw Tiger Woods's yacht, Privacy, and Madonna's mansion, and then we headed north to the tamer life of Sunny Isles Beach. Here's a peek at the best in show.

STAY: Solé on the Ocean Resort & Spa is a sleek boutique hotel with minimalist, contemporary Italian design and all the Florida trimmings: glass-fronted balconies, a tan-worthy swimming pool and beachfront, a gym and steam room, room service and valet parking. Popular with a lot of professional athletes, families and couples, Solé suites and studios also have the right stuff, like I-Home radios and Keurig coffee machines, and stand-up paddleboards on the beach. A bed-and-breakfast package in an oceanview room starts at \$175 in June.

Celebrity chef Ralph Pagano of TV's Hell's Kitchen presides over Solé's Alba Seaside Italian Restaurant, cooking up a cornucopia of Florida shellfish — stone crab, shrimp, oysters — plus seared tuna, lobster with lemon butter, lamb chops with mint yogurt and braised short ribs. Italian to the core, Pagano goes old school with meatballs and veal Milanese and newfangled with Parmesan-truffle fries and tiramisu with frangelico.

Alba loosens up on Thursdays with \$35 all-you-can-eat dinners and \$15 all-you-can-drink wine pairings. If you stay the weekend, you can segue right into Happy Hour at the pool deck on Fridays to Sundays with half-price cocktails and oysters at 75 cents a schlurp. Think ocean breezes, the glow of the sunset on the waves and a refreshing Ginny Rogers, mixed with craft gin, ginger and fresh lime juice from the Florida Keys.

Down the road, the four-star Marenas Beach Resort & Spa is an airy oceanfront hotel with both a metropolitan air and a child-friendly pool and beachfront. International guests with Spanish, French and Italian accents gather at the Caracol Restaurant for gaucho steak, Florida shrimp and key-lime pie.

Marenas can be great value, with low-season summer rates from \$179 and winter discounts of 15 to 40 per cent, depending on when you book. The summertime Beach Junkie package offers 30 per cent off on visits of three nights or more if you book by May 31, plus a \$50 dining credit and mojitos at the Caracolitos Beach Bar. Marenas's upscale studios and suites with kitchens make it easy to dine in, and the Solstice Spa completes the resort scene with treatments like the Vitamin C Body Wrap, a great antidote to the intense Florida sun.

For five-star living, you can't get more luxurious than the Acqualina Resort & Spa, a splendid Mediterranean-style hotel that has swept every "top" list in North America. This is the high life, with a fleet of Rolls-Royces and Ferraris in the driveway, a branch of the Zagat-popular eatery Il Mulino New York and the superlative Acqualina Spa by ESPA for beauty and body care like the enzyme facial that promises more youthful skin.

EAT: Timo Restaurant & Bar embodies Sunny Isles' "dolce vita." Chef Tim Andriola's modern Italian fare features braised short ribs, foie gras crostini and black truffle pizza. Andriola, an alumnus of the Culinary Institute of America and consultant to Le Cordon Bleu, elevates pasta into art with dishes like fazzoletti and suckling pig, sun-dried cherries and arugula and orecchiette with spicy Italian sausage and fennel.

At the health-oriented Miami Juice, the fruit and bee pollen smoothies, veggie burgers and organic salads are as Florida-fresh as you can get. And I've heard that the B-52, blending ginger, spinach and garlic, is a surefire cure for headaches and hangovers.

There are bargain bites along Sunny Isles Boulevard, too. Insiders reserve early for the all-you-can-eat orgies at the Newport Beachside Resort — Maine lobster on Wednesdays for \$38 and Florida stone crab on Fridays for \$55.

At Duffy's Sports Grill, the giant-screen televisions tune into the Miami Dolphins, the Marlins, the Heat and the Florida Panthers, depending on the season. Margueritas are served poolside, along with wings, kobe burgers and ribs. Entrées cost \$11.95 on Monday nights.

SUN & SAND: Heritage Park at 192nd St. and Collins Ave. is Sunny Isles Beach's newest green space, blessed with playgrounds, a leash-free dog run, movie nights and free concerts. Heritage will be the venue for the city's anniversary party, June 26, with rides, games, live music and a BBQ, as well as the Sunny Isles' sixth annual Jazz Festival on Nov. 16.

On the waterfront, you can rent gear for water-skiing, jet-skiing or deepsea fishing. More laid-back, Blue Moon Outdoor Center rents paddleboards and kayaks for the tranquil mangrove waterways of Oleta River State Park. And adding a bit of Riviera raciness adjacent to Sunny Isles, the Haulover

Nude Beach is a wildly popular clothing-optional beach.

SHOP: It's hard to focus on retail therapy in Sunny Isles with all the dazzling competition. Immediately south is Bal Harbour, the ritziest shopping centre in North America, and a few blocks north lies Aventura Mall, where Nordstrom's and Macy's anchor 300 boutiques ranging from Action Kids to Zingara Swimwear.

In Hallandale Beach, the Village at Gulfstream Park is a complex of fashion and lifestyle boutiques at the 74-year-old horse-racing and gambling track.

Still, we desperately need basics for the beach, and quickly. Wings in Sunny Isles stocks colourful T-shirts, swimsuits and body surfboards. If you check online at www.wingsbeachwear.com, the shop advertises cheap 'n' cheerful promotions on sunglasses, beach bags and flip-flops, sometimes for under \$5.

IF YOU GO

Sunny Isles Beach is 11 kilometres south of Fort Lauderdale-Hollywood International Airport and 33 kilometres north of Miami International Airport, with non-stop flights from Montreal via West Jet, Air Canada and American Airlines.

All addresses below are in Sunny Isles Beach, which extends for four kilometres from 157th St. & Collins to 193rd St.

Sunny Isles Beach Visitor Center: 305-792-1952, www.sunnyislesbeach.com or www.sibfl.net; 18070 Collins Ave., Mon.-Sat. 10 a.m.-4 p.m. Greater Miami info: 800-933-8448, www.miamiandbeaches.com.

Solé on the Ocean: 786-923-9300, www.SoleOnTheOcean.com; Alba Seaside Italian Restaurant: www.albamiami.com; 17315 Collins Ave., 249 rooms and suites; summer \$179-\$1,250 U.S.; winter \$319-\$1,500.

Marenas Beach Resort & Spa: 877-858-2305, 305 -503-6000, www.marenasresortmiami.com; 18683 Collins Ave.; summer rates from \$179; regular rates for 125 suites & 40 hotel rooms from \$279-\$759 per night. Packages available with buffet breakfast, valet parking, discount at Bloomingdale's-Aventura and spa services.

Acqualina Resort & Spa: 877-312-9742, 305-918-8000, www.acqualinaresort.com; 17875 Collins Ave.; 98 rooms and suites from \$675. Packages available with spa, AcquaMarine Children's Program, honeymoon perks, Mother's Day extras (until May 20), Art Basel Miami Beach (Dec. 5- 8) and cruise-line connections. The deluxe Five-Star Experience includes champagne and spa treatments, from \$875 per night for four nights, plus a fifth night free, valid until June 30.



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