



Plunge Beach Hotel is a creative new establishment, filled with bright open spaces, in the retro-chic area of Lauderdale-by-the-Sea in south Florida. PHOTOS: PLUNGE BEACH HOTEL

PLUNGE INTO A WORLD FILLED WITH FLORIDA SUN AND FUN



ROCHELLE LASH

Plunge Beach Hotel is calling all free spirits to its new digs in Lauderdale-by-the-Sea, Fla.

This adorable establishment is the result of the merger and modernization of three 1950s hotels, so it swings with retro decor, bright open spaces and a keen young staff.

The Florida sun and spirit radiate while guests bask in the heat on the Atlantic oceanfront and around two swimming pools. When the Backflip Beach Bar fired up for happy hour, I fully expected Frankie Avalon or Dion to break into song.

The design is a mix of modern trends — nothing fixed or formal. The lobby has industrial-inspired exposed ceiling pipes and concrete columns. The furniture is covered in bubble-gum pink or lime green, and surfboards and pop-art posters brighten the walls. Totally Instagrammable.

“It’s truly cool,” said general manager Tom Mulroy. “Plunge is bringing new energy to Lauderdale-by-the-Sea with a beach-party feel and a happening pool bar.”

Plunge’s brochure pitches surfing contests and craft beer. It’s popular for bachelor and bachelorette parties. On a tamer note, you can sit on the splendid beach and watch the Atlantic world float by — graceful pelicans, a

kite surfer flying high or an ocean liner in the distance.

I like Plunge because it’s a cute crossroads of ice-cream parlours, pizza joints and sunglass shops.

The scene: Lauderdale-by-the-Sea (LBTS) is a barrier island at the northern tip of Greater Fort Lauderdale, and has a vibe all its own. It’s more intimate and more moderately priced than the famous, fabulous Fort Lauderdale of five-star hotels, pricey yachts and glitzy shopping.

LBTS is a quaint collection of mid-century motels and beach lodges, a funky enclave of mom-and-pop enterprises along the Atlantic oceanfront. Water sports are paramount, including scuba on a reef famous for a shipwreck.

The community is relaxed and friendly. Folks mingle along the pier or at the Friday night block

party. And El-Mar Village, about one kilometre from Plunge, is a cute crossroads of ice-cream parlours, pizza joints and sunglass shops.

The digs: Plunge has 163 guest rooms and suites with varied views — the town, the beach or the pools.

The rooms are spacious, fresh and equipped with 50-inch TVs, surf-inspired art and raw wood furniture. Some have balconies or Juliet balconies. The decor is cute and simple, but the accommodations are comfort-plus, with deluxe pillow-top mattresses, cushy pillows, and bathrooms done in pristine white tiles.

The buildings are less than 30 metres apart. The Island Building includes the reception, valet parking, coffee shop and evening supper lounge. The Beach Building is adjacent to the main pool and the beach bar. The seaside Bungalow Building has its own pool and guest rooms with kitch-

ettes and sitting/dining areas. **Eat, drink:** You have choices — all casual, all lounge-y.

The Backflip Beach Bar is action central from 11 a.m., with happy hour daily and live music on Fridays and Sundays. The Florida sky and Atlantic Ocean are backdrops, so it’s breezy, sunny fun.

Backflip is the No. 1 spot in the ‘hood for Latin-inspired comfort bites, local brews and cocktails such as the El Diablo, made with tequila, lime and ginger beer. Taste treats include yucca fries and garlic-shrimp tacos, topped with fiery accents of chipotle, salsa and jalapeno.

The Octopus Gastropub takes it indoors. Octopus is a supper lounge with wine, beer and an unusual cocktail offering: its Alternative Alcohol lineup features drinks made with little or no alcohol that mimic the hard stuff. For example, the Garden Cocktail uses Premium Blend’s Klir Red from Florida, an orange-based fermented wine. Add raspberry purée and lemon juice, and you have an attractive vodka-esque tropical drink.

Eats at Octopus include pan-roasted fish, a double-patty burger, shrimp pasta, charcuterie and lamb poutine. And yes, there is octopus, with white beans and chorizo.

What to do: The Pelican Hopper is a local shuttle bus that cruises LBTS. You can also grab a bicycle at Plunge or set up tours by Segway, the Fort Lauderdale Water Taxi or the Jungle Queen Riverboat. Plunge can organize thrilling ocean adventures like catamaran sailing or deep-sea fishing.

If you’re an NHL fan, the Florida Panthers play in Sunrise, an easy 25-minute drive from Plunge. They’ll face off against the Ottawa Senators on Dec. 23 and the Canadiens on Dec 30.

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IF YOU GO

Lauderdale-by-the-Sea is 25 kilometres north of Fort Lauderdale-Hollywood International Airport.

Plunge Beach Hotel: 754-200-3346, plungebeachhotel.com; 4660 El Mar Drive, Lauderdale-by-the-Sea, Fla.

Rates fluctuate and are approximate. Rooms (with or without balcony or ocean view), Dec.-April, US\$161-\$399; one- and two-bedroom suites cost more. Holiday rates are higher. May-Nov. is lower. At certain periods, some prepaid rates can be 25 per cent lower, or less. Resort fee of \$30 covers pool/beach chairs/umbrellas/towels (first come, first served), valet parking, Wi-Fi, local calls, 24-hour fitness centre, cruiser bicycles/helmets, beach volleyball. Extra: Beach chaise longue, \$10. CAA gets 20 per cent discount, on availability.

Dining: Backflip Beach Bar: 11 a.m.-10 p.m., live music Fri. and Sun., 3-6 p.m.; happy hour daily 4-6 p.m. and 8-10 p.m. Octopus: nightly from 4 p.m. Bean & Barnacle: coffee, pastries, sandwiches, gelato, 6:30 a.m.-9 p.m.

Lauderdale-by-the-Sea Chamber of Commerce: 954-776-1000, lbts.com.

Greater Fort Lauderdale Tourism: 800-356-1662 or 800-22-SUN-NY/800-227-8669; sunny.org; Visit Florida: 888-735-2872, visitflorida.com.



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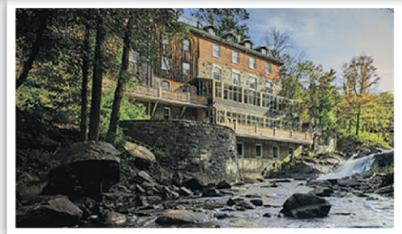
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