

Go beyond the beach in the new Miami

Such neighborhoods as Wynwood, downtown, the Design District, Midtown and Brickell prove there's more to Miami than SoBe

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A Shepard Fairey wall at Wynwood Walls Cary Darling

The Miami area is a shape-shifter of a region.

Through the 20th century, it morphed from paradise to punchline (“God’s waiting room”), immigrant gateway to celebrity playground.

Now, it’s in the process of changing again, though perhaps in a more subtle way. In the past decade, neighborhoods that commuters used to hurriedly drive through are becoming destinations that people drive to, further underscoring what locals know and many tourists overlook: There’s more to South Florida than South Beach.

Forbes magazine recently named arty Wynwood, a formerly semi-industrial area wedged between downtown Miami and the burgeoning Design District, as [one of the country's best hipster neighborhoods](#). It showcases what may be the world's largest display of open-air street art, murals and sanctioned graffiti, including work from such notables as Shepard Fairey and Kenny Scharf.

Meanwhile to the south, downtown Miami, once bereft of many arts venues worth talking about except for the beautiful '20s-era [Olympia Theater at the Gusman Center for the Performing Arts](#), is in the middle of an arts explosion. The Cesar Pelli-designed white wedding cake of a complex known as the [Adrienne Arsht Center for the Performing Arts](#), opened in 2006 and including an opera house and concert hall, anchors once-dowdy Biscayne Boulevard with a sense of architectural authority.

Nearby is the Pérez Art Museum Miami (PAMM to Miamians), a cutting-edge contemporary art museum opened in 2013 and designed by Herzog & de Meuron, the Swiss firm famous for Beijing's "bird's nest" stadium. *The New York Times* calls the PAMM building "spectacular ... a striking marriage of nature and culture."

PAMM is merely the opening salvo in the 29-acre [Museum Park](#), a bayside refuge that includes a large green space and which will soon be the home of the new, relocated [Frost Museum of Science](#), due to open this year.

North of Wynwood, the [Design District](#) has become a high-end shopping magnet with such storefronts as Christian Louboutin, Prada, Hermès and Ligne Roset joining many others. Nearby [Midtown Miami](#) features more decidedly middlebrow retailers but is the home of some worthwhile eateries.

There's Brickell Avenue, south of downtown, which also is in the midst of becoming a shopping and nightlife mecca.

There are even dance clubs/lounges now where it's less about what you're wearing and who you're with and more about the music.

Put it all together and this is a different Miami experience — especially if, like me, you haven't been to South Florida in nearly a decade.

Wynwood rising

When the globally recognized annual art fair known as [Art Basel Miami Beach](#), the highly successful spinoff of Switzerland's original Art Basel, launched in December 2002, much of the action centered on Miami Beach. At last month's edition, which reportedly attracted some 70,000 artists, art lovers, collectors, celebrities and hangers-on, home base remained in Miami Beach, but some of the attention had shifted across the causeway to Miami's newly hot Wynwood district.

What was once just a handful of galleries and artist spaces has become a celebration of visual arts — specifically street art — that sprawls over several blocks.

The best place to start is at [The Wynwood Walls](#) (2516 N.W. Second Ave.), an art and restaurant development begun in 2009 by the late developer Tony Goldman, who wanted to distill Wynwood's essence into one location. An ever-shifting assortment of murals, by artists like Retna, Lady Pink and the aforementioned Fairey and Scharf, means a visit one month may be very different from one a few weeks later. There's a free art walk on the second Saturday of the month.

"Wynwood's large stock of warehouse buildings, all with no windows, would be my giant canvases to bring to them the greatest street art ever seen in one place," Goldman says on The Wynwood Walls' [website](#).

After walking the grounds and perhaps grabbing a bite at the Walls' [Wynwood Kitchen & Bar](#), stroll through the surrounding streets to appreciate just how a splash of wall art can transform neighborhood businesses from mundane to magical.

If you pop into [The LAB Miami](#) (400 N.W. 26th St.), a collaborative workspace for artists and tech types that sometimes hosts public events, you might even see offended patrons storm out during a performance-art display — as happened at the LAB's closing-night Basel party.

Or, you could catch an indie movie at [O Cinema](#) (90 N.W. 29th St.), a venue that provides alternative film programming for once arthouse-starved Miami.

The invasion of artists into Wynwood has been followed by a wave of chefs entering the area. So, any visit to Wynwood is not complete without stepping into Matt Kuscher's [Kush](#) (2003 N. Miami Ave.), a kitschy Florida roadhouse of sorts — the Sunshine State equivalent of Texas' Twisted Root chain.

With a sign outside that proclaims "no clubby music, no Corona, no vodka," along with movies like *The Karate Kid* playing on the video screen and a mix of rock and reggae on the sound system, Kush supplements a selection of burgers and local craft beer with such regional favorites as a fried conch sandwich, Florida alligator bites and Key lime pie. (The small place gets slammed at lunchtime, so get there early.)

Just north of Wynwood is the Design District, another area that has exploded in the past decade, but don't forget to bring your wallet. Even if you can't afford such retailers as [Marc by Marc Jacobs](#) or [Rolex](#), walking down streets Northeast 38th through Northeast 42nd, between Northeast Second and Miami avenues, makes for pleasant window shopping.

Not far away is the more budget-friendly Midtown Miami, which, in any other city, would be just more big-box, chain-store sprawl.

The Miami version, home to the likes of a West Elm furniture store and Target, offers a walkable, palm-tree-and-patio-lined stroll, peppered with restaurant fare like Asian fusion [Sakaya Kitchen](#) (3401 N. Miami Ave.), Argentinian [Novecento](#) (3201 N. Miami Ave.) and Chinese [Blackbrick](#) (3451 N.E. First Ave.). The last won 2014 Best Chinese Restaurant honors from *New Times*, the local alternative paper.

Farther north, in Little Haiti, is [Sweat Records](#) (5505 N.E. Second Ave.), a vinyl-oriented record store and concert space that is a good place to catch up on what's going on in the local indie scene. If you think Miami music is all about Rick Ross and Gloria Estefan, Sweat Records will school you otherwise.

Downtown renaissance

In years past, there weren't always a lot of reasons to go into downtown Miami. Now there are more, and it's not just because of the new 20,000-square-foot, 24-hour dance and "gentlemen's" club called [El eleven](#), pronounced "eleven" (29 N.E. 11th St.).

The Pérez Art Museum Miami (1103 Biscayne Blvd.), which replaces the unremarkable Miami Art Museum, is a striking building with a signature vantage point along Biscayne Bay — until Oct. 1, the entrance even has artist Konstantin Grcic's installation of hammocklike seats strung outside, emphasizing the feeling of tropical daydreaming.

It promises to be more than just another museum devoted to modern art. As shown by the recent exhibit from Brazilian artist Beatriz Milhazes, the first major retrospective of her work in this country, PAMM often will have a distinctly Latin perspective.

Don't feel rushed to leave the area once you exit the museum. The expansive park and waterfront location practically demands lingering.

After that, it's just a hop, skip and a jump to the Arsht Center for the Performing Arts (1300 Biscayne Blvd.), which claims to be the largest performing-arts center built in the U.S. in the past 30 years. If the scheduled performances don't appeal, free twice-weekly tours offer a peek at what's inside.

Both Pérez and the Arsht were mired in controversy at the start — they both collided with arguments about use of public funds, and some didn't want the museum named after donor/developer Jorge Pérez — but Miamians seem to have taken to them. For example, in December, PAMM said it had [surpassed 300,000 visitors](#), about 40,000 more than its projection by this time.

And the museum momentum continues with art collector Gary Nader, owner of a Wynwood gallery, who is [looking for a Biscayne location for a 90,000-square-foot museum of Latin American art](#) — featuring a splashy design from Mexican architect Fernando Romero — that would open in 2016.

Head south on Biscayne and, once you cross the Miami River, it becomes Brickell Avenue, long a street of consulates, banks and swanky hotels. But they've been joined in recent years by a new wave of restaurants, bars and shops.

Start at [Mary Brickell Village](#) (901 S. Miami Ave.), a collection of stores and eateries, then explore up and down Brickell.

Unfortunately, Brickell's growth spurt has come with a cost: A 100-year-old building that housed Miami's legendary, long-running bar Tobacco Road recently was knocked down to make way for development.

Back on the beach

Of course, none of this means that South Beach is over.

The sea and sand remain a powerful siren song, and no visit to Miami is complete without an excursion to Miami Beach — especially if you're coming from a chilly North Texas winter. But there are new places to check out to add to the usual itinerary.

[Lincoln Road](#), Miami Beach's best pedestrian promenade for first-rate people-watching, continues to expand, stretching east of Alton Road to include new joints like [Haven](#) (1237 Lincoln Road), a cool little bar that makes for a nice pit stop before you head out to the clubs. The room is surrounded by video screens whose programming is built around various themes. While taking in the visuals, nosh on a galbi (Korean barbecue beef) burger, macadamia lobster or sushi.

Near the other end of Lincoln Road sits the Frank Gehry-designed [New World Center](#) (500 17th St.), opened in 2011 as the headquarters/performance space for the [New World Symphony](#), the celebrated youth orchestra overseen by the San Francisco Symphony's Michael Tilson Thomas.

The best thing about the building may not be what's on the inside but what's outside: a 7,000-square-foot screen, facing a grassy plaza, that's used for "wallcasts" — free screenings of performances going on inside or even films. When I was there, one of the "Fast and Furious" movies was showing.

In a move that was typical for fashion-conscious South Beach, the symphony's previous home — a former movie theater that fronted Lincoln Road — is now an H&M store.

Perhaps it was always more truism than truth, but there has long been a feeling that Miami Beach can be a tourist rip-off. Take parking for instance. That gorgeous structure at [1111 Lincoln Road](#) is a parking garage (like the Pérez, designed by Herzog & de Meuron) unlike most others, but using it will set you back \$30, or \$60 if you lose your ticket.

On top of that, there has been the notion that there's little good food on the beach and what's there is overpriced and haphazardly served. Even worse, there's the claim of no decent Asian food *anywhere* in South Florida.

Well, if [Khong River House](#) (1661 Meridian Ave.) is any indication, all these cliches need to be re-examined. With a kitchen run by former *Top Chef Masters* contestant Patricia Yeo and friendly waitstaff and reasonable prices (at least for lunch), Khong's pan-Asian menu includes the likes of: a chicken meatball banh mi with pickled Asian slaw, red curry and a side of airy taro chips; a kimchee burger; chocolate-chile bread pudding; and coconut rice fritters served on top of a mango-Thai basil salad and topped with coconut sorbet.

This is the kind of playful cross-cultural culinary craziness of which food dreams are made.

There's even Korean food in South Beach — although you might miss it, since the entrance to [Drunken Dragon](#) (1424 Alton Road), which sits in an anonymous strip mall, is unmarked. That hasn't stopped it from being discovered by the foodie hordes, though. As Miami's *New Times* noted last summer, "Drunken Dragon just opened a few weeks ago, but already it's one of the buzziest places in town."

The same guys behind Drunken Dragon also operate [Foxhole](#) (1218 14th Court), a nearby, comfy two-level bar with a similar lack of signage. "I was surprised, but people like walking around with their phones and not finding it on their first try," partner Jarred Grant told *New Times* of why his places are so anonymous.

It's this speakeasy secrecy, sans the velvet-rope exclusivity, that has become the stereotype of Miami nightlife that partly makes Foxhole and Drunken Dragon such a kick.

And the beach is now home to what *Miami Herald* restaurant critic Evan Benn says is [the best restaurant of the year](#): contemporary American/Floridian [Oolite](#) (1661 Pennsylvania Ave.), run by James Beard nominee Kris Wessel.

After a meal and a couple of drinks, you can head to some of the newer dance clubs on the beach, among them [Do Not Sit on the Furniture](#) (423 16th St.), [Treehouse](#) (323 23rd St.) and [Trade](#) (1439 Washington Ave.) — where the more casual, music-centered policy means you're less likely to run into a wall of doorman attitude.

And that is very New Miami indeed.

The new Miami

Arts

- The Wynwood Walls, 2516 N.W. Second Ave., Miami; thewynwoodwalls.com
- Pérez Art Museum Miami, 1103 Biscayne Blvd., Miami; www.pamm.org
- Arsht Center for the Performing Arts, 1300 Biscayne Blvd., Miami; www.arshtcenter.org
- Miami Design District, www.miamidesigndistrict.net
- New World Center, 500 17th St., Miami Beach; www.newworldcenter.com