

Living it up in Miami

From street art to a brush with Latino culture; pubs and rooftop bars that buzz into the wee hours of the morning, Miami is a tourist magnet that offers something for all!

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Thanks to Hollywood's repeated portrayal, Miami conjures up images of hip nightlife, sunbathing, long beaches lined with colourful lifeguard towers and people living it up. While visiting one finds that indeed glamour is written all over the city, but dig a bit deeper and one can discover the soul of Miami, embedded with history and culture. While Little Havana is the Cuban heart of this town, Wynwood is splashed with eye catching graffiti and murals. I divided my time between the city's two main areas - Downtown Miami and the famous Ocean Drive next to South Beach, which is lined with art deco buildings that go back to the 1930s.

A colourful splash

I love anything cheerful so the first tour had to be the famous Wynwood area, which is clearly Miami's most Instagrammable locale with street art running across several blocks and boho boutique stores, buzzing bars and restaurants. But how can one appreciate art on an empty stomach? Craving for widely abundant Mexican food, I went to the Taco Stand, a lively restaurant chain from California, to satiate my appetite for tacos and quesadillas, which are hard to find in my city, Delhi.

As it was too sunny to walk, my friend and I signed up for a golf cart tour. During the ride, I came across fascinating murals from budding artists across the world. The guide told us that Wynwood was a collection of dilapidated warehouses until 2009 when real estate developer Tony Goldman bought a few buildings after seeing the potential of developing the area into an art district. Today it has transformed into one of the world's largest outdoor art districts with walls that have become canvases for bright, giant murals.

A boy playing marbles, a baby holding a can of spray paint, two women with flowing hair, a gorilla holding a martini glass and one of the legendary Mexican painter Frida Kahlo were some of

the eye catching ones that I saw. Many of these murals may not be there for long because street art is not permanent, but a few artists have had their work up since six or seven years. There is more art and many lovely murals at Wynwood Walls, an open-air, but ticketed museum.

Next on my list were the markets and bustling restaurants in the area. Wynwood Marketplace is a lively spot with shops, kiosks, food trucks, bars and space for live music. I sipped a couple of cocktails in a happening restaurant and bar named after the city, Mayami.

Getting my first taste of nightlife at the clubs and pubs in the Downtown Miami's Brickell area, I stopped at Sexy Fish, a glamorous spot with funky interiors and brilliant cocktails, before heading to Sugar, a rooftop bar on the 40th floor of East Miami, where the stunning view of Miami's skyline gives the glass in one's hand a whole new meaning. It seemed the city truly came alive when the sun went down and the lights came up.





Little Havana, Miami's Cuban heart

The next day it was time to delve into Latino culture. Lined with Latin restaurants and bars, cigar shops, bakeries and an old theatre, the lively neighbourhood of Little Havana is so quintessentially Cuban that it is akin to walking the streets of Havana. I feel the best way to explore a neighbourhood is by trying the local food, so I signed up for all the Cuban delicacies, right from mojitos and sandwiches to cigars and coffee.

My food tour guide, Dubcy from Venezuela, who introduced me to this ethnic enclave, told me that one can even watch how the cigars are rolled. My first stop was El Cristo restaurant for Cuban coffee and empanadas, a deep-fried pastry with a meat filling, which happened to be beef that day. This was followed by Colada coffee, the strong and sweet Cuban version of espresso, which



Experience



is always served in tiny cups. For someone like me who loves a sip of potent coffee, this was exceptionally good.

I then stopped by Domino Park, a landmark which may seem familiar to movie buffs because a few scenes of the 2022 movie, *Father of the Bride*, were shot here. Talking politics, grey-haired gentlemen sit here to play the tile-based game, Domino. Surprised at seeing their age, I was told one needs to be at least 55 years old to be a member - I guess that's what keeps their minds sharp and focused.

Cuban sandwiches and mojito were waiting at Old's Havana Cuban Bar & Cocina, where relaxing at their outdoor section, I had the legendary sandwich that I have heard so much. Brought by Cuban exiles to Miami, the Cuban sandwich is layers of ham, Swiss cheese, pork, pickles and mustard in Cuban bread - it was delicious and I wolfed it down in minutes.

I also heard an interesting story about how Mojito was born. While there are many theories, I was told that it started as a cure for scurvy with mint, lime and sugar to make up for Vitamin C deficiency. Some years later, white rum (Bacardi) was added to this concoction and the rest as they say is history. The difference here is that they serve it with a sugarcane stick, which adds so much flavour to the cocktail.





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Next in line was a shop named Havana Classic where I met Roberto Eduardo, a guy who rolls cigars. Rollers, who are a key part of the three steps in making cigars, need to have at least 10 years of experience to do the job professionally. Roberto, who had been rolling cigars for more than 20 years, was really deft - I could have watched his hands at work for hours. The other key requirement for a good cigar is the quality of the tobacco leaves and storage: cigars need to be kept in a humid room for at least six weeks before they are ready for puffing.

Miami's vibrancy is omnipresent and more so in this district. One of the best venues for live music and dancing is Ball and Chain, a classic bar and restaurant that has been around since 1935 and has hosted many musicians including Nat King Cole. I downed a mojito here, swayed to the music and then headed to a more contemporary place, Cafe La Trova, that's ranked No 21 in The World's 50 Best bar list where mixologists stir up some interesting cocktails. Their award-winning drink is called *Buenavista*, a mix of gin, cucumber, mint, elderflower liqueur, lime juice and sugar.

Ocean Drive

All along Ocean Drive there are many art deco buildings that make up one of the iconic skylines in the world. Where else can



you find a kaleidoscope of buildings in pastel shades of pink, blue, yellow and more that are hotels, shops, nightclubs and restaurants running parallel to the most famous beach in the city and one of the most well-known across the globe, the South Beach.

Breakwater Hotel, where I stayed, goes back to the 1930s and is one of the most popular art deco hotels in the area. I spent time walking along the beach, posing in front of those colourful lifeguard towers, lazing around and sipping giant margaritas at the pubs during the day. But it is after sunset that this area truly comes alive when people hit the nightclubs and party till the wee hours of the morning, just like I did.

It is not in every city that one can pack in so many disparate experiences, but in Miami one goes all the way from lounging on the sand to admiring art, ethnicity and getting a taste of the high life in its pubs and restaurants. 