

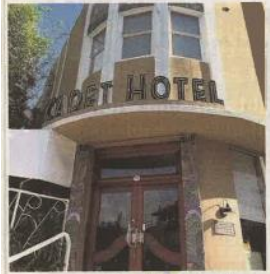
TRAVEL

SUNDAY MAIL SEVEN DAYS NOVEMBER 23, 2014 21

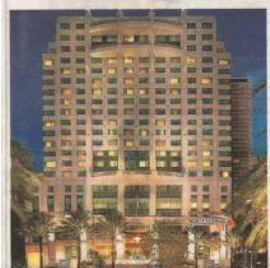
Florida's glamour city always fascinated me, so I couldn't wait to sample what they call Little Havana and I wasn't disappointed... life truly is a beach.

CAT HARVEY

Miami heat is so cool



HAVEN The hospitable JW Marriott



RENOVATED The Cadet hotel

Ever since Don Johnson gallantly fought crime in a speedboat back in the '90s, I've been intrigued by Miami.

While the vastness could seem intimidating, arm yourself with maps and attitude and you'll uncover a fabulous, vibrant city dancing to a Latin beat, with a little something for everyone. There are so many different streets of the city worth exploring I reckon you need at least four or five days. First on my hit list was the glamorous South Beach.

Famous for golden sands, beautiful people and stunning art deco architecture, it doesn't disappoint.

There are more than 800 hotels in this area alone, many still displaying classic 1920s to 1940s design features like stepped rooflines, glass block round porthole windows and terrazzo floors.

Ocean Drive is perfect for admiring the buildings and enjoying the sea views.

There are a plethora of shops, bars and clubs to keep you entertained. Be warned, though, the ones for the beautiful people are just that. But if you can rock stilettoes and skimpy bikinis with panache, or boast a hard-earned six-pack, fill your designer boots.

It's a joy to sit with a cocktail and people-watch here, with surfers, revellers and the bodiest beautiful effortlessly negotiating the pavements on roller-blades. The hop-on, hop-off open-top bus tour was another must-do on my agenda.

The City nightseeing Miami bus at \$39 for a two-day pass is worth every cent.

There are two routes

— blue for downtown and red for Miami Beach. You can, like I did, do both consecutively. It takes more than three hours but gives you the perfect overview of what is a quite enormous and captivating city.

More than 5million people — the same as in the whole of Scotland — live here. There is a massive Latin American population and Spanish is the most spoken language in the city.

I found the locals very friendly — a big smile and a warm 'Hola' go a long way.

It's worth stopping in Little Havana to experience the Cuban influence, with tantalising food smells wafting from street cafes and thick plumes of exotic cigar smoke billowing from old men in rocking chairs outside bars.

Calle Ocho (8th street) and around it is where most Cubans settled to follow their American Dream when Fidel Castro came to power in 1959. We got off the bus for a look around the Italian Renaissance-style Vizcaya Museum and gardens.

The stunning building is crammed with extravagant European antiques and is wonderfully out of place in a beach city.

Try to visit the Venetian Pool, a large outdoor swimming pool built in the 1920s in a former quarry. It's a stunning mix of Italian influences, with waterfalls and tiled arched loggias. For those who love to shop, Lincoln Road Mall is home to designer brands and

imperious boutiques.

For bargain-hunters, Dolphin Mall is best.

With dozens of big brands at outlet prices, be prepared for your

card to take a hammering. There's also a massive multiplex cinema here.

We found a gem of a place to stay in South Beach, just one block from the sea. The Cadet is a boutique hotel renovated with stunning antiques.

The vibe is relaxed and the staff are first-class. The galleries and dining on Lincoln Road and nightlife of Ocean Drive are just a five-minute walk away.

Pied a Terre, the hotel's French restaurant, was the top-rated dining experience in Miami. The exquisite food and experience lived up to the hype.

This street is filled with eateries. Two minutes up the road is Ola, voted best Latin American cuisine in Miami.

Here, there is a world of exotic dishes I've never heard of, all skillfully infused with tantalising Latin American spices.

Miami is a great destination for children and the Seaquarium is great fun where killer whale Lolita is the star turn.

Miami Children's Museum is packed with fun exhibits, while animal lovers will appreciate the city's famous zoo.

Monkey Jungle and Miami Beach botanical gardens are worth a visit, too, and if you have a hie car, the Everglades National Park is only 50 minutes away.

This world heritage site is a natural habitat of manatees, American crocodiles and the Florida panther.

You can hike, canoe or even take an airboat trip across this unique landscape.

After two days enjoying the throbbing vibrancy of South Beach, we moved to downtown Miami to sample the much cooler, chic, businesslike vibe.

We stayed in the JW Marriott on Brickell Avenue and were blown away by the hospitality.

The rooms are spacious and elegant and the rooftop pool is a haven of calm in the business heartland.

As they say in Little Havana, su estupendo... it's great.



For further information look at www.miamianbeaches.com
 Flights: Virgin Atlantic fly to Miami daily from Edinburgh via Heathrow, from £653 return. Call 0844 2092770 or www.virginatlantic.com
 Hotels: The Cadet — www.cadethotel.com JW Marriott — www.marriott.com/miami
 Restaurants: www.oliarestaurant.com www.piedaterre.com



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