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Planning a trip to Miami Beach? Go north for a boho vibe
By Candyce Stapen
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A Miami Beach vacation doesn't have to be all about music blasting from outdoor bars. If, like us, you're in search of an alternative to South Beach's noise, \$30 valet parking, packed sands and traffic, do what we do: Stay in North Beach.

The area extends from 63rd Street to 87th Street, encompassing the oceanfront hotels along Collins Avenue, and reaches west to Normandy Isles' Biscayne Bay. Nicknamed NoBe (a counterpoint to South Beach's moniker SoBe), North Beach is a find — and at no time more than during spring break.

Not to be confused with inland North Miami Beach, NoBe, eminently family-friendly, is relatively quiet — but not dead. It features broad sands, street parking, little traffic outside of rush hours, and it's graced by a miles-long, oceanfront "boardwalk" that's actually a wide concrete path edged by grass-topped dunes and sea grape bushes. To take in the sea air, my Gen X son jogs the 4.4 miles round trip to Surfside, the adjacent community, and my husband and I stroll. We pass runners, cyclists, dog walkers and some bikini-clad sun lovers, but North Beach's seascape also includes grade-schoolers on scooters and tots pedaling tricycles.



North Beach, with oceanfront hotels and spas along Collins Avenue, parks and outdoor stages, Miami Modern architecture and your pick of Latin and South American cuisine staples, combines the beach scene with a wallet-friendly bohemian vibe. (Carillon Hotel and Spa)

And unlike some other beach areas, NoBe has breathing space; high-rises don't cover all the land. You can join in a pick-up volleyball game on the sand courts at the North Shore Band Shell Park and watch films or listen to musical performances on the outdoor stage. The tree-shaded North Shore Open Space Park has picnic tables and paths by the seaside.

The '50s-era two-story garden apartments add to the community feel. Built to attract the middle class, the apartments are graced with interior courtyards, “cheese holes” (rows of circles that mimic Swiss cheese), futuristic fins and other classic Miami Modern, or MiMo, architectural details. Along Collins, such MiMo-style resorts as the Deauville, Carillon and Casablanca once brought mid-century glamour. With several sections of North Beach awarded local or national historic status, preservationists hope to maintain the area’s special structures.

NoBe also comes with the bonus of being a real neighborhood. So many locals hail from Argentina that the community, especially along the Collins Avenue corridor, is often called “Little Buenos Aires,” although many residents claim ties to Uruguay, Peru, Cuba and other Latin and South American countries. For visitors, that connection translates into some tasty fare.

At Moises Bakery, we buy Chilean chicken empanadas, our favorite of the shop’s six types, and at \$3, the filling food is some of the best cheap eats around. When co-owner Phillip Coleman, from Chile, took over in 1991 he changed the European bakery to one that caters to the Latin and South American population, adding empanadas, Cuban croquettes, Venezuelan-style tres leches (sponge cake with three types of milk) and pastel de nata (Portuguese egg tart). Nearby, at Manolo, we watch international soccer games on the multi-screen televisions while sampling tortilla de papa (a five-egg pie baked with potatoes) and other Argentine comfort foods. The churros (fried dough sticks sprinkled with sugar) feed my sweet tooth. At Sazón Cuban Cuisine across the street, maracas mark the menu’s signature dishes, most of which come with black beans and rice. The rolled chicken coiled around a sweet plantain stuffing is another guilty pleasure of mine. It doesn’t cost much to feed a family in North Beach.



The splash pool and beach of Carillon Hotel & Spa, previously known as Canyon Ranch Miami. (Carillon Hotel and Spa)

Canyon Ranch Miami, a hotel, spa and residences, debuted in 2008, just in time for the Great Recession, which tamped down on development. However, in the five-plus years we’ve borrowed our relative’s condo, we’ve seen a Publix grocery and more eateries bloom along Collins Avenue. In January, Z Capital Partners took over Canyon Ranch Miami, renaming it Carillon Hotel & Spa and pledging to create a “world-class property.”

Although NoBe's restaurants can't match the best of South Beach, the seafood at Fifi's is good, and the French-Moroccan fare at Normandy Isles' Rouge, opened in 2011, is top-rated, plus its "secret garden," a vine- and flower-filled rear courtyard, is a treat. We book a table every trip, tempted by the ambiance and the tagines of quail stuffed with sausage, or the braised lamb shank in port wine. Indoors, silent Charlie Chaplin movies play, projected on the rear wall of the restaurant.

Especially along 71st Street, NoBe still has pawn shops and thrift stores, remnants of its less-prosperous past. But architect Renzo Piano's luxury 64-unit condominium tower is slated to go up on Collins on the border of North Beach. Will this property and others signal higher rents, taller buildings and tears in the neighborhood's fabric? Concerned, I ask Philip Levine, mayor of Miami Beach, who campaigned, in part, on a platform of revitalizing NoBe.



Beachside in NoBe. (Carillon Hotel and Spa)

"Over the years, North Beach has been left behind. Years ago, the area looked like it lacked a lot of love," says Levine, whose panel has already instituted such community-supported improvements as a free trolley system that connects Collins Avenue with Normandy Isles and opened a dog beach. "I love dogs. How could Miami Beach not have a place to go swimming with your dogs? We created Bark Beach, and it was a home run."

The Renzo Piano development company gave \$10 million back to the NoBe community, half of which is earmarked to renovate the North Shore Open Space Park, notes Levine. He also wants to retain NoBe's MiMo character. "One of the catalysts for change in South Beach in the late '80s and '90s was the recognition of art deco. So we want to preserve the MiMo style as a catalyst for North Beach. We have to be very careful to preserve any and all architecturally significant properties," Levine says. The master plan pencils in zoning changes to allow increased density of development, both retail and residential, along the 71st Street corridor.

Is the goal to make North Beach like South Beach? “No,” he says. “We already have a South Beach. North Beach is unique. It has the beautiful beaches of Miami Beach, but less congestion than other areas, and North Beach is a little more bohemian. . . . North Beach is more of a cool, locals’ neighborhood that has less of the hustle and bustle of South Beach. I think that the Latin flavor, one of the coolest elements, will stay.”

Good. I’m already thinking of when I can again borrow the condo, gather the family and treat them to sweet plantains, savory Moroccan lamb, long oceanfront strolls and white-sand beaches.

If you go...

Where to stay

Carillon Hotel & Spa

6801 Collins Ave.

305-514-7000

www.carillonhotel.com

One- or two-bedroom suites with kitchens at this beachfront, former Canyon Ranch property known for its spa and fitness center. Rates include exercise classes. Suites from \$650 through April 12; from \$495 April 13 to May 24; from \$400 in summer.

Collins Hotel Miami Beach

6600 Collins Ave.

786-235-7409

www.collinshotelmiami.com

Moderately priced property with outdoor pool across the street from beach. Rooms from \$160.

Where to eat

Moises Bakery of Miami

7310 Collins Ave.

305-868-0548

\$3-\$4 for empanadas. Inexpensive sweets.

Rouge

908 71st St.

305-720-9125

www.rougemiamibeach.com

Noted French-Moroccan restaurant with garden seating. Entrees \$29-\$35.

Sazón Cuban Cuisine

7305 Collins Ave.

305-861-4727

www.sazoncubancuisine.com

Tasty Cuban cuisine in a simple setting. Entrees \$15-\$25.

Fifi’s

6934 Collins Ave.

305-865-5665

fifisseafood.com

Seafood dishes, some with a Latin influence. Entrees \$18-\$35

Manolo

7300 Collins Ave.

305-868-4381

www.churrosmanolo.com

Salads, burgers, tortillas and Argentine entrees. Entrees \$9-\$19

What to do

Bark Beach

Oceanfront between 80th and 81streets

305-673-7730

www.miamibeachparks.com

Swim with your dog, Friday to Sunday, 1:30 p.m. to 5:30 p.m. Residents \$5; non-residents \$25, cash only. Pay on-site.

North Shore Band Shell

7275 Collins Ave.

305-861-3616

www.miamibeachparks.com

Free outdoor jazz, rock, orchestral concerts and movies.

North Shore Band Shell Park

7250 Collins Ave.

305-673-7730

www.miamibeachparks.com

Sand volleyball courts.

North Shore Open Space Park

Collins Avenue from 79th to 87th Terrace

305-861-3616

bit.ly/18K2yvh

Oceanfront park with shaded picnic benches and paths.

MiMo on the Beach walking tours

Meet at the North Shore Band Shell, 73rd and Collins

305-672-2014

www.mimoonthebeach.com

90-minute neighborhood walking tour showcases distinctive features of Miami Modern architecture. Typically held the first Saturday of the month, \$25.

Information

www.miamiandbeaches.com