

EXPLORE FLORIDA

& The Caribbean

A South Florida Sun Sentinel
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**A CLASSIC
CAR TRIP
TO KEY WEST**

**BIG TIME
AT THE
GIANT GUITAR**

**MAGIC
RINGDOM
WEDDINGS
AT DISNEY**

**RUNNING WITH
THE PACKS
AT SEACREST
WOLF PRESERVE**

**SOUTH
ANDROS
ISLAND
OUT OF THE
STREAM**

**STATEWIDE,
CARIBBEAN
EVENT CALENDARS**

A Spin around My Home

*A worldly travel editor
returns to South Florida –
and finds worlds to explore*

By Thomas Swick ● Photography by Thomas Swick

South Florida.

It sounds like a state.

It could be one. It contains only three counties but more than six million people. Were it a state, it would be the 18th most populous.

It encompasses a polyglot metropolis and a primordial national park. Historic hotels – Florida's most iconic structures – and a new one in the shape of a guitar (not far from a stadium that resembles a spaceship). Art Deco and Mid-Century Modern, Mediterranean Revival and Seminole chickee. Painterly swimming pools and refreshing museums. Walls bright with murals, trees that seem sculpted, parking garages like out of a dream.

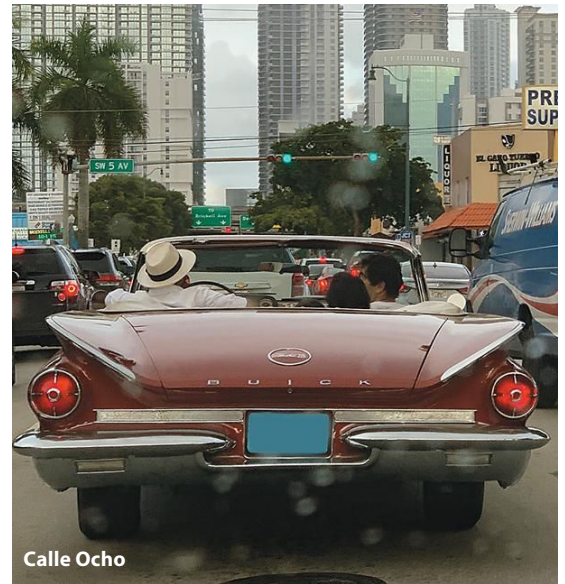
New River in downtown Fort Lauderdale



The Biltmore in Coral Gables



Books & Books in Coral Gables



Calle Ocho

A high-speed train connects the three big cities of spreading skylines and awakened downtowns, international airports and can-you-top-this ports. And the cruise ships come and go, with an air of *grandissimo*. (Or at least they soon will.)

There are beaches and gardens, waterways and trails, ethnic neighborhoods and moneyed streets. The seas may be rising but the malls are thriving. Breweries are multiplying as fast as the iguanas. We have spring training and thoroughbred racing, the King Mango Strut and the Day of the Dead. Many residents own boats, a greater number have dogs. Everyone, at some point, is on I-95.

Where to begin to show it all off?

Why not the Everglades, that river of grass where the main entrance never closes? (Except during a pandemic.) You can take a ranger-led slough slog to a cypress dome or just stare down from boardwalks at unhurried gators. Returning to civilization, stop at Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden for more flora with perhaps a crocodile.

You're now in the city of Coral Gables, some of whose streets are lined with trees as magnificent as the ones at Fairchild. Extravagantly shaded Columbus Boulevard will lead you to the Biltmore Hotel, completed in 1926 with a tower modeled after the one on Seville's cathedral. Get out to admire the high-ceilinged lobby and enormous pool; if it's a Sunday, enjoy brunch in the arcaded, palm-fronded courtyard.

Heading into downtown Coral Gables, you'll pass the Venetian Pool, a pre-Disney fantasy of grotto and waterfall. One block north of Miracle Mile, Books & Books embraces a courtyard café that, on weekends, becomes a music venue. If you don't care for bookish surroundings, there are transportive tapas at Bulla, wait-worthy ramen at Ichimi, and, at Chocolate Fashion, a peerless flourless chocolate cookie.

You can cross U.S. 1 into Coconut Grove, which still has a leafy, village feel, but the rash of new restaurants makes it a better place for dinner. Instead, cruise north out of the Gables to SW Eighth Street – the famous Calle Ocho. The almost equally famous Versailles is another option for a meal – black beans and *vaca frita* – but the servings are so large you may not want to eat again until tomorrow. At least drink a *cafecito* with the men at the *ventanita*.

The heart of Little Havana lies about a mile and a half east. Here old timers play dominos in Domino Park, while others dance on the sidewalk in front of Ball & Chain. On this block you can buy cigars at Cuba Tobacco Cigar Co., lick a *dulce de leche* ice cream cone at Azucar, and catch a foreign film at the Tower Theater. Or order a mojito and join in the dancing.

Continuing east, you'll pass Michelle Bernstein's Café La Trova, where a live band in the evening gets diners dancing, before eventually entering the glass canyons of Brickell. Here you'll find