

Sun, Beaches, Hot Chicas... Miami Vices

Just the facts, ma'am, on America's
gay Riviera. **By Edie Stull**



If you've never been to Miami, you may have gotten your image of it from TV shows like *CSI: Miami*—tall palm trees outlined against a bright blue sky, long stretches of white sand edged by blue-green water...and, yes, bikini-clad women. That vision isn't far off, but it turns out the city offers so much more. The beaches and the year-round subtropical weather are good reasons to visit Miami, but they're not the only one. Add to that the hot nightlife, the authentic Latin food and the fact that the multicultural destination is so gay-friendly it even has its own gay and lesbian chamber of commerce.

In a Nutshell

Miami itself is home to an international business district, a vibrant Cuban community and fascinating art and science museums, while Miami Beach—what you're often picturing from those media images—is really a sliver of land separated from the mainland by picturesque Biscayne Bay. The hip and trendy South Beach is a 23-block area with colorfully restored Art Deco buildings at the southern end of Miami Beach.

Store Your Luggage

Miami and its beaches offer every imaginable kind of lodging at a wide range of prices, from B&Bs to high-end hotels to Art Deco restorations. Expect prices to be higher when your digs are close to the beach, when the rest of the country is enduring really crappy weather, and when there are special events in Miami.

Mark's List of Miami and Miami Beach Gay and Lesbian Friendly Hotels (jumponmarkslist.com/gay_hotels_miami) provides some lodging guidance, and a site like Travelocity or Orbitz is useful for recent traveler reviews.

Show Off Your Tan

Miami Beach has two main gay beach areas—though you may find more boys than babes—the popular 12th Street Beach (12th Street and Ocean Drive) and Haulover Nude Beach (Collins Avenue and 108th Street). Although it's tolerated in some places, nude sunbathing is not legal in Florida, so you're taking a chance when you take it all off. If you decide to chance it, shed your

clothing on the beach as the restrooms are too close to the road. If you need a break from the beach to let your sunburn cool off, you can take a walking tour of some of the more than 800 Art Deco buildings in South Beach, shop 'til you drop on Lincoln Road, take a cruise to the islands or an airboat ride through Everglades National Park. And you can also experience the look and feel of old Florida in Key Biscayne and Coconut Grove, and at the European-style Vizcaya mansion.

Explore the Nightlife

After a day in the hot sun, beach-goers flock to the city's restaurants and clubs. You can find any kind of food, but Miami's significant Latin population makes it the best place in the country to sample authentic Cuban cuisine. Little Havana, west of downtown Miami, has lots to offer. Settled by refugees who fled Fidel Castro's Cuba, the area has coffee bars and restaurants, cigar factories and streetside food stalls all with a colorful Latin atmosphere.

Any kind of seafood is another good bet. Check out the famous Joe's Stone Crab for something you won't find in other parts of the country. Call ahead since it is open only seasonally.

After dark, Collins Avenue is awash in light—not the bright neon of Vegas, but Art Deco pastels. Music spills onto the street, and people are everywhere.

Find Local Playmates

As gay-friendly as Miami is, if you are looking for lesbian-only clubs, you'll be disappointed—there aren't any. But don't despair. You'll find women's nights and special events that make it a very lesbian place indeed. Many big lesbian parties are annual charity events. These mini, Dinah-like weekend events include the Winter Party in February, the Miami Gay and Lesbian Film Festival in April, Aqua Girl in May and the Women's White Party in November. Icandee Productions hosts Fuse—a weekly cocktail, dinner and dance party at Grass Restaurant Lounge—and Siren dance party at the Crème Lounge. Pandora and Ultra Events also stage lesbian parties and events, including their Saturday La Descarga, a Latin dance party at the Yuca Lounge, while She Ventures Out offers lesbian cultural, sporting and social events. ■