



the many shades of MIAMI BEACH

From the candy coloured art deco hotels to the coolest nightclubs on the planet, South Beach Miami is a magnet for the rich, the famous and those lucky enough to delve beneath the veneer and uncover its hidden gems. **Norah Casey** tells all.

My late husband's view of Miami was heavily influenced by the 1983 movie *Scarface* where Al Pacino plays a vicious murdering Cuban drug lord. So on our first visit together he wasn't keen on venturing anywhere near the city and we opted for the more gentrified locale of South Beach instead – a whole world away from downtown Miami. And we both fell in love with it. At that time it was undergoing a transformation. In the 1980s South Beach became a haven for bohemian retirees where the crumbling art deco buildings commanded low rents and the beach was right on the doorstep. By the time we visited in the 1990s the area was on the turn but still magical. We stayed in small hotels all beautiful but in disrepair where you could still glimpse the faded glory of better years in the dilapidated furnishings and peeling wall paper. There was a real neighbourhood feel to South Beach then, a place for shorts

and flip flops and hanging out at the beach from morning to sundown.

Now it's transformed yet again. Some areas of South Beach have worked hard to rise above the touristy over-priced strip that is now Ocean Drive, creating a destination that is a luxurious urban mecca for celebrities. The renaissance has seen many restoration projects to preserve these beautiful art deco buildings.

We stayed at one such hotel. The National Hotel Miami Beach is an Art Deco landmark designed by Roy France, a noted architect of the time. It was one of the grandest hotels on the beach front when it opened in 1940. Tastefully renovated in 1997 when it was reopened under new ownership. Many of the original features were lovingly restored and art deco art and antique pieces replaced those fittings that couldn't be

renovated. But the upholstered barrel chairs in the lounge, the chrome light fixtures and the terrazzo flooring in the Martini Room are all original. The oak bar still stands in the hotel's main bar and the carpeting and chandelier are all originals in the Ballroom and Oval Room.

The guest rooms of the National's 14-story historic tower and cupola were renovated in 2012 with new dark wood furnishings and modernised bathrooms maintaining the art deco feel. The Terrace Rooms and suites are more generously sized with terraces that over-look the iconic 205 ft. infinity pool – the longest in Miami Beach. A second pool allows for sun-bathing and more leisurely swims while a few steps away you can access the beach directly and avail of the hotel's own chaise lounges and umbrellas. Sundowners on the terrace are the perfect

way to end a blissful day of doing nothing. And as night falls The National is a great location for exploring South Beach – most of what you need is on the door step. If you're going to stay in South Beach my advice would be to stay in an Art Deco hotel. Remember however

that they are old, most are sympathetically renovated but that comes at a price in terms of mod cons. But the ambiance and décor transports you to a different era. You will never experience a truly authentic art deco historic district like this and it is far better to immerse yourself in it than to watch from the side-lines.

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THE NATIONAL IS A
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SOUTH BEACH
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DAY 1

We arrived late in the day – Delta had lost our luggage and kept it for a day or two – so it took some time to get organised with something to wear (but we saved time on the unpacking!). We had already planned to go to one of the hottest restaurants in Miami but only one problem – it takes no reservations. The rich and famous have to stand in line with the rest of us and I'd been warned that the queues were sometimes hours long. But I have wanted to go to this place for years – it was a favourite haunt of Al Capone and Frank Sinatra – and I had already read everything there was to know about it – its history, the menu, who owns it, who runs it – in short I had overdone the homework and was in danger of over-hyping it for everyone else. The place is none other than Joe's Stone Crab which began in the early 1900s when Joe and his wife Jennie discovered this little known delicacy – stone crabs – which were teaming in the waters around Miami. Since then it's been frequented by famous actors, sports stars and politicians and even featured in *Goldfinger* the Ian Fleming novel (under the *nom de plume* of 'Bill's on the Beach') where James Bond ate the best meal he had ever eaten in his life. Now there's a recommendation. And to give you a sense of its popularity, Joe's is also the second highest grossing restaurant in the US – the October 2014 issue of *Restaurant Business Magazine* placed Joe's Stone Crab number two in the country with revenues of \$35.3 million (number one was Tao Asian Bistro, Las Vegas with revenues of \$64.6).

Joe and Jennie opened the restaurant in 1913 in the front room of their bungalow and their son Jesse Weiss who took the mantle on is widely credited as having created the enormous celebrity following. "Anyone well known who came to Miami Beach, from anywhere in the world, would stop in at Joe's," the maître'd told us later that night. Jesse knew them all – Amelia Earhart was a regular and according to Jesse: "She was down to earth. You knew where you stood with her. If you'll pardon the expression, there was no bullshit to her." Other regulars included The Duke and Duchess of Windsor, Gloria Swanson, J Edgar Hoover and Mohammad Ali. Joe's uses its own boats which is fortunate because during the stone crab season (October to



May) it uses up to a thousand pounds of crab a day. During the season Joe's can serve up to 2000 diners a night on a first-come, first-served basis, and that's after 1000 for lunch.

The first stop on arrival is the Maître'd stand. We arrived out of season in the summer months so the good news was the queue wasn't too long but the bad news was we didn't get to try the stone crabs. Despite our wonderful Maître'd's attempts to explain the texture and taste of the sweet succulent meat dipped in Joe's famous mustard sauce, we felt a little hard done by that we didn't actually get to taste them ourselves. There were five of us in the party and we ate in the main high ceilinged dining room. This is an old school restaurant with tuxedoed waiters and formal service. However it also manages to have that casual Miami feel so that diners were as likely to be wearing shorts as suits. The staff here are veterans, many have been with Joe's a long time and see it more as a family. Our waiter regaled us with stories from his many years there and talked fondly of

the comradery between the staff. We might have missed the stone crab season but we feasted on seafood and had a fantastic evening in the bustling dining room at Joe's. It lived up to the hype, and then some, and is firmly on the bucket list for a return visit when the stone crabs are in season.

We donned bibs, rolled up our sleeves and ate lots of crab. Before that we enjoyed a perfectly chilled Jumbo Shrimp Cocktail (\$14.95), a dozen oysters (\$16.95), the teens had Fried Calamari (\$13.95) served with a tangy Key Lime Curry Aioli – my own selection for the table was Lobster Tacos (\$15.95), served



with avocado aioli and mango – and they were divine. For the big feast we ordered steamed Killer King Crab Claws (Large 20oz \$54.95), grilled King Crab Legs with roasted garlic oil (24oz \$72.95) and Lobster Macaroni & Cheese (\$18.95), served with a creamy white cheddar from Vermont. There was more than enough for the five of us.

On recommendation we tried Cakebread Sauvignon Blanc from the Napa Valley (\$53) which had a wonderful, clean taste with lots of citrus notes to balance the shellfish.

Afterwards we tried Joe's Famous Key Lime Pie – our first of the visit so we had to try it – one was more than enough. And then we rolled home content that we had just had a special evening in one of America's great institutions.

Joe's Stone Crab; 11 Washington Ave, Miami Beach, FL 33139, telephone 01 305-673-0365; joesstonecrab.com



Joe and Jennie's front room restaurant.

SOUTH BEACH ART DECO ASDAS



DAY 2

We enjoyed time on the beach and by the pool at the National Hotel – partly because we were all a bit tired and still digesting the enormous feast at Joe's the night before but mostly because Delta still had our luggage and we were constantly back and forth to reception in the hope that they might arrive. But by late afternoon our luggage had earned more air miles than we had and we washed the clothes we had worn the night before and hoped they would dry in time for the big excursion that night.

One of the highlights of our stay on South Beach was an evening at Hakkasan, the haute-cuisine of Asian food and a sister restaurant to the Michelin star Hakkasan in London. There are now five Hakkasans in the US and 12 across the world. We had booked weeks prior to the trip as a special treat. The evening would be even more special as this Hakkasan is based in one of the coolest hotels in Miami Beach, the Fontainebleau. The hotel has several restaurants but Hakkasan was our destination of choice.

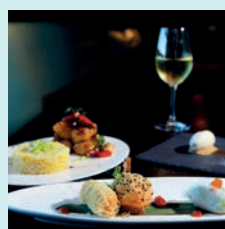
The Fontainebleau opened in the 50s and quickly built a reputation for being the biggest and the most opulent. It was renovated in 2008 and is now firmly back on top. It is also home to LIV – one of the hottest clubs in South Beach.

There are some magic ingredients at work at Hakkasan which is why a visit is such a treat. It's more the whole experience – a sum of the parts – rather than one offering over another. The food is not Chinese *per se* – there are lots of Asian influences at work and even then that's not what makes it different. The menu cleverly marries traditional dishes with a contemporary twist, often serving classic food with gourmet garnishes that add that glossy finish that sets one meal apart from another. From the moment we arrived we were transported into that distinctive oriental ambiance that could be Shanghai as easily

as Miami. The Fontainebleau Hakkasan takes some elements of South Beach and cleverly combines traditional dark teak screens and furnishings with hints of blues and turquoise reminiscent of the ocean on its doorstep. The low level lighting and discrete dining areas add to the feeling of grandeur and privacy. Just at the right moment the waiting staff would appear with various courses before quietly leaving the space to us again. We had the signature Hakka cocktail to start – Grey Goose vodka with sake, coconut, passion fruit and lychee juice – it hit the right note in terms of setting the tone for the evening. This is a blow-out dining experience and it doesn't come cheap. But the food lived up to our expectations and as evenings go it was very special – I have certainly had my share of overpriced meals that didn't feel that special despite the cost. So all I can say is if you are planning one beautiful meal during your visit then Hakkasan can certainly offer you that. A word about the menu – sharing is key. There was five in our group so we shared all of the dishes so got to try lots of things. We had the wonderful grilled Silver Cod served with Champagne and Chinese honey which is a Hakkasan signature dish (\$48) and more Japanese (think Nobu). All of the dishes are a feast for the eyes as much as the palette. To start we had the Dim Sum Platter (\$28) – beautifully served and melt in the mouth divine, Crispy Duck Salad (\$25) – this was superb and served with pomelo, pine nuts and shallots; Salt and Pepper Squid (\$20) and some aromatic Jasmine Tea Smoked Beef Short Rib (\$28). As well as the signature Silver Cod we ordered Steamed Chicken with Ginger Sauce (\$16); Charcoal Grilled Sha Cha Chilean Sea bass (\$48) – which had a wonderful kick; Stir-fried Bahamian Lobster with XO Sauce (\$58) and Crispy Chicken with Orange Sauce. Miami's Hakkasan serves local ingredients so while it is true to



the Hakkasan menu it has some wonderful original dishes like the stir fried grouper with black truffle. We stayed with the US wines for the meal – I narrowly missed interviewing a woman called Delia Viader in Napa Valley once during a review trip – she called the Cabernet Franc something she “dared” to do. And here on the Hakkasan menu was the 2008 Cabernet Franc “Dare” by Viader! It was perfect for this rich, glamorous meal with a wonderful combination of blackcurrant, chocolate and vanilla. Just perfect. As was the whole evening.



Culinary delights at Hakkasan

DAY 3

As our final day in Miami dawned we had high hopes of being reunited with the suitcases and kept up a steady flow of calls to Delta – even though there was no human being available to talk to us. The online tracker – a great invention if it worked – was showing little action and the hotel had joined forces with us to try to locate a real live person at Delta to talk to us. We took turns sitting in reception as we had been told that unless we personally signed for it the driver would take the luggage away. So in-between times we took a long walk of the historic art deco neighbourhood and dipped in and out of shops to pick up some souvenirs of our short stay.

In the early evening we headed to the only place we hadn't explored – the thumping, beating heart of South Beach.

Much of the tourist action is on Ocean Drive (from Biscayne Street to 15th Street). It's changed beyond

belief since I last visited but you will still want to spend some time there. Ocean Drive used to be a really cool nighttime Mecca for great cocktails and casual dining. You won't get very far on the sidewalk before being accosted by restaurant managers waving menus and pulling out chairs for you such is the competition on the strip. And sadly there isn't much difference between the dining options. Everywhere you go on Ocean Drive tables are adorned with massive goldfish bowls filled with luminous cocktail concoctions. I hadn't seen them before and asked the waitress what the idea was. She said some celebrity arrived in the area and was served an oversized glass of something in one of the bars and she tweeted it and so the rest of the bars and restaurants realised that they could get a social media buzz going just by serving these gigantic cocktails (she

claimed that they subsidised the cocktail cost as a PR stunt but I expect they were diluted to the price point asked for!). But they are onto a good thing because myself and my friend ordered two exotically sounding cocktails and even the teenagers had mocktails and then what did we do? They looked



Ocean Drive's latest craze were luminous cocktail concoctions in goldfish bowls



so ridiculously large we took endless photographs at every angle and sent tweets and Facebook messages to make everyone jealous. In truth, we couldn't even finish them and the food was dreadful. But that said it was one of the best nights we had on the trip and the teenagers declared it was their favourite place... ever. The sidewalk features a constant stream of people while stretch Limos, open-topped Mustangs and Cadillacs cruise the street blaring music. We met an eclectic bunch of people that night – one guy rapped for us in the hope that we'd buy his record (which we did because he earned it), we had touts selling bags, jewellery, DVDs – at one point a group of sailors (or maybe they were only dressed up in uniform) sang a song out of tune for us. A man with a monkey created quite a stir (and not an animal rights campaigner in sight) and there was much craning of necks to see who was about to get out of a Bentley with darkened windows – even the waiting staff were throwing names about (apparently local celebrities but we didn't actually know who they were) then eventually a child of about 12-years-old got out of the back and bought an ice cream and got back in again as it slid away from the kerb.

So after our three days in Miami we woke early the next day, packed the cases (well mine had only just arrived so I didn't need to pack) and headed south for Key West. The verdict. A fantastic exhilarating and hectic few days experiencing all the shades of South Beach – from the celebrity-obsessed party-goers at the Fontainebleau to the street sellers and buskers on the beach front; the touristy fried fast food on Ocean Drive to the sublime Joe's Stone Crab and the glamour of fine dining at Hakkasan. Miami Beach is not for the fainthearted or those looking for a well-earned rest. It's high-energy and high-octane adventure and three days was just right.



SOUTH BEACH