

Miami Nice

A New Appreciation for Miami



By Ray Collins

I don't mind admitting I've never really appreciated Miami. There's a perception of big city crime, big city traffic and English no longer being the most prominent language in Dade County. Why drive four hours to experience that?

Erin and I had an opportunity to spend a few days at a waterfront apartment—so we decided to roll up our sleeves and get outside our comfort zones.

We stayed in an area north of downtown called Edgewater, an appropriate name since it is on Biscayne Bay. It's a generic urban area without a lot of warmth or fuzziness. We stayed on the 4th floor, our car stayed on the 7th floor—and we were determined to leave it there and spend the next couple days walking around this region.

Forty-four hours later, we had walked 16 miles.

First stop—the 'Design District.' Pretty buildings, pretty people and high-end shopping—including flagship stores for Chanel, Dior, Cartier and many others. Interesting architecture—even the pedestrian entrance to the parking garage is unique: an oversized fiberglass bubble. How high-end is this neighborhood? When the late afternoon summer rain began, the man we were talking to at the information booth gave us an oversized umbrella with the Design District logo on it. "Keep it!" he said as we splashed down the sidewalk.

From there we walked to an area called Wynwood, which is known for its huge murals on buildings—and it didn't disappoint. It's like an outdoor museum. Lots of cool shops and restaurants. Fun place to see. We wandered back home in the dark, through some questionable areas, hoping we didn't need to use our pretty new umbrella for protection.

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The next morning—our only full-day—we laced 'em up and prepared to walk as far south as we could (which wound up being about seven miles). Our first discovery was the massive Brickell City Centre. Wow! Four levels of restaurants, entertainment and retail. 107,000 square feet. Well-done.

We stumbled upon a new restaurant—so new, it was only open to friends and family so the staff could practice before opening to the public. They let us sneak in. Happy to report they were ready! "The Henry" already has restaurants in Phoenix, San Diego, Los Angeles, Dallas—and I would bet Miami will be their latest success story. Perfect blend of great food, service and ambiance—morning, noon and night. The sign out-front says, "The greatest neighborhood restaurant." It just is. Not trendy. Not too eclectic. Just solid. (www.TheHenryRestaurant.com)

Bellies full, we continued our walk south through beautiful tree-lined neighborhoods (also in Brickell) toward Coconut Grove. I learned a painful lesson: When you punch up "Coconut Grove" in the GPS, your phone doesn't know you want to be brought to the epicenter of the retail district. Instead it will bring you toward a neighborhood and wrap you around and around and around without any real end point. Without a specific address, it is like pulling a thread on a sweater. We went with it for awhile until I began imitating the announcer at a horse race, "And it's left Achilles with a big lead, but along comes back of the right knee. Achilles still out in front."

We finally limped into Coconut Grove—after a brief stop at the Vizcaya Museum's weekly Farmers' Market. Erin browsed while I found a stool. We arrived in 'The Grove' at the same time the afternoon rain arrived. Unfortunately, our new umbrella was back at the apartment. After a little browsing and stopping for ice coffee--and literally icing my Achilles on a chair--we were ready to head back north. We tried to find a trolley stop, but no one knew where it was or how often they ran. Frustrated as the rain picked up, we resorted to the old-fashioned method. No, not hitch-hiking; Uber. The driver was nice but wouldn't get over the story we told about where we walked the night before between Wynwood and Edgewater. "I'm a dude with tattoos on my arms, but I wouldn't walk through there." I reassured him we had a pretty blue umbrella, and we weren't afraid to use it.





Monday morning, we went upstairs to retrieve the car and headed out for our last half day in Miami. We drove across the bay and dropped anchor on South Beach for a few hours. We have both been here many times—together and separately—so this was less about exploring and more nostalgic for us both.

We walked up the beach boardwalk among the rollerbladers, joggers and volleyballers. We saw a movie being filmed and saw a drag show on the big front porch of an ocean-front restaurant. We walked up and down the Lincoln Road pedestrian mall, sort of the equivalent of Sarasota's St. Armands Circle. After brunch, we were ready to head back to our little slice of paradise on the Gulf Coast.

Glad to go? You bet. Very interesting, and I can finally see the value in Miami. Just bring an umbrella.

Ray Collins is a Sarasota-based Realtor and travel writer with more than one hundred published articles around the world. www.raycollinsmedia.com/articles

