

Sun, Surf and surprises in Fort Lauderdale, Florida

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Once billed as Florida's original college spring break destination, Fort Lauderdale has grown up. The city has matured to a sophisticated yachting haven of upscale shopping, dining and lodging.

When you combine year-round sunshine with pristine beaches and genteel history, the result is a relaxing break for all ages in a fashionable beach town.

The oceanfront Pelican Grand Beach Resort is an example of Victorian architecture mixed with old Florida elegance, located in Fort Lauderdale's north beach section. One of the only hotels situated directly on the beach, the Pelican's proximity to the shoreline offers magnificent views and lovely verandahs for dining, sunning or curling up with a book. The suites are spacious with a charming décor and comfortable both inside and out on the roomy balcony.

In addition to indoor and outdoor fine dining at OCEAN2000, the lobby space offers The Emporium, an old-fashioned ice cream parlor, serving up gelato, coffee creations and other sweet treats. The luxury PURE Spa, with unobstructed rooftop views of the ocean, is a Scandinavian concept of well-being in the middle of Fort Lauderdale. Dip into the zero-entry, beachside pool providing a view of the 500-foot private beach, as well as a lazy river to help you unwind. A variety of water sports is available, such as paddle boarding, kayaking, parasailing and snorkeling, just steps from your room.

Fort Lauderdale is a foodie town with hundreds of gastronomic choices from all over the world. Las Olas Boulevard boasts many including Casa Sensei, a Pan-Asian and Latin American eatery with waterfront dining. While skimming the menu you'll snack on Kimchi buttered popcorn, which goes perfectly with a Ginger Snap cocktail or Japanese Sake. The entrees are diverse with everything from Sushi to Dim Sum to Argentinian Beef Empanada. And when you are done savoring your meal, more surprises. Along with your check, a giant gob of cotton candy appears, along with a thoughtful towelette to deal with those sticky fingers.

Another waterfront spot, Shooters Waterfront, also provides indoor/outdoor dining, with amazing views of yachts while offering water taxi service on the Intracoastal waterway. Since 1982, Shooters Waterfront has specialized in fresh seafood creations, expertly cooked, and a full bar including beer, wine and crazy cocktails. Treat yourself to a Russells Bourbon Infused Apple with Vanilla and Honey or a Key Lime Martini to get the overall Shooters' experience started. Bring your pups for a choice of their own menu, featuring Ocean Reef Turkey, Boca Chica Chicken and Bahia Beef. Yes, canines have their own menu.

A popular concept in happening cities is the food hall. More upscale than its predecessor, the mall food court, this gathering space offers a diverse and delicious option in the historic Sistrunk neighborhood. The oldest African American community in the city, it was named after Dr. James Franklin Sistrunk, the founder of Broward County's first Black hospital. Now the Sistrunk Marketplace and Brewery offers contemporary spots such as Hot Lime Craft Tacos with its signature, Peruvian-influenced ceviche as well as creative tacos and burrito bowls.

With more than a dozen, internationally influenced eateries, the Marketplace also offers the Khoffner Brewery and Shady Distillery, specializing in small-batch vodka. In addition to food and drink, the hall offers cooking classes, live music and local art, as well as retail space. The young, hip vibe provides a welcoming gathering opportunity for families of all ages.

Protected by the Florida Trust for Historic Preservation, a 35-acre oasis of nature sits between the Intracoastal Waterway and the Atlantic Ocean. Bonnet House Museum and Gardens is a throwback to old Florida architecture and landscape. Owned by artists Frederic Clay Bartlett and his wife, Evelyn Fortune Lilly, as a winter retreat, this is not your typical millionaire's estate. Even though money was no object, this property was built and maintained as a charming, whimsical home to inspire art, eclectic collections and warm memories. Open to the public for tours and private events, this space is a welcome break from the beach scene.

A few blocks away lies the entrance to Las Olas Boulevard, an upscale area of shopping, galleries and dining experiences, sitting along the city's famous canals. The street runs west to the city's central business district and is accessible by car or water taxi, which offers daily hop-on, hop-off fares. Gondola tours also travel through the canals, some in conjunction with waterfront dining options.

Many shopping opportunities for antique and consignment furniture hunters are available, with mid-century modern motif being a popular style. Some shops might prove costly, but many offer affordable prices like Decades Design Group, with its two locations in Fort Lauderdale. With so much wealth in the area, interesting deals might be found on items previously owned by the rich and famous, from oversized chandeliers to mid-mod tchotchkes, one could spend an afternoon searching for treasures around town.

Fort Lauderdale has become a diverse city of multi-cultural, multi-faceted, and multi-generational alternatives to theme parks and tourist traps. Not just for spring break anymore, the city offers year-round opportunities for beach vacays, shopping adventures, historic discoveries and culinary surprises. With its proximity to Miami, Key West and Florida's Gulf Coast, Fort Lauderdale also provides the perfect jumping-off point for further adventures.

