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LIFESTYLE | TRAVEL

Wait, Is Fort Lauderdale...Cool? A Traveler's Guide

With a booming food scene and throwback architecture, Fort Lauderdale is connecting with hip, hungry travelers.



GOING COASTAL A swimming pool at the Kimpton Shorebreak Fort Lauderdale Beach Resort, opened in late 2022, offers views of the Intracoastal Waterway.

By Matthew Kronsberg | Photographs by Alfonso Duran for The Wall Street Journal

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SOME THINGS in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., never change. The Elbo Room—the open-air beer bar where East Las Olas Boulevard meets the ocean is, incredibly, just as raucous today as it was 40 years ago when the city was synonymous with spring break debauchery.

I approached a recent visit to the Elbo Room warily, but a \$5 beer and singalongs to Tom Petty and Zach Bryan quickly won me over. A few more beers and I risked being consumed by dangerous thoughts of jumping from a motel balcony into a swimming pool so I high-tailed it out of there before the spring break spirit completely took hold.



From left: Crowds gather on the wraparound balconies at the Elbo Room, a historic hub of the city's beach party scene; drinks are poured at the Elbo Room.

I grew up in the suburbs of the South Florida city in the 1980s, during the final years of the city's "Fort Liquordale" era. It was always beautiful and often fun. But interesting? Not compared with Miami, the cultural supernova 30 miles to the south. I got out as soon as I could but still return to visit my family there often, and I have watched the area struggle to redefine itself.

A recent trip back revealed that the struggle is paying off. Young people are moving into the city, bringing diversity and energy to emerging micro-neighborhoods. A craft beer scene has blossomed—at least 15 breweries have sprouted within 10 miles of downtown—and an onslaught of new restaurants has snagged national attention.

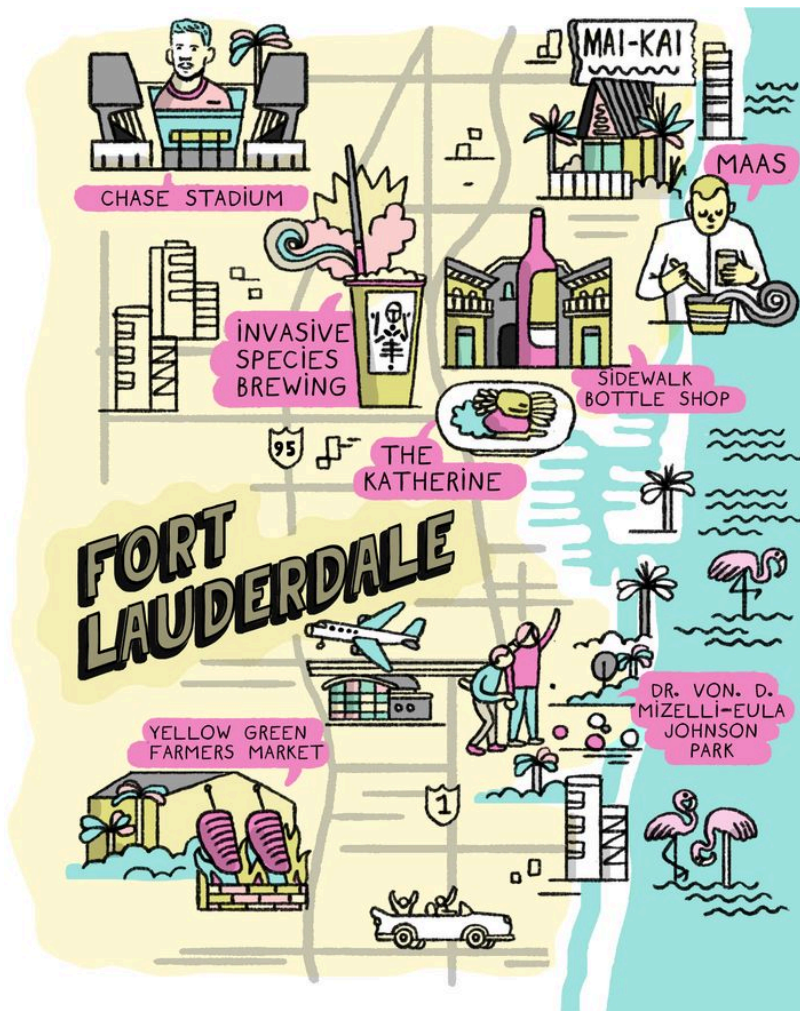


ILLUSTRATION: JAMES GULLIVER HANCOCK

And you may have heard of that fresh Fort Lauderdale transplant Lionel Messi, the Argentine soccer player who last December bought a \$10.75 million estate conveniently close to Chase Stadium, where his team, Inter Miami CF, will play this season. In short, the city has developed a swagger I'd never imagined, as it sheds its reputation as a place exclusive to hedonistic spring breakers, the yacht set and sun-starved retirees.

To rediscover my hometown I started in Progresso Village, a neighborhood that extends north from downtown. First stop: Sidewalk Bottleshop, a wine bar housed in a 99-year-old Mission-style building. Entering through its courtyard, I noticed a graffitied rendition of the Last Supper, draped with a banner that read, "Messi is the GOAT," hung there by chef, co-owner and proud Argentine Walter Navarro.

Navarro turns out an ambitious menu from a trailer parked outside the bar's back door. While I ate a milanesa sandwich and sipped a Spanish Garnacha, co-owner David Lopez told me how, as a kid growing up in Miami, he'd written off Fort Lauderdale as "a boat town run by old people." But in the two years since the pair opened the wine bar, that's changed. "I'm bringing

all my friends, chefs up from Miami for pop-ups, and the first thing they say is ‘Holy s—, this is awesome. Why haven’t I discovered this place earlier?’”

Nearby, at Invasive Species Brewing in Flagler Village, I met Megan and Mickey Quinn, both 30, very recent transplants from Cleveland. When they first arrived, they expected everything to be like the Strip where the Elbo Room is located, but “then we started finding places like this and Tarpon River,” Megan said, referencing another district and its namesake brewery. “I’ve totally changed my perspective.” Surrounded by tropical taxidermy, I watched the bartender plunge a superheated iron rod into a small glass of beer, caramelizing its residual sugars and creating a dramatic puff of steam.

You’ll find the greatest monument to the cultural cornucopia the region has become—Yellow Green Farmers Market, with about 700 stands—in Hollywood, 5 miles south of the airport. Though tempted by Peruvian-style sushi and Colombian BBQ, I made a beeline instead to Bahamas Specialty Seafood, where Godfrey Young makes conch salad the way his grandparents and great grandparents from Andros and Cat Islands did. (“I’m an originalist,” he said.)

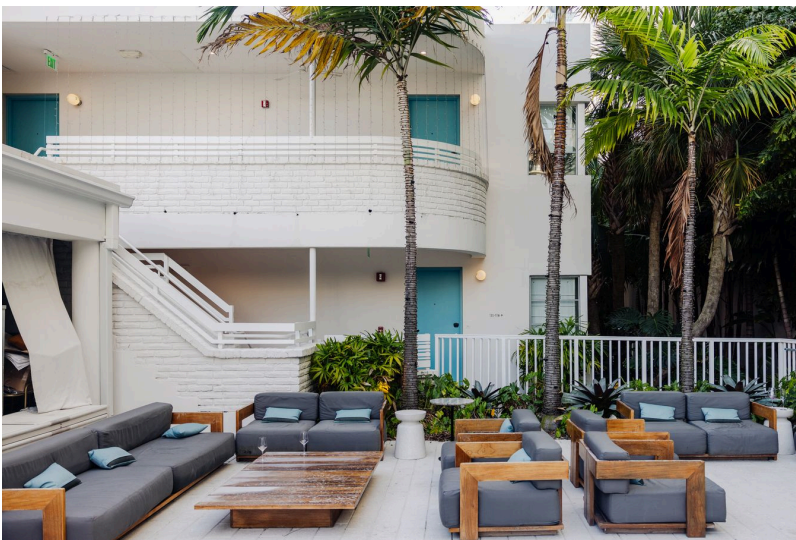


Clockwise from top left: Conch salad is prepared at Bahamas Specialty Seafood, a stall at the Yellow Green Farmers Market in Hollywood; visitors browse the wares at the Yellow Green Farmers Market; the market also includes a central pavilion where diners and shoppers can gather.

I found so much to love inland, it took me a while to make it to the beach, theoretically the city's main attraction. I drove 20 minutes to Dr. Von D. Mizell-Eula Johnson State Park on the waterfront. I hiked the Barrier Island Nature Trail and watched kayakers paddle among the manatees of Whiskey Creek.

Housed in the Conrad Hotel, Vitolo—the just-opened offshoot of New York's celebrity canteen Emilio's Ballato—promises to bring famous faces to Fort Lauderdale for Italian red-sauce classics. Next door, MAASS in the Four Seasons hotel might soon attract Michelin stars, given that chef Ryan Ratino has earned three for his Washington, D.C., restaurants. At the bar, while I ate a trifle made with fermented banana and black truffle, a woman next to me, already on

her third visit, told me “We needed this,” sounding like a citizen of a frontier town hailing the arrival of a sheriff.



Clockwise from top left: The patio at Archibalds Village Bakery in the North Beach Village neighborhood; a scone from Archibalds Village Bakery; an outdoor seating area at the Kimpton Shorebreak Fort Lauderdale Beach Resort.

Right behind those hotels, I spent time strolling through North Beach Village, a bastion of old-school charm anchored by Breakers Avenue, with teal-tinged midcentury buildings like the 96-room Kimpton Shorebreak Fort Lauderdale Beach Resort. Businesses like Archibalds Village Bakery, which slings British pastries worthy of a handshake from Paul Hollywood of “The Great British Baking Show,” give the area a friendly, scrappy vibe that evokes early ’90s South Beach.

Fans of midcentury design are waiting for June, though, when the Mai-Kai will reopen after a 30-month, \$15 million renovation. The Polynesian-style restaurant, built in 1956, was arguably the apotheosis of tiki culture. Partnering with distiller Maison Ferrand to resurrect the high ester rum used in classic tiki cocktails like the Jet Pilot, it hopes to retake that honor.



Clockwise from top left: The dining room at the Katherine, a restaurant by the acclaimed chef Timon Balloo; tuna crispy rice and Thai red curry branzino from the Katherine; a Negroni cocktail from the restaurant.

Fort Lauderdale’s transformation crystallized for me at the Katherine, Timon Balloo’s downtown restaurant. At his eponymous Miami restaurant, which closed during the pandemic, Balloo cooked remarkable food. He and Marissa, his wife and business partner, had grown up in the Lauderdale ’burbs, gone away and recently returned to raise their kids. From the globe-spanning menu, I ordered “Mom’s Trini oxtail” and a Thai red-curry branzino, topped by a green papaya salad, whose recipe Timon learned from his father-in-law, who hails from Chiang Mai.

As I dug in, Balloo explained why they were drawn to Fort Lauderdale after so much time away: “We met here. We’re bringing back everything we love from our travels to the city where we fell in love.”

The Turbulent Tides of Florida Spring Break

In this state, spring break has been both a cultural touchstone and generational rite for nearly seven decades, even as other destinations have fallen in and out of favor. Here, some high- (but mostly low-) lights of this annual.

1960

The film “Where the Boys Are” tells the story of four college students in Fort Lauderdale for spring break.



COURTESY EVERETT COLLECTION

1961

Fifty thousand spring breakers descend on Fort Lauderdale, nearly doubling the town's population of 84,000.



BETTMANN ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES

1986

Fort Lauderdale's mayor tells students to stay away. Daytona Beach's mayor welcomes them, and invites MTV along.



GETTY IMAGES

2012

Harmony Korine's film "Spring Breakers" turns the neon underbelly of the annual student bacchanal into art.



ANNAPURNA PICTURES/COURTESY EVERETT COLLECTION

2015

Panama City Beach, the latest hot spot of coed spring migrations, sets up a “beach jail” after the revelry gets out of hand.



MICHAEL SPOONEYBARGER/REUTERS

2024

Miami Beach declares it is “breaking up” with spring break after nearly 500 arrests during 2023’s festivities.



JEFFREY GREENBERG/UNIVERSAL IMAGES GROUP VIA GETTY IMAGES

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