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In the Midst of it all

Move over South Beach – it's now all about the Mid-Beach, as the cool kids find a new hangout in Miami. *James Litston* visits the up-and-coming neighbourhood

The Miami Beach Edition is contributing to the revival of the Mid-Beach district

Mirrored sunglasses are an absolute godsend if you want to politely observe your surroundings. From my poolside perch beneath a large sunshade, I'm able to scrutinise my fellow guests without looking nosey. The 30 and 40-something crowd are clearly enjoying the Florida sunshine. Animated conversations mix with laid-back disco beats as a waiter pops a champagne cork, further fuelling the palpable buzz. It all feels excitingly glamorous and upbeat – just the sort of thing one might expect from a trip to glitzy Miami.

The difference, though, is that I'm not in famously showy, see-and-be-seen South Beach. I'm a dozen blocks north of South Beach's Lincoln Road Mall in an area known as Mid-Beach, where I'm soaking up the sights at the Miami Beach Edition. Although I've holidayed in Miami more times than I can count, I've never ventured this far from the South Beach strip before. That's because until recently, this staid and unfashionable district was more *Golden Girls* than *Miami Vice*, with limited visitor appeal.

But thanks to a raft of high-profile developments, recent years have seen Miami's style-conscious crowd desert sizzling South Beach for this unloved neighbourhood. And two hotels in particular – the Edition and its near neighbour, Faena Hotel Miami Beach – have suddenly made this stretch of shore the most talked-about in Miami.

True renaissance

The story of Mid-Beach's blossoming began in late 2008, when the landmark Fontainebleau Resort relaunched from a massive refurbishment. Despite being located 30 blocks from Ocean Drive and the heart of South Beach, the Fontainebleau's nightclub, Liv, was soon drawing crowds to this forgotten end of the beach. The W South Beach and Soho Beach House followed and, post-recession, the pace has picked up; the Edition opened in 2014, the Faena joined it last year and the Nobu Hotel Eden Roc is scheduled to open this month.

"Mid-Miami Beach is enjoying a true renaissance," William Talbert, president and chief executive of Greater Miami Convention & Visitors Bureau, confirms when we meet at the start of my trip. "During the heyday of the Rat Pack, the Fontainebleau and Eden Roc were among America's most desirable vacation destinations, and today they've been reinvented and restored. Mid-Beach is just across the causeway to the Wynwood cultural quarter and the booming Design District, beyond which lie Downtown and Port Miami. And the Edition, Faena and Metropolitan by Como are adding further distinction to Mid-Beach's impressive portfolio of hotels."

As I sit here quietly taking in the Edition's poolside scene, I can see why it's been causing such a stir. The hotel – part of the Marriott family – marries Ritz-Carlton levels of service with distinctive Ian Schrager styling. The resultant merger of lifestyle and luxury is fabulous indeed.

Turn to 54

Faena Hotel boasts a Damien Hirst sculpture

Super stylish W is at the tip of Mid-Beach

Occupying a remodelled 1950s structure, it's a glorious mix of original features and contemporary chic. And while the tropical landscaping and retro design beg to be Instagrammed, I don't see anyone indulgently taking selfies by the pool. It's far too civilised for that, the clientele too cool.

It's a similar story a few doors down at the show-stopping Faena Hotel, which I pop into for lunch at Los Fuegos, its Argentinean steakhouse. Like the Edition, it's another renovated 1950s icon – but that's about the only parallel. Instead of the latter's pared-back aesthetic, the Faena screams over-the-top excess (movie director Baz Luhrmann was involved with the design).

Huge, bright murals adorn the cathedral-like lobby, with nothing so vulgar as a reception desk to interrupt their impact. Bold colours, animal prints and gilded accents define the public areas, and even the most refined guests can't help gawping at the golden mammoth skeleton in the grounds – a showpiece sculpture by artist Damien Hirst.

The Continental restaurant offers outdoor dining towards South Beach

Budget option

It's not just about high-end hotels, though. Across the street from the Edition lies another new property, the AC Hotel Miami Beach. Designed for a younger audience, this limited service hotel offers boutique styling on a budget. The rooms are smart, and the rooftop pool and lobby-level bar make up for the lack of a restaurant. It's ideal for fun-loving clients seeking style without breaking the bank.

But while these hotels are all busy, it's a different story in the surrounding streets, where the absence of cool shops and cafes does little to draw foot traffic. Although these things will surely spring up as the area continues to develop, for now I have to walk several blocks towards South Beach to find somewhere for dinner. But The Continental, which opened last year, is worth the walk for its retro styling, Asian-inspired sharing plates and $3 happy hour beers.

It's also close to the W Hotel, where I head for cocktails. As befits the design-focused brand, the interiors are show-stopping. The Living Room bar is standing-room only, but I find space at Grove, the chilled-out bar in the gardens. In the soft evening light, I no longer need mirrored shades for people-watching, so I settle back to soak up the vibrant scene. It's hard to believe that this part of town was once so unfashionable, but with the spotlight shining so intently, Mid-Beach looks set for a brilliant future.

Book it: Five nights room-only at the AC Hotel costs from £1,055pp (two sharing), including Manchester flights departing May 2017.

■ thomascookworld.com

Operator view

Miami's Mid-Beach is performing well for Thomas Cook, as Jill Thompson *(pictured)*, head of long-haul, reports

"Miami Mid-Beach is an up-and-coming destination for us, and we've seen a huge increase in popularity for this area in the last few years. It's slightly removed yet within easy reach of the non-stop bustle of South Beach, making it ideal for combining a beach stay with culture, shopping and nightlife. It's easy to get around by bus, bike or foot, too, so clients don't need to drive. It is also popular as a twin-centre with Caribbean destinations such as Cuba, Jamaica and the Bahamas, or as a starting point for a Caribbean cruise or a fly-drive to the Florida Keys or elsewhere in the Sunshine State.

Miami itself appeals with events such as the Ultra Music Festival, in March, when the world's hottest DJs perform at clubs and pool parties all over town. There's also the Polo World Cup and a renowned Gay Pride event. And no trip to Miami is complete without a trip to Little Havana too, with its backdrop of traditional Cuban music, art galleries and authentic cuisine.

Our new Florida brochure launches this month, featuring holidays from May 2017 to April 2018. We've added the Savoy Hotel and the Miami Beach Edition to our existing range of Mid-Beach hotels, which includes Soho Beach House, AC Hotel Miami Beach and Circa 39 Hotel Miami Beach. Plus we have our own twice-weekly flights from Manchester with Thomas Cook Airlines, which feature a premium cabin that provides an even greater level of comfort (and is a great choice for special occasion trips). As well as Thomas Cook Airlines, we offer flights from other airports with British Airways and Virgin Atlantic, our preferred partners."