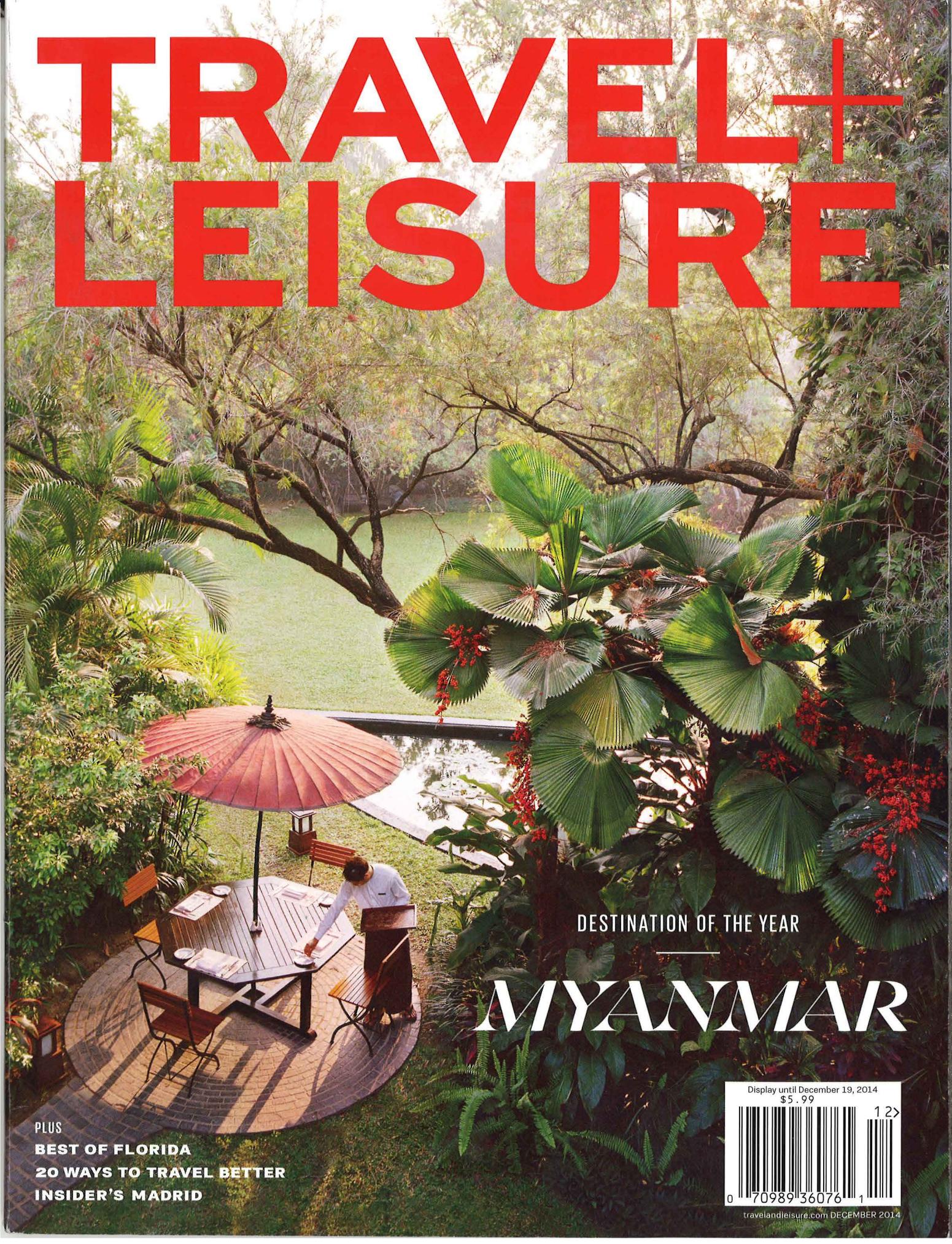


TRAVEL + LEISURE

A vibrant photograph of a tropical garden. In the foreground, a chef in a white uniform is bent over, preparing food on a small table under a large, traditional-style red umbrella. The garden is filled with various tropical plants, including several large green fan palms and clusters of red flowers. A paved walkway leads through the foliage towards a bright, open area.

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WELCOME TO THE
NEW FLORIDA

ON A JOURNEY THROUGH THE SUNSHINE STATE,
TOM AUSTIN DISCOVERS EDGY ART SPACES,
AN INNOVATIVE FOOD SCENE, AND PLENTY OF COOL CACHET.

PHOTOGRAPHED BY DAVID ALEXANDER ARNOLD



hen I was a kid growing up in Miami, Florida had been reduced to a series of only-good-for-a-weekend clichés. Orlando was defined by Walt Disney World. Palm Beach was starchy and snooty. Miami was the cranky sixth borough of New York City.

Now a young generation of Floridians is transforming the state, creating forward-thinking hotels, restaurants, shops, and neighborhoods, and forging new regional identities while holding on to the best of their respective local traditions. On a recent trip, I uncovered a New Florida—a little smarter, a lot hipper, and resolutely primed for the future.

SOUTH FLORIDA

Historically, Miami, Fort Lauderdale, and Palm Beach never played well together, but in the past 10 years South Florida has emerged as a nascent metropolis of art, architecture, hype, and rising real estate values, fueled by Art Basel and Design Miami.



Last December, the big Miami story was the opening of Herzog & de Meuron's **Pérez Art Museum Miami (PAMM)** (pamm.org), which included restaurateur Stephen Starr's art-world hangout, Verde. This year, the debut of Museum Park—designed by Cooper, Robertson & Partners, of New York's Battery Park City—has completed the evolution of downtown. Looking out from the waterfront terrace of PAMM, it's like I'm seeing Miami for the first time, the shimmering skyline resembling a neon Xanadu. Nearby, the Modernist Bacardi Tower is now home to the **National YoungArts Foundation** (youngarts.org), which supports emerging artists. On the seventh floor, Frank Gehry has created a high-tech restaurant called **Ted's** (youngarts.org/teds; \$\$), with LED projection screens on every wall and nightly cultural events. After catching a performance by violinist Joshua Bell, I ask Bell about the new restaurant concept, and he says, "Food and live music are two of my favorite things—why not combine them?"

Straight up Biscayne Boulevard is the just-renovated 1953 **Vagabond Hotel** (thevagabondhotel.com; \$\$\$), which has a swinging Miami hepcat vibe. A restored sculpture with cavorting nymphs and dolphins outside the hotel is just the kind of casually beautiful creation that makes me grateful to be a Miamian.

Although Miami Beach is well past its early Art Basel buzz, two anticipated hotel projects are continuing to raise the bar. The iconic **Shelborne Wyndham Grand South Beach** (shelborne.com; \$\$\$) has just completed a \$90 million renovation,

From top:
The three-mile beach at Naples Grande Beach Resort; the Pérez Art Museum Miami.



WORTH THE DETOUR: FORT LAUDERDALE

This coastal city is in the middle of a development boom spearheaded by the expansion of the Fort Lauderdale–Hollywood International Airport, set to be completed in 2018. Highlights: Just north of downtown, the renovated **Victoria Park Hotel** (thevictoriaparkhotel.com; \$) is housed in a Midcentury Modern building and has local art and surfboard-shaped wooden coffee tables. Down the street, the **Thousand Pound Egg** (thousandpoundegg.com) sells south Florida-sourced products such as Mr. Q. Cumber sodas. The recently opened **Stonewall Gallery** (stonewall-museum.org) draws from the Stonewall Archives to showcase works that range from Village People albums to Oscar Wilde's letters.

From left: A Jonathan Adler-designed room at Eau Palm Beach Resort & Spa; sodas at the Thousand Pound Egg, in Fort Lauderdale.



anchored by a Morimoto restaurant. Farther north, at the **Thompson Miami Beach** (thompsonhotels.com; \$\$\$), designer Martin Brudnizki, who made a splash with the city's Soho Beach House, mixes contemporary art by Tom Slaughter and Duncan Hannah with vintage design accents. The suites have rows of martini glasses lined up like mini obelisks on a Midcentury-style room divider; at chef Michelle Bernstein's Seagrape restaurant downstairs, the retro bar is made of dark-green onyx marble.

I first wrote about Palm Beach society in the 1980's, and the town can be daunting; back then, locals regarded anything to do with Miami as hopelessly beyond the pale. Things have certainly loosened up. The designer Jonathan Adler, a seasonal resident who has built an empire on whimsy here, tells me that a trip to Palm Beach should be like "lemon sorbet for your mind and body." He's leaving his lemony mark all over the guest rooms at the new **Eau Palm Beach Resort & Spa** (eaupalmbeach.com; \$\$), a festive mélange of Sputnikesque light fixtures and pillows with images of smooching doves. On Bradley Place, the **Meat Market Palm Beach** (meatmarketpalmbeach.com; \$\$\$)—an offshoot of South Beach's big scene restaurant—is perennially crowded and turns out dishes such as white-truffle Kobe-beef tartare and tequila-based cocktails with names like "I Love Gold."

I make my way south to Delray Beach on the A1A, with the glistening ocean along for the ride. After Palm Beach's incessant roar, Delray Beach feels a lot like Mayberry. It's quieter and more low-key, with funky sidewalk cafés and pint-size boutiques lining the main artery, Atlantic Avenue. I check in to the **Seagate Hotel & Spa** (seagatehotel.com; \$\$) and immediately hop in one of the hotel's complimentary cars, making a beeline for a nightcap at **Dada** (dadaofdelray.com; \$\$\$), which is full of surrealist-inspired works of art.

THE FLORIDA KEYS

Driving south on U.S. 1 takes me to the Florida Keys, with booming Key Largo my first stop. The restaurant scene in the Keys has long swayed between irredeemable tourist traps and overwrought French joints with delirious post-nouvelle ambitions. But I'm surprised to find a new cadre of creative young chefs who are changing the culinary landscape.

My reconnaissance mission kicks off with lunch at the waterfront **Snapper's Restaurant & Saloon** (snapperskeylargo.com; \$\$\$). Snapper's has all the usual semiotics of a Keys cliché, from Conch Republic flags to saucy let-the-good-times-roll bar signs, but there's also an herb garden out front and up-and-coming chef Andrew Tsang in the kitchen. His ceviche, made with lime, cilantro, serrano chiles, and locally caught lionfish lightly smoked in a glass Mason jar, is one of the most flavorful yet subtle dishes I've ever eaten in the Keys.

From Key Largo, I continue down U.S. 1, stopping in for smoked lobster at **Casa Mar Fresh Seafood Market** (Rte. 1; 305/440-3935), in the town of Tavernier, before arriving in Islamorada. A traditional haven for sport fishermen—a roll call that includes Winston Churchill and Paul Newman—Islamorada has lately earned the reputation as the most sophisticated of the Keys. My hotel, the 18-cottage beachside **Moorings Village & Spa** (themooringsvillage.com;\$\$\$\$), is surrounded by bougainvillea and coconut palms, and there's a cool pop-up boutique nearby called Mayú on the Bay in an Airstream trailer filled with pieces by Roberta Freymann, Letarte, and others. Come evening, I head to chef George Patti's slick new **S.A.L.T Fusion Cuisine & Caña Lounge** (salt-fusion.com; \$\$\$) for a plate of Manchego grits and seared shrimp in chorizo cream sauce, a welcome leap from the fish-fry-palace era of the old Keys.

From top: Mayú on the Bay, a boutique at the Moorings Village & Spa, in Islamorada; a view from the Thompson Miami Beach.





From left: The adults-only Oasis Pool at the Four Seasons Resort Orlando, Ravello, the hotel's Italian restaurant.

WHAT'S NEW IN NAPLES

The Gulf Coast city is trading its hallmark Old Florida sophistication for a younger—and more vibrant—sense of style. The **Naples Grande Beach Resort** (naplesgrande.com; \$\$) has just renovated 424 rooms, many overlooking a sugar-sand beach. At the revamped **Ritz-Carlton** (ritzcarlton.com; \$\$\$), a first-floor lounge called Dusk whips up first-rate sushi and is great for people-watching. North of downtown Naples, don't miss the **Local** (thelocalnaples.com; \$\$), where the farm-to-table menu includes a mouthwatering barbecue chicken with pecan crumble.

I arrive in Key West at cocktail hour, when downtown is just hitting its sloppy stride, and take a shuttle boat from the Westin Key West Resort & Marina to **Sunset Key Guest Cottages** (westinkeywestresort.com; \$\$\$), the Westin's sister property and the perfect spot for watching the sun descend into the ocean. For breakfast the following day, it's **Glazed Donuts** (glazetdonuts.com), where Jonathan and Megan Pidgeon have developed a cult following thanks to their maple, bourbon, and candied-bacon treats. The island's drowsy rhythm is seductive, and I spend the morning shopping downtown, before lunch at Old Town staple **Garbo's Grill** (garbosgrillkeywest.com; \$), a tricked-out food stand and truck with mock gun turrets made out of painted Tupperware cake covers. The grilled mahimahi tacos and Korean *bulgogi* short ribs are downright addictive.

Despite the vestiges of Key West eccentricity, serious hotel money is funneling into the island. At the entrance of Key West, far removed from Old Town's mad flavor, there's the new, 100-room **Gates of Key West** (gateshotelkeywest.com; \$\$); and in the historic seaport area, the **Marker** (themarkerkeywest.com; \$\$) has 96 airy, white-on-white rooms, some with water views. Just south, the **Saint Hotel Key West** (thesainthotelkeywest.com; \$\$) is a multimillion-dollar renovation of the city's landmark Southern Cross hotel.

CENTRAL FLORIDA

Heading north along the Florida Turnpike through the headwaters of the Everglades and past old-school towns like Yeehaw Junction, I spot Orlando's Walt Disney World looming on the blank green horizon like a kind of PG-13 Las Vegas. In the classic tradition of the state, the city is reinventing itself all over again,



building on its core business of theme parks, but touting sophisticated hotels and restaurants, and a beyond-cool Vietnamese/hipster scene in the emerging Mills 50 neighborhood northeast of downtown.

The Four Seasons Resort Orlando at Walt Disney World Resort (fourseasons.com; \$\$\$) epitomizes the city's transformation. The sleek adults-only pool is straight out of Palm Beach; the stylish restaurant Ravello, done up in wood and Botticino marble, specializes in updated Italian classics; and the hotel's Explorer Island is like a mini resort for kids, with a tubing creek and faux-Stonehenge garden follies.

That afternoon, seized by nostalgia for my childhood trips to Disney, I find myself clinging desperately to my sanity (and my stomach) on Space Mountain. Walt Disney World and Universal Studios Florida didn't get to be figureheads of multinational behemoths by failing to capitalize on the city's craze for sympathetic adult diversions: these days, Epcot's new After Hours Wind Down Experience, which allows grown-ups to eat and drink until 11 p.m., is more to my taste. After a stroll past the United Kingdom

Pavilion in Epcot's World Showcase, where a cover band is belting out without irony the Who's "Won't Get Fooled Again," I stop by the France Pavilion for wine and tasty escargot cassoulet.

Orlando has more James Beard Award-nominated chefs than any other Florida destination, and the

Grande Lakes Orlando (grandelakes.com; \$\$), just a 12-mile drive from downtown, is hoping to build on that fact. A partnership between Ritz-Carlton and JW Marriott, the property has an on-site farm complete with beehives and a barn. At the Ritz-Carlton,

chef Mark Jeffers's Highball & Harvest restaurant serves a standout smoked mackerel dip, while Melissa Kelly's Primo, at the JW, whips up southern Italian farm-to-table fare such as sautéed scaloppine of pork saltimbocca.

The next day, I set out to explore another side of the city's culinary resurgence. In tow with Ricky Ly, a local food blogger and author of *The Food Lovers' Guide to Orlando*, lunch is a marathon of three remarkable Vietnamese restaurants in a tiny mall in Mills 50. The place is like stepping into a slice of Vietnam: the delicious \$3.50 kingfish sandwich at **Banh Mi Nha Trang** (nhatrangsue.com; \$) is a kind of benediction—and the best of Florida's new age. +