

[VP10Attractions.doc, Jeff Borg, 3,090 words]

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Attractions Galore

From the oldest building in the United States to the newest member of the Metrozoo family, the attractions of Greater Miami are guaranteed to thrill, captivate and educate. Nature provides the lush backdrop for a colorful palette of parks, animal adventures and historic sites.

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*Besides the world's most fabulous beaches,
endless fun activities and attractions await.*

By Jeff Borg

Greater Miami and the Beaches packs in more fun than you can schedule. Watch dolphins leap, see alligators wrestle, hear parrots talk, and ride boats gliding on air. Stroll through intimate botanical gardens and sprawling public parks, from waterfront to underwater. View architecture from ancient Europe to Streamline Moderne. Lounge in spring-fed pools and at poolside lounges. Or just veg out at the beach.

BEACHES. Sure, Greater Miami may offer tons of fun, food and drink, but we all know you came for the beach. Where else would you find world-class beaches with a world-class city attached?

The first thing to remember is that the beaches belongs to you — well, technically, to the state — but you get to enjoy any of them from tiny Golden

Beach in the north to the tip of Key Biscayne in the south — 21 miles of blissful shores.

One of the world's most famous patches of sand would have to be sun-drenched South Beach, the 3.3 miles stretching from South Pointe up to 23rd Street. This is the image that appears on every postcard — backed by Art Deco hotels, fashion models, fancy cars and such — and farther north are several more miles of beach, lined with more luxurious hotels, resorts and condos and punctuated by parks, parking lots and passageways between the buildings for easy access.

Miami-Dade County's huge Haulover Park, across the cut from Bal Harbour, is the site of much seaside activity, with a marina, picnic facilities, nine holes of golf and 1.4 miles of beach, including a secluded clothing-optional section.

Virginia Key and Key Biscayne are strung along Rickenbacker Causeway like gems on a necklace. Windsurfers, kite boarders, sailors, and their friends and dogs set up tailgate parties on the causeway's Hobie Beach, named after the small sailboats that swarm colorfully offshore.

Virginia Key holds special significance for African Americans. During the years when beaches were segregated, black families and friends could come here by boat — later by causeway — for barbecues, music, games, fresh ocean breezes and cool ocean swims on sultry summer days. Closed in 1982, listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 2002, then reopened in 2008, historic Virginia Key Beach now has lifeguards, facilities and parking. Tour the Virginia Key Coastal Hammock Interpretive Trail to see how the park is restoring native flora.

Out at the end of Rickenbacker Causeway awaits Key Biscayne and the county's enormous Crandon Park, offering plenty of parking, world-renowned golf and tennis facilities, and two miles of white beach consistently ranked among the nation's top 10. Undulating sandbars not only calm the surf but also make great

places to perch and play. With picnic tables, grills, dunes and hardwood hammocks, Crandon offers something for every beachgoer.

At the southern tip of Key Biscayne, Bill Baggs Cape Florida State Park protects the Cape Florida Lighthouse. Erected in 1825, it remains the oldest structure still standing in Greater Miami and the Beaches.

ACTION. For a little action, try an airboat ride on the River of Grass, better known as the Everglades. Professional guides lead tours through the swamps and hardwood hammocks to see alligators and other wildlife. Witness alligator wrestling. Stop at a local restaurant, where the menu is likely to include frogs' legs and gator tails. Take Tamiami Trail (US 41) west and look for Angels Cypress Airboat Tours, Coopertown Airboat Rides or Safari Everglades Safari Park. Down south near Homestead, find Everglades Alligator Farm.

Homestead offers other kinds of action as well. Folks can satisfy their need for speed at the Richard Petty Driving Experience, at Homestead-Miami Speedway, the only such venue to host all six of North America's motor-sports championships. Also near Homestead is the huge Homestead Sports Complex, a baseball-training facility, and the Doc DeMilly Rodeo Arena, where the annual Homestead Championship Rodeo and Frontier Days features roping, riding, steer wrestling, barrel racing and bull riding.

MARINE PARKS. A few minutes from Downtown Miami on the Rickenbacker Causeway sits the pioneering Miami Seaquarium, which spreads over 38 acres of Virginia Key. Kids of all ages get a kick out of the Nile crocodiles, sea turtles, manatees, rays, wild birds and fish of every size and color, including 200-pound nurse sharks. Playful dolphins, sea lions and whales perform for guests in shows under the Golden Dome, a local landmark designed by the late acclaimed architect Buckminster Fuller. On everybody's to-do list should be the Seaquarium's Dolphin Harbor, where visitors can experience a leisurely two-hour interaction with the friendly dolphins. An unforgettable swim with the graceful marine mammals follows an educational segment.

Farther south lies the largest marine park in the national system, Biscayne National Park, most remarkable because 95 percent of it is underwater. Divers and snorkelers get a fish-eye view of the brilliant coral reefs, tropical fishes and other delicate marine creatures, while landlubbers can view them aboard glass-bottom boat tours. Park activities include fishing, picnicking, boating, camping and wildlife watching. Wear comfortable shoes to hike the self-guided trail on Elliott Key, winding through a hardwood hammock of rare vines, flowers and trees.

MUSEUMS. In Downtown Miami, the area's rich history can be explored in the Historical Museum of Southern Florida. The museum's exhibitions examine the legacies of Paleo and Tequesta natives, who came millennia ago, and the community's more modern development, including immigration from Latin America and the Caribbean. An excellent research center preserves more than a million historical photographs, along with antique maps, books and prints, while the object collections display artifacts from the Seminole and Miccosukee tribes.

At the iconic Vizcaya Museum and Gardens, in Coconut Grove, a priceless collection of furnishings and decorative arts spans 2,000 years of North American, European and Asian history. All are housed in a bayside estate from the Gilded Age, set amid 10 acres of formal gardens and hardwood hammocks. Each year, Vizcaya welcomes 185,000 visitors with tours in 10 languages. The landmark has appeared in countless movies and television series and has hosted the likes of Queen Elizabeth II, Pope John Paul II, President Ronald Reagan, King Juan Carlos and Queen Sofia, and the Summit of the Americas. Residents and visitors love to commemorate important occasions, including galas, weddings, commitment ceremonies and *quinceañeras*, at Viscaya.

South Florida's prehistoric past is on display at the Deering Estate at Cutler. Archaeological sites date human activity here to 10,000 years ago and animal life to 100,000 years ago. The 444-acre estate contains a Native American burial mound from around 1600. Coastal hardwood hammocks, mangrove forests, salt marshes and endangered pine rock lands add to its interest. Visitors can join

annual events such as the SoBay Festival of the Arts, the Deering Seafood Festival and the Summer Cabaret Concert Series.

The graceful Mediterranean city of Coral Gables was the brainchild of developer George E. Merrick and was named after his boyhood home, so the city has preserved the home for all to see. Coral Gables Merrick House was built in 1899 as a wood-frame structure, onto which the characteristic coral-rock gables were added around 1907. The house has been restored to its 1920s' appearance and is filled with Merrick's art, furniture and personal treasures.

The oldest buildings in Greater Miami and the Beaches date to the 1100s, but showed up in North Miami Beach during the 1950s. Originally constructed in medieval Spain, the Monastery of St. Bernard de Clairvaux, a 12th-century relic from Segovia, was brought here by publishing magnate William Randolph Hearst, reassembled stone by stone, renamed the Ancient Spanish Monastery and opened to the public. Couples love to get married in the church on the property.

In South Miami-Dade, you'll find Coral Castle, one of Greater Miami's more mysterious sites. It was built by one Edward Leedskalnin in the 1920s. Although he weighed only 100 pounds, he by himself moved tons of coral rock by hand to construct the massive castle with equally massive furnishings. Why? For unrequited love, of course.

Not all museums focus on the past. In Coconut Grove, the Miami Science Museum looks toward the future. Visitors explore energy, robotics, astronomy, archaeology and biology. The museum — the first to join the Smithsonian Institution's national-affiliate network — has collected more than 60,000 artifacts. An awesome planetarium, with a domed projection screen 65 feet in diameter, has a projector capable of displaying the stars and planets as seen from anywhere on Earth at any time of year.

Don't forget the kids. Miami Children's Museum, on MacArthur Causeway near Downtown Miami, includes 14 galleries plus classrooms, a parent/teacher

resource center, the Kid Smart educational gift shop, a 200-seat auditorium and a Subway restaurant. The museum offers hundreds of bilingual interactive exhibitions, as well as programs, classes and learning materials related to arts, culture, community and communications.

In the section of the Everglades just west of Miami, members of the Miccosukee Tribe live unaffected by modern times in many ways. The tribe descended from approximately 50 Native Americans who escaped from the Seminole Wars of the 19th century. Long one of the area's most celebrated attractions, the Miccosukee Indian Village presents tribal life through craft exhibitions, historical artifacts, typical foods and famous alligator wrestling. The tribe also has a thriving gaming enterprise.

PARKS. In the city of Miami, at the center of the urban area, neighborhood parks are sprinkled in many of the areas popular with visitors, starting with Bayfront Park downtown. Densely tropical Simpson Park sits just three blocks from the bustling business center of Brickell Avenue. Wainwright, David Kennedy and Peacock parks line the bay at Coconut Grove, and the Dinner Key Picnic Islands lie just offshore. Find more Miami parks at miamigov.com/cms/parks.

The city of Miami Beach maintains many of the parks that visitors know best. Lummus Park provides the palms, lawns, dunes and sands between the sparkling blue Atlantic and pastel-colored Ocean Drive. South Pointe Park makes a great perch from which to view giant cruise ships, nearly close enough to touch, as they glide into port in the early morning and out in the evening. Find still more Miami Beach parks at miamibeachparks.com.

Miami-Dade County operates regional parks. In the urban northeast corner of Greater Miami, the hubbub of city life dissipates quickly in the haven known as Greynolds Park. Follow the tranquil Oleta River past mangroves and other native trees, while alligators and turtles glide by silently. Take advantage of canoe, kayak and paddleboat rentals on weekends and holidays. Down south in Coral

Gables, tropical Matheson Hammock Park has a small saltwater “atoll” pool favored by families, who enjoy its safe beach, bay-front views and peaceful picnic grounds. Other facilities include a marina, hiking trails and a fine restaurant set in a coral-rock building. For more on county parks, visit www.miamidade.gov/parks.

On the bay adjacent to Matheson Hammock, don't miss Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden, one of the premium conservational and educational gardens anywhere. Within the lush sanctuary, quiet pathways thread between flourishing plants, flowers, fruits, vines, palms and oaks. Fairchild has a tropical rainforest, an eight-acre arboretum and a four-acre Keys Coastal Habitat. Walking tours, tram tours and butterfly tours complement numerous annual events, including the international mango festival, the palm and cycad festival, the orchid festival, the chocolate festival and Fairchild's signature event, Ramble, a festival featuring 12 acres of plants, garden accessories, antiques, food, music and activities for adults and children.

Farther south, Pinecrest Gardens lays out 22 beautiful acres of botanical gardens with a petting zoo, a playground, a butterfly exhibit and facilities for weddings and parties. Down in the Redland area, discover the 37-acre Fruit and Spice Park, the only botanical garden of its kind in the United States, with 500 varieties of delectable fruits, vegetables, herbs, spices and nuts from around the world, including **50 varieties of mangoes, 80 varieties of bananas and 70 varieties of bamboo**. A tasting counter invites sampling. But don't leave South Miami-Dade before tasting the vintages of Schnebly Redland's Winery. Here vintners make wines from local fruits like mango, litchi and guava.

To find wild animals and birds in their natural habitat,, visit Everglades National Park, covering much of Greater Miami southwest of the urbanized area. Best visited in fall, winter or spring, this slow-moving River of Grass contains both temperate and tropical plants and is known for rich bird life, particularly wading birds like roseate spoonbills, wood storks, great blue herons and egrets. The only place where alligators and crocodiles coexist in the same environment, the glades

also give sanctuary to such rare, endangered species as the Florida panther and the West Indian manatee.

Explore the Everglades by foot, bicycle or canoe, or join a tram tour from the Shark Valley visitor center on the park's northern border. Educational displays and backcountry permits are available at the Flamingo visitor center, deep inside the park, while the Coe Visitor's Center at the main entrance near Homestead offers exhibitions, films, books, brochures and information on walking trails.

SWIMMING POOLS. Even if your hotel has five pools, you should take a dip in Coral Gables' Venetian Pool, a coral-rock quarry transformed into the world's most beautiful and unusual swimming hole and listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The 820,000-gallon pool, which is fed by cool springs, features waterfalls, caves and grottoes. The Venetian architecture, designed by Denman Fink and Phineas Paist, includes a palm-fringed island, a beach, a cobblestone bridge, loggias and porticos. Youngsters need to be 3 years old or 38 inches tall.

If you don't have the use of a pool, Grapeland Water Park is the kind of place that makes the kiddies squeal with delight. Located in the center of town, the family water park features multiple pools, slides and tube rides.

WALKING DISTRICTS. Although spread over 1,946 square miles, Greater Miami and the Beaches does have a few walkable districts. Stroll around Miami Beach's famous Art Deco District, painted in pastel hues and home to the largest concentration of Streamline Moderne structures in the world. Once threatened by the wrecking ball, they now contain Miami Beach's hippest hotels, restaurants, clubs, shops and galleries. Listed on the National Register of Historic Places, they line Ocean Drive, Collins and Washington avenues, and side streets. Efforts to protect the district were spearheaded by the Miami Design Preservation League, the world's first Art Deco society, which arranges tours.

Southwest of Downtown Miami, Little Havana remains the soul of the Cuban community. Amble along its main drag, Calle Ocho (SW Eighth Street), which is

a party for the senses — the rich aroma of handmade cigars, the strong taste of *café cubano*, the rhythmic sound of salsa and the unique sight of grizzled men in guayaberas playing dominoes. Each spring, a million people show up for the world's biggest street party here.

Coconut Grove is a bohemian bayside village of posh boutiques, artsy galleries, eclectic shops, fine eateries, historical sites, sailboats and more boats. Miami evolved from the Grove, where visitors can still see the home of pioneer Commodore Ralph Monroe. But don't let the relaxed daytime charm fool you. Streets can be busier at midnight than they are at noon, and a musical *mélange* from reggae to *reggaetón* spills from the cafés.

A world away from the glitz of Miami, Cauley Square Historic Village preserves a bit of Old South Florida on the road to Homestead. Stroll shady garden paths. Shop for antiques in restored cottages. Refresh in the Tea Room Restaurant, Village Chalet or Latin Corner. Cauley Square makes a great setting for weddings and other gatherings.

ZOOS. Greater Miami's fresh air, sunshine and wildlife are not confined to the beaches. Some of our most colorful characters, from macaws to monkeys, welcome visitors to Jungle Island, on the MacArthur Causeway near Downtown Miami. Trails wind through aviaries to display a rainbow of tropical birds, including pink flamingos, cockatoos, parrots and penguins.

Penguins in Miami? Sure, African penguins thrive in warmer climates. Another unusual resident is the 2,000-pound Crocosaurus, claimed to be the largest crocodile in the Americas. Delightful bird shows take flight in the 1,200-seat Parrot Bowl, while the serpentarium and the jungle theater display animals from snakes to tigers. Kids enjoy the three-story Hippo Slide.

Continue to work on your tan while touring Miami Metrozoo, a rare subtropical site consistently ranked among the country's top 10 zoos. While children marvel at the sight of 1,300 animals roaming unfettered through their natural

environments, parents appreciate the cageless design of the modern park, which re-creates Asian, African, Australian and American habitats so residents feel at home.

On its 740-acre site, Metrozoo recently unveiled Amazon & Beyond, a 27-acre exhibition of jaguars, anacondas, giant river otters, harpy eagles, stingray touch tanks and displays on forests. Ride the monorail or tram for an overview of the park, which makes a great site for a family picnic or larger party. Find Miami Metrozoo 19 miles southwest of Downtown.

Farther south, Monkey Jungle provides a habitat for nearly 400 gibbons, guenons, spider monkeys, orangutans and other playful primates. Most run free on the 30-acre reserve, while visitors observe from inside cages. Now in its third generation of family ownership, Monkey Jungle is one of the country's few protected habitats for endangered primates, and the staff participates in global efforts to save various species.

EVERYWHERE. Sit back and relax as the sights glide by. Hop on an Island Queen cruise, leaving from Bayside Marketplace. From scenic Biscayne Bay, view the impressive skyline of Downtown Miami, the towering cruise ships at the Port of Miami, tony Fisher Island and glittering Miami Beach. Peer into the backyards of the rich and famous. The modern yachts have both air-conditioned and open-air sections and depart from 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. on the hour.

To see all the best attractions throughout Greater Miami and the Beaches, and save some money, consider a Go Miami Card. This pass includes more than 40 local attractions, plus discounts on shopping and dining. Choose from one to seven days' worth of unlimited admissions to museums, tours, cruises and other activities, including the Miami Seaquarium, Jungle Island and Miami Duck Tours.