

# 'I'm leaving you, South Beach. It's not me, it's you. Definitely you' | Opinion

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A pile of beer cans in the sand on South Beach, during Spring Break. Joe Raedle Getty Images

Dear South Beach,

I'm breaking up with you.

This isn't easy to say because I've loved you for so long. Two decades ago, you seduced me with your charms, offering soft breezes, pastel Art Deco buildings and Latin beats. I loved your wide and accessible beach, international foods, burgeoning cultural scene and sophisticated multicultural vibe. You were a place like no other. Small enough to feel like a neighborhood and large enough to encompass the world.

And now? I'm sad to admit our relationship has soured. I know you expect me to say, "It isn't you, it's me." But that's not true. It's you. You've changed in ways that break my heart. At some point, 10 or 15 years ago, you veered in one direction, and I in another. (Isn't this the way most love affairs end?) A victim of your own popularity, I guess, you had a hard time saying no to anyone or any group who wanted a piece of you, whether they added value to the community, or not.

Back in the day — before the A- and even B-list models and photographers decamped *en masse* to Johannesburg, before the hip gay nightclubs closed and their patrons moved to the mainland and Fort Lauderdale — you were fueled by creativity. You were cool then, and suave. Today, you are a tawdry shadow of your former self.

You brought this on yourself.

Your reputation, among those who have already fled, is of a low-rent party town who turns its back on residents in favor of commercial interests. It's hard to think of a week when some festival or other doesn't commandeer the public beach, occasionally erecting enormous air-conditioned tents that impede access to the still-sparkling sea. And don't get me started on the month-plus bacchanal — that you so willingly embrace — innocently called "Spring Break." From late February through early April, thousands swarm into town with an alcohol-fueled, anything-goes mentality, leaving swaths of trash in their wake along the streets and the once-lovely beach.

What? You say I am exaggerating? Oh, South Beach. Remember when your name was a synonym for glamour and glitz? For model shoots and the pop-pop of flashbulbs as celebrities sashayed to the newest restaurant or club? Today, the shots and pops come from guns, as the once-remarkable Ocean Drive is now synonymous with pounding music from clubs, drunken

partiers, street fights and police towers with spotlights to keep an eye on volatile crowds. And when did thong bikinis worn with sandals — and nothing else — become acceptable street attire?

From my perspective, as a winter resident for more than 20 years, you opted for volume of tourism over quality of life, driving away the people who helped create your image as a sophisticated, international destination. I can't help but wonder, my sweet, what would have happened if you had set your sights on more ambitious goals? If you aimed high instead of low. I gaze over the causeway at the Design District in Miami, an area that, not so long ago, was a sleepy 'hood where designers prowled by day and few visited the one restaurant open at night. Today, the innovative district is home to sleek contemporary architecture, luxury boutiques, chef-driven eateries, art galleries, design showrooms and the dazzling Institute of Contemporary Art.

And what are you offering me, South Beach? Along a stretch from Fifth Street to 17th Street, within a three-block-wide swath from Washington Avenue to Ocean Drive, I recently counted 18 tattoo parlors, seven vape shops, nine scooter rental stores, too-numerous-to-count fast-food joints and 15 identical beach-wear stores all selling exactly the same cheap bathing suits, lotions, flip-flops, hats, T shirts and souvenirs. Add to that blocks and blocks of empty storefronts, abandoned or bankrupt — who can tell? — and the demise of your glory is complete.

And so I'm leaving you, my former love, and heading off to parts unknown. I realize all destinations evolve and change, as do all relationships. I'm sure you'll be fine without me. "Good riddance," you might even say. I prefer a gentler parting, and, truly, wish you well.

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