

WITH: NEW ENGLAND DESTINATIONS
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Hot in the city

BY NECEE REGIS | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

MIAMI BEACH — In the mid-1990s, when I first began wintering here, there wasn't much to discover in the neighborhood referred to by locals as South of Fifth, a.k.a. SoFi, a narrowing triangle of streets from Fifth to the end of the island at 17-acre South Pointe Park. There was one high-rise condo building at the southernmost point (now dwarfed by half a dozen towers), Art Deco hotels in varying states of disrepair, one beach bar, bodegas, Joe's Stone Crab, and two-story apartment buildings that might best be described as neglected. It was a big deal when Big Pink, serving diner-like food in a retro-pink building, opened for biz. (Happily, it's still open.)

Fast forward to 2016, and this booming area is fast becoming a destination for new restaurants, galleries, bars, and hot hangouts. New height restrictions have quashed mega-tower development, so the area — so far — retains its old-beach

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JAMES ABUNDIS, PATRICK GARVIN/GLOBE STAFF



CHRISTOPHER MUTHER/GLOBE STAFF

Inside the Ancient Spanish Monastery in Miami.

A beautiful history lesson

BY CHRISTOPHER MUTHER
GLOBE STAFF



NORTH MIAMI BEACH — How is it that one of the oldest buildings in the Western Hemisphere sits on a nondescript stretch of highway near a tennis center and a smattering of apartments in south Florida?

Funny you should ask. The story of the Ancient Spanish Monastery is a tale of social upheaval and lost fortunes that dates back to 1133 AD when construction began on the monastery in northern Spain. Cistercian monks occupied it for 700 years.

And this is when things started getting bumpy for the monks.

A social revolution in the 1830s ended the monastic era and the majestic building was seized for back taxes and converted into a stable.

William Randolph Hearst purchased the languishing monastery for \$500,000 in 1925 with plans to reconstruct it in California. It was disassembled brick by brick and sent to the United States in 11,000 crates. Soon after the purchase, Hearst found himself in a bit of financial turmoil, and much of his collection, including the monastery, was auctioned off. It sat in a warehouse in Brooklyn until the 1950s.

Finally, businessmen Raymond Moss and William Edgemon bought the monastery (a steal at \$19,000) and oversaw its reconstruction (not such a steal at \$1.5 million to put back together). It was a tourist attraction in the 1950s until it was purchased in 1964 by multimillionaire banker Colonel Robert Pentland Jr. and presented to the Bishop of Florida.

It's now an active Episcopal monastery with regular services in the chapel. The monastery is also open to the public. You can sit in the peaceful cloisters, wander around the courtyard, and enjoy the well-manicured gardens. The quiet is occasionally interrupted by the meowing of cats that live on the property.

There are plenty of historical recreations in Florida, but the Ancient

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IZZY'S FISH & OYSTER



THE WILLIAMS-MCCALL GALLERY



THE COLONY

PHOTOS BY NECEE REGIS FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Inside

NET GAIN

If you catch 'em, these chefs will cook 'em up. **M2**

MORE, PLEASE

If buttermilk biscuits are your thing, eat here. **M2**

FASHION HAVEN

Italian midcentury chic in Fort Lauderdale. **M4**

FUN NEVER ENDS

A winter Cape vacation, with kids? Yes you can. **M6**

STORY TIME

Black History Month in New England. **M6**



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Miami’s SoFi hood grows but keeps its charm

► **MIAMI**
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neighborhood vibe.

“Fifteen years ago, you wouldn’t walk here at night,” said Francesco Cavalletti, restaurateur who opened the stylish Italian trattoria La Locanda in 2003. “We knew that Washington Avenue was scheduled for a facelift. Now there are crowds walking by and there are choices for everything. The neighborhood has grown so much. It’s residential and not trendy.”

Indeed, on the first block south of Fifth along Washington you can enjoy house-made pasta dishes, wood-fired pizza, and veal scallopine (La Locanda); grilled octopus, Halloumi cheese, and lamb souvlaki (Meze Aegean Bistro); gourmet schnitzel sandwiches, salads, and crepes (Europa Delicatessen & Gourmet Market); and lobster rolls, chowder, and oysters (Izzy’s Fish and Oyster).

“For years, South of Fifth was only known for Joe’s Stone Crab. Slowly but surely more restaurants moved in and became local favorites,” said Jamie DeRosa, chef-owner of the newest-kid-on-the-block, Izzy’s Fish and Oyster.

On a recent Wednesday night, this small seafood house — with its hip maritime decor — was packed with diners enjoying fried clam bellies, New England crab cakes, Parker House rolls, and a decadent lobster poutine.

“SoFi is a melting pot of tourists and locals. It’s less hotel-driven. More personal and intimate,” said DeRosa.

Around the corner, DIRT recently debuted, elevating fast food dining to a cleaner, greener level by serving seasonal, local, and organic products in salads, smoothies, sandwiches, and more for breakfast, lunch, and dinner.

Heading south, five and six story structures are sprouting up, housing contemporary condos on the upper levels, and Pilates studios, realty offices, skincare clinics, juice bars, wine

bars, and art galleries in street-front digs. On tree-shaded residential side streets, spiffed up Art Deco apartment buildings are reminders of a quieter era. It’s here you’ll also find the Jewish Museum of South Florida, a 1936 structure designed by Art Deco architect Henry Hohauser — featuring 77 stained glass windows and Moorish copper dome — that for 50 years served as a synagogue for Miami Beach’s first Jewish congregation.

Gail Williams and her partner Dawn McCall first visited SoFi about 17 years ago. “We fell in love with the area and saw its promise. It was more neighborhood-y than the rest of South Beach,” said Williams. In 2012, the couple opened the Williams-McCall Gallery in a chic modern space where they exhibit contemporary paintings, works on paper, fine art photography, encaustic collage, and sculpture by a roster of local and international artists.

“When I think of this area, I think of the interior — along Meridian and Jefferson avenues. That’s still like old South Beach,” said Williams, adding, “There’s been a lot of recent development. High-rise luxury towers. We’ve witnessed transformation, but it’s a good one. It’s still a culturally diverse neighborhood.”

Accommodations have also improved since I first arrived 20 years ago. Art Deco hotels have gone boutique (Hotel St. Augustine, The Savoy Hotel, The Century Hotel) though some are renovated more than others. For those who want a kitchenette, the Mercury Hotel has reinvented itself as an all-suite condo hotel. Oceanside, fans of international brands can stay at the Marriott Stanton South Beach and the Hilton Bentley Miami. Travelers with limited budgets — and a sense of adventure — book at SoBe Hostel and Bar, conveniently located next to the take-out window of My Ceviche.

With new construction on what seems like every block,



NECEE REGIS FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE



Above: New construction in the SoFi neighborhood reflects a nostalgic vibe.

Left: The Jewish Museum of South Florida designed by Art Deco architect Henry Hohauser.

it’s anyone’s guess as to how long this neighborhood avoids the glam-theatrics and trend-seeking tourists who clog the heart of South Beach. Upscale white-tablecloth dining spots run by corporate-owned restaurant groups have already crept southward. On one block of First Street you’ll find high-concept Greek restaurant Milos Miami, up-market Fogo de Chao Brazilian Steakhouse,

Southeast Asian-hybrid concept Red Ginger, sleek white-on-white clone of NYC’s upscale Italian Il Mulino, and soon-to-open French-inspired café and market, Bake House Brasserie.

As SoFi continues to grow, hopefully it keeps its neighborhood charm. Stay tuned.

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CHRISTOPHER MUTHER/GLOBE STAFF

A Spanish beauty to behold

► **MUTHER**
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Spanish Monastery is a true antiquity, which happens to be conveniently located near a Publix supermarket.

ANCIENT SPANISH MONASTERY
16711 West Dixie Highway, North Miami Beach. www.spanishmonastery.com, 305-945-1461. Tours are

available most days from 10 a.m. to 4:30 pm. Admission is \$10 for adults and \$5 for students and seniors. Visiting hours are Mon. to Sat. from 10 a.m. until 4:30 p.m. and Sun. from 11 a.m. until 4:30 p.m.

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The facade of the Ancient Spanish Monastery.

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