

Grooving at the Grove

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MIAMI - Back in the late '70s, when South Beach was still a bunch of run-down old apartment buildings like the one in the opening scene of "Scarface," the coolest Miami neighborhood was Coconut Grove, and I lived there.

Just 10 minutes south of downtown at the edge of Biscayne Bay, the Grove was low-key hip, with a small collection of boutiques, Coconut Grove Bank and one big condo-hotel building called Mutiny, because that's pretty much what it did - overthrow the low-scale scruffiness of the Grove.

I dwelled in a tiny, one-bedroom apartment in a roach-infested pink building on Tigertail Avenue, one of the Grove's main drags.

Thirty years later, the cool bay breeze still blows through the Grove, but the neighborhood has changed as much as I have. The commercial district has grown vastly, adding some chain stores but, happily, remaining a haven for locally owned clothing boutiques such as Maya Hacha, along with antique shops, galleries and the odd head shop. There are restaurants of every ilk, but the area has stalwartly resisted infestation by chains.

The Grove's still easygoing, but with an urban edge and more tall buildings. The Coconut Grove Bank and the Mutiny (you can rent a suite starting at \$129) are still around, but they're surrounded by much taller, sleeker condos and hotels, including a boutique Ritz Carlton, an Italianate hotel with a spa, waterfall and stylish lounge. (Rates start at \$329.)

Near the Ritz is the apartment building where I lived, but it's now a Residence Inn. Happily, it's been gutted and redone since my day. A night there now starts at \$139 - just a bit more than what I paid for a month's rent back in the day.

Nearby is the sound stage in which the USA cable series "Burn Notice" is shot (yes, it's here and not in South Beach). The old building, formerly the Coconut Grove Expo Center, was scheduled to be torn down this year to make way for a park and amphitheater, but the show threatened to move its filming to Louisiana if that happened, so Miami decided to keep the building and keep "Burn Notice." Parts of the movie "Marley & Me" were shot there, too.

Not far away, buried deep in the foliage of the Grove - and pretty much ignored by locals - is Barnacle, the oldest house in Miami, built in 1891. It's officially a state park, and you can go inside for \$2.

Another, far more palatial piece of history is located at the northern edge of the Grove: Vizcaya, the ornate, multiperiod mansion built in 1916 by agricultural industrialist James Dearing. With its 10 acres of lush gardens, ahead-of-its-time plumbing (the multihead master shower is a jaw-dropper, even today), European ceilings and Old World art treasures, it's a must-see.

Then go enjoy one of the Grove's many cafes. On any given day, even when the mercury tops 90, you can find the denizens of the Grove dining at outdoor tables. Enjoy a tilapia burger or croque monsieur at P'tit Paris, or some French delicacies at Le Bouchon du Grove. I waited out a rainstorm at Le Bouchon last spring, sipping champagne and eating mussels at a table beneath the eaves as I watched fellow tourists slosh by. I felt cocooned.

If you want to have a beer with the locals, drop in at Sandbar Sports Grill. This is just a basic bar, which makes it perfect for the Grove. Try the fish tacos if you're hungry.

All over the Grove, be on the lookout for peacocks. There are hundreds around here. Residents are accustomed to their yelps and the plopping sound they make when they land on the roof. Some folks like the birds; some don't. It wouldn't be the Grove if people weren't arguing about something, though.

The peacocks have inspired a public art project: Fiberglass peacocks are scheduled to appear throughout the Grove starting next spring. No, you can't take a peacock - real or fiberglass - home with you. But a stray feather you find on the sidewalk? That's fair game and a fitting souvenir.

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If you go ...

Stay: Ritz Carlton Coconut Grove, 3300 S.W. 27th Ave. 305-644-4680, www.ritzcarlton.com; the Mutiny, 2951 S. Bayshore Drive. 305-441-2100, www.mutinyhotel.com; Residence Inn, 2835 Tigertail Ave. 305-285-9303, www.marriott.com.

Shop: Maya Hatcha, 3058 Grand Ave. 305-443-9040, www.mayahatcha.com.

Visit: Barnacle State Park, 3485 Main Highway. 305-442-6866, admission \$2; Vizcaya, 3251 S. Miami Ave. 305-250-9133, www.vizcayamuseum.org , admission \$15 adult, \$6 children ages 6 to 12, \$10 seniors 62 or older.

Eat and drink: P'tit Paris, 3105 Commodore Plaza. 305-445-7331; Le Bouchon Du Grove, 3430 Main Highway. 305-448-6060; Sandbar Sports Grill, 3426 Main Highway. 305-444-5270.

For more information on Coconut Grove and other Miami destinations, visit gmcvb.com or call a travel agent.

Caption: RITZ CARLTON Though traditionally low-key Coconut Grove now has upscale newcomers such as the Ritz Carlton, much of the charm of the neighborhood has remained. The neighborhood has been seen in the movie 'Marley & Me' and the TV show 'Burn Notice.' Patrick Farrell MIAMI HERALD The 1916 Vizcaya Museum and Gardens was home to agricultural industrialist James Dearing. It's a combination of Old World European elements and modern-for-its time conveniences set on 10 acres. Chuck Fadely MIAMI HERALD Fish tacos at the Sandbar Sports Grill make for a laid-back meal that fits the easy-going vibe of Coconut Grove.

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