

THE U.S. ISSUE NEXT STOP

The Sweet Life at the Chic Tip of South Beach

By MARY BILLARD

IT was a sunny Monday afternoon, and the scene around the yellow-and-orange cabanas at La Piaggia Beach Club was laid-back and effortlessly chic. Waiters brought trays of chilled rosé, goose pâté and “les mini cheeseburgers.” Women, wearing cunning coverups that manage to cover up nothing, dipped their manicured feet into the sand.

A few attractive young bodies were leisurely sunning near the saltwater pool, but nobody was in the pool itself. It was just for show, as was the plaque on the weathered wooden front door falsely stating that the club was “members only.” With the blue waters and swaying palms, the scene at La Piaggia could almost be mistaken for St. Barts or Mustique. Except, of course, for the surrounding sea wall of beachfront condos that screamed Miami.

In recent years, the triangular district at the tip of South Beach has emerged as a chic yet relaxed alternative to the typical Ocean Drive frenzy farther north. It even has a hip moniker, SoFi, which stands for South of Fifth Street — the four-lane thoroughfare that cleaves the neighborhood from the rest of the area.

North of Fifth Street, club kids work off their hangovers at Ocean Drive madhouses like News Cafe, bachelorettes prowl for gallon-size frozen margaritas (with four straws) and busloads of tourists search for the Versace mansion. All the while, menu-wielding hostesses canvass passersby with two-for-one drink specials.

In contrast, the area south of Fifth almost feels like a gated resort — though, in reality, anyone can waltz in. More European than Daytona Beach-at-spring-break, the SoFi scene skews a little older, a little more arrived than arriviste, cushioned by the base of wealthy second-home owners from the area's gleaming condos.

And just as downtown Manhattanites joke that they get nosebleeds north of 14th Street, SoFi residents have taken to saying that there is no reason to go above Fifth to socialize anymore.

For brunch-time gossip, locals pull up to Big Pink, a nouveau diner that functions like a general store. At sunset, Smith & Wollensky or Monty's South Beach are the big draws, particularly on Fridays, to watch the looming cruise ships slowly move out to sea. If the wind is blowing in the right direction, strains of “Y.M.C.A.” or Bob Marley can be heard.

And for a crazier party atmosphere,

IF YOU GO

WHERE TO DRINK

Ted's Hideaway Tavern (124 Second Street, 305-532-9869), a dive bar for connoisseurs and after-work waiters, is open from noon to 5 a.m.

Monty's South Beach (300 Alton Road, 305-672-1148; www.montysouthbeach.com) is an overgrown tiki hut overlooking the marina, which draws everyone from speedboaters and weathered fisherman to surfers and young women in hip maxi dresses.

WHERE TO EAT

Smith & Wollensky (1 Washington Avenue; 305-673-2800; www.smithandwollenskysteakhouses.com) is called “Smith & Wo” by the chic and coiffed crowd, who all sport designer sunglasses (waiters included).

Joe's Stone Crab (11 Washington Avenue, 305-673-0365; www.joesstonecrab.com) is a 96-year-old institution, so expect hours of waiting (no reservations taken), although greasing the maitre d' is a local art form. An order of large



South Pointe Park in the SoFi area of South Beach's social scene.

A crowd a bit older and more arrived than arriviste.

there is the splashy Nikki Beach Club, where bronze bodies lounge on daybeds under private canopies, bottles of Piper-Heidsieck chill in ice buckets, and young women in turquoise Pocahontas-fringed bikinis dance to entertain guests.

While the beauty of South Beach is often obscured by the partying, SoFi denizens also make the most of this pie

stone crab claws is \$39.95 in the summer.

Prime One Twelve (112 Ocean Drive, 305-532-8112; www.prime12.com) is the original SoFi steakhouse. A 48-ounce Porterhouse for two is \$88. Across the street is the new **Prime Italian** (101 Ocean Drive, 305-695-8484), where spaghetti with Kobe meatballs is \$23. On weekends, the street between Fifth and two is a block party.

Big Pink (157 Collins Avenue, 305-673-0888; www.bigpinkrestaurant.com) is SoFi's commissary. Pizza from \$8 and a classic burger is \$10.25.

La Piaggia Beach Club (1000 S. Pointe Drive; 305-674-0647; www.lapiaggiabeach.com) offers a European vibe, including the menu. Tuna with mango and soy sauce dressing is \$21.50.

WHERE TO STAY

Hotel St. Augustine (347 Washington Avenue; 305-532-0570; www.hotelstaugustine.com) is an Art Deco

Fifth Street, 305-673-0888; www.bikemiamibeach.com) is a beachfront from \$8 an hour to \$80 a week.

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area. The pioneers were Myles Chelmsford and Nemo, a trendy spot in 1995. “There are no signs of life,” said Mr. Chelmsford, who now runs numerous residential hotspots in SoFi, and as the Sultan of South Fifth. In a former bum-laden crack house, they used to film “Miami

and a rooftop pool. Today, top-commodations include a beachfront Marriott and the all-suite Hilton Miami/South Beach. They are this month by the Sense South a luxury boutique hotel with 18 and a rooftop pool.

Hotels are on their way. In August, Mr. Chelmsford is opening the Prime One Twelve, a modern 14-unit resort next to the town's Hotel. Opening rates are set at a night.

SoFi is sleepy the rest of the year, but the demand for a happening scene is a Miami imperative. On a warm Friday evening in late April, a crush of partygoers in miniskirts and high heels and their older boyfriends congregated at the outdoor tables at Prime Italian, an offshoot of Prime One Twelve, the stylish steakhouse in the town's Hotel. (Both are owned by Mr. Chelmsford.)

Prime Italian, with its clubby macho décor, is a restaurant conceived to separate pro athletes from their money via a culinary invention called Kobe meatballs. A crowd of overdressed and underdressed clamored for tables near the bar, where, recently, the N.B.A. star Antonio Walker sat watching a Celtics-Bulls playoff game. The scene prompted one visitor to tag it as Bentleyville in honor of the gridlock of \$300,000 cars.

Yes, it may be SoFi. But it's still South Beach.