With its subtropical climate and intimate ties to Latin America, Miami is like no other city in the United States. More than 65 percent of its population is Hispanic, and Spanish is the most commonly heard language. Situated at the southern tip of the 500-mile-long Florida peninsula, Miami is the largest urban area in the southeastern United States and one of the youngest cities in the country. Carved from a swampland just over 100 years ago, it has been dubbed the Magic City for its seemingly overnight growth into an international tourist mecca. But the Miami of today offers far more than sun and fun. Truly the “Gateway of the Americas,” the city is at once a metropolis of remarkable cultural diversity, a bustling hub of international commerce and finance, and a port of entry for peoples from the Caribbean and Latin America seeking a better life in the United States.
Mayaimi through the Centuries

The area that is now Miami was occupied as long as 10,000 years ago by the Tequesta Indians. When the Spanish arrived in the 1500s, they heard the Tequesta refer to local rivers and lakes as Mayaimi, which historians think meant “fresh water,” “clear water,” or “big water.” Although the Tequesta soon succumbed to disease and violence at the hands of the Spanish, their legacy survives in the name of the city of Miami and in the ancient artifacts still being uncovered during the construction of modern skyscrapers.

Located between two warm bodies of water, the south Atlantic Ocean and the Gulf of Mexico, Miami has a pleasing, tropical climate.

Except for a brief period of British rule following the American Revolution, Florida was controlled by the Spanish until 1821, when Spain ceded the territory to the United States. For several decades thereafter, south Florida was populated mainly by pirates, runaway slaves, and displaced Indians who sought refuge in the region and came to be known collectively as the Seminole Tribe. Today several thousand Seminoles live on six reservations throughout South Florida.

Credit for the birth of a city from this alligator- and mosquito-infested swamp rests with a persistent widow named Julia Tuttle and a wealthy developer, Henry Flagler. A major property owner in what is now Miami, Tuttle tried unsuccessfully in the late 1800s to persuade Flagler, who was building resorts in the northern part of the state, to extend his railroad farther south. In 1895, when a record freeze wiped out citrus crops in most of Florida and sent tourists scurrying, Tuttle is said to have sent Flagler a box of fresh orange blossoms as proof of South Florida’s superior climate. Convinced at last, Flagler built the long-sought railroad, and in July 1896, the city of Miami was officially incorporated. Some residents wanted to call their new city Flagler, but the railroad magnate himself insisted on Miami, a modern version of the name that had been associated with the area for perhaps thousands of years.

Boom Times

Flagler immediately set about laying out streets, providing city services, and building lavish hotels that turned Miami almost overnight into a winter resort for the rich and famous. The real estate boom continued into the early part of the 20th century, thanks to marketing campaigns in the North and completion of the Dixie Highway between Miami and Chicago, which made the new vacation destination accessible by car and drew middle class vacationers to Miami.

Devastated by a hurricane in 1926, the young city soon bounced back, even in the midst of the Great Depression of the 1930s. It was then that Pan American Airways began its Flying Clipper air service from Miami, advertising the city as the “Gateway to the Americas.” At the same time, development in nearby Miami Beach lured rich tourists to the area once again.

When a German submarine sank a U.S. ship just off the coast early in World War II, South Florida was quickly transformed into a massive military base. After the war, many of the soldiers who had been
stationed there settled in the area, creating another real estate boom. Retirees from the cold Northeast also flocked by the thousands to Miami’s sunny climes.

Over the years, Miami has been beset by the usual urban ills—street crime, drug trafficking, political corruption, and civil unrest—but again and again it has triumphed to resume its role as America’s tropical playground. And in recent years, it has gained a new reputation as a hub of international commerce.

**Tropical Paradise**

This modern city rests on limestone bedrock beneath a layer of soil not more than 50 feet thick. Covered thousands of years ago by a shallow sea, Miami is still only about 12 feet above sea level. The massive Biscayne Aquifer, which lies just below the surface, supplies ample drinking water to most of South Florida but also hampers underground construction and makes a subway system impossible.

Miami has the distinction of being the only major U.S. city bordered by two national parks—Everglades National Park, a vast expanse of subtropical marshland, to the west and Biscayne National Park, a 181,000-acre underwater refuge to the east.

Thanks to the warm Gulf Stream ocean current just 15 miles offshore, Miami enjoys a pleasing tropical climate. Temperatures average 76 degrees Fahrenheit year-round, with winters typically drier and cooler and summers hot and humid. Summer temperatures have never topped 100 degrees, and there has been only one recorded snowfall—in January 1977.

Located between two large, warm bodies of water—the south Atlantic and the Gulf of Mexico—Miami is especially vulnerable to hurricanes, which typically occur between June and November. The worst in recent memory occurred in 1992, when Hurricane Andrew struck the region with sustained winds of 165 miles per hour, causing more than 25 billion dollars’ worth of damage but sparing most of downtown Miami and Miami Beach.

**A Haven for Immigrants**

The threat of storms does little to deter the thousands of people who settle in Miami every year. Comprising just 35 square miles of land, it is one of the most densely populated cities in the country, with more than 404,000 people. Some 2.5 million live in Miami-Dade County, which encompasses the city of Miami and 31 other municipalities. County residents come from more than 120 countries and speak 68 languages. The majority Hispanic population of Miami is made up mostly of refugees from poverty and political unrest in the Caribbean and Central and South America. In their adopted city, they have created distinctive neighborhoods, such as Little Havana and Little Haiti, whose marketplaces and celebrations echo those of their homelands.

Calle Ocho, Little Havana’s main street, hosts the country’s largest Latino festival, attended by more than a million people. Other sights in Little Havana include monuments to Cuban heroes and a Cubano version of the Hollywood “Walk of Stars” that features Latino actors, playwrights, and musicians, such as singer Gloria Estefan. Considering that Miami is just 90 miles from Cuba—much closer
The Miami skyline, lit up against the night sky and reflected in the surrounding water, projects an image of a vibrant international city.

than it is to Tallahassee, the state capital of Florida—it’s not surprising that Cuban immigrants are one of the most influential ethnic groups in the area. A half million or so Cubans fled their island nation after Fidel Castro’s Communist takeover in 1959. Two decades later, when Castro announced that anyone who wished to leave Cuba by boat could freely do so from the docks at Mariel, the result was a mass exodus known as the Mariel Boatlift. During four months in 1980, some 125,000 people, including 25,000 prisoners and mental patients Castro had released, arrived on Florida’s shores, overwhelming Miami’s economy and escalating existing racial tensions in the city.

During the 1980s, thousands of Haitians also landed in Miami, having risked their lives on leaky boats to escape the grinding poverty and political oppression in their homeland. Miami’s Little Haiti now is home to more than 30,000 Haitian immigrants, most of whom speak Creole, a pidgin language based mostly on French. For years, the heart of the neighborhood was the Caribbean Marketplace, a replica of a market in the Haitian capital, Port-au-Prince, which sold everything from fruits and spices to voodoo candles and brightly-colored paintings. Now Haitian activists and preservationists are opposing the city’s plan to demolish the old building to make way for a new theater and community center.

The influx of Haitians into Miami was followed by Nicaraguan refugees fleeing the Sandanista government in that country and more recently by immigrants from South American countries, such as Argentina, Brazil, and Venezuela. Adding to the cultural mix are significant numbers of Jewish Americans, Asians, and even a burgeoning Russian community known as Little Moscow.

While ethnic clashes and disputes over immigrant issues have been inevitable in this melting pot, the cultural diversity and
rich ethnic traditions have helped make Miami the vibrant city it is today.

Commerce, Cruises, and Colleges

With Miami’s international flavor and alluring climate, it is not surprising that tourism remains the number one industry in the region. Some 11.5 million people visit Greater Miami every year, pumping more than 16 billion dollars into the local economy.

But Miami’s position as the gateway to Latin America has made it a magnet for business as well. The city boasts that more than 500 multinational firms use Miami as their base in the Americas. General Motors, Microsoft, Disney, and Kraft Foods are among the corporate giants whose Latin American headquarters are located in Miami.

The city also ranks as a major international banking center with more than 100 commercial banks and foreign banking agencies. Miami also hosts more than 100 foreign consulates and foreign trade offices, which contributes to its reputation as a world metropolis.

As a city essentially surrounded by ocean, Miami enjoys a thriving maritime industry. Besides ranking as one of the nation’s busiest cargo ports, the Port of Miami is the Cruise Capital of the World,
Tourism is Miami’s number one industry, and its many beaches are among the greatest attractions for tourists and residents alike. Serving more than 20 cruise ship lines that sail to more than 100 countries and 250 ports around the globe. In 2007, more than 3.7 million passengers passed through the Port of Miami. The cruise industry and cargo trade combined provide some 110,000 jobs and contribute 16 billion dollars a year to the local economy.

The Miami area offers opportunities for education and research at a dozen colleges and universities, including state-supported Florida International University, the largest university in South Florida; Miami-Dade Community College, the largest community college in the country; and the University of Miami, the largest private university in the state. The University of Miami’s Rosensteil School of Marine and Atmospheric Science is one of the most important centers for oceanographic and atmospheric research in the United States. And the university’s School of Medicine houses leading departments for treatment of diabetes and eye diseases, as well as the world’s largest center for research on spinal cord injury.

The campus of Florida International University houses the National Hurricane Center, where meteorologists continuously monitor and predict the path of tropical storms in the Atlantic and eastern Pacific Oceans during peak hurricane season. The center issues advisories and warnings whenever a storm threatens land.
Attractions for All

As a year-round outdoor playground, Miami offers numerous attractions and leisure time activities for visitors and residents alike. Sun worshippers can luxuriate on any of 16 beaches, while Miami’s abundant waters beckon those who enjoy boating, fishing, and windsurfing. Nature lovers can dive or snorkel on protected tropical reefs in Biscayne National Park or canoe the Everglades’ vast “river of grass,” a habitat of such rare and endangered species as the manatee, the American crocodile, and the Florida panther.

To the delight of sports enthusiasts, Miami boasts professional teams in baseball, football, basketball, and hockey, as well as world-class tennis and golf tournaments, thoroughbred horse racing, and greyhound dog racing. Also popular is the Basque game of jai alai, billed as perhaps the fastest ball game on earth; jai alai players literally run up the walls of a court to catch a ball traveling upwards of 170 miles per hour.

Tamer but equally fascinating attractions in the Miami area include those described below:

- **Miami Metro Zoo.** In this 300-acre cageless zoo, some 1,300 animals from Asia, Africa, Australia, and the Americas roam on islands sur-
rounded by moats. Visitors can ride a monorail to view the animals in simulated natural habitats.

- **Miami Science Museum.** Highlights include a planetarium, a wildlife center specializing in ecological research and rehabilitation of injured birds, and special exhibits, such as a collection of rare dinosaur fossils.

- **Miami Seaquarium.** Visitors can enjoy year-round outdoor shows featuring dolphins and killer whales and can even swim with dolphins. Home also to seals and sea lions, endangered sea turtles, and manatees, the 38-acre site offers spectacular views of Biscayne Bay and the Miami skyline.

- **Parrot Jungle Island.** Not limited just to parrots, this 18-acre site is inhabited by more than 3,000 birds and animals. Highlights include close-up encounters with wildlife and spectacular shows such as Winged Wonders, Reptiles of the Jungle, and Tale of the Tiger.

- **Venetian Pool.** Created from a former coral quarry, this is considered one of the most beautiful public swimming pools in the United States. Designed to echo the lagoons of Venice, Italy, it features waterfalls, a grotto, and a Venetian style bridge leading to a palm-shaded island. Now on the National Register of Historic Places, the pool once hosted celebrities such as swimmer and film star Esther Williams.

- **Vizcaya Museum and Gardens.** This lavish Italian Renaissance mansion, inspired by the palaces of Europe, was built in 1916 as the winter residence of industrialist James Deering. Now it is a National Historic Landmark and accredited museum, and the art- and antique-filled home and formal gardens are open to the public.

Whether Miami beckons for business, fun, or permanent refuge, its sunshine, warm breezes, cultural diversity, and numerous attractions make it a truly Magic City for all who visit or call it home.

### Websites of Interest

**www.miamigov.com**

The official website of the city of Miami, this site provides information about history, government, and arts and entertainment.

**www.flheritage.com**

Maintained by the Florida State Office of Cultural, Historical, and Information Programs, this website is the go-to place for details about Florida's history, archaeology, and cultural resources.

**web.miamibeachfl.gov**

Here at the official site of the City of Miami Beach, you'll find all you need to know about the Miami area's trendiest destination. The “Visitors” section offers a virtual tour.

**www.miamidade.gov/filmiami/Fun_Facts.asp**

This site features interesting facts about Miami-Dade County, compiled by the government office that promotes film and television production in the region. Did you know, for instance, that Miami-Dade imports more live flowers than any other county in the United States? Or that school students are taught in 16 different languages?

### References


**Phyllis McIntosh** is a freelance writer whose work has appeared in many national magazines and newspapers.
The most popular destination in Miami is not actually part of the city at all. It is Miami Beach, a separate town with a population of 95,000 situated on a string of barrier islands linked to the mainland by causeways. Following real estate booms in the 1920s and 1930s and construction of the town’s modern Art Deco style hotels and apartment buildings, Miami Beach became a vacation magnet for millionaires, celebrities, and ordinary Americans alike. It was dubbed the “sun and fun capital” by comedian Jackie Gleason, who taped his weekly variety show in Miami Beach in the 1960s.
These are just a few of the hundreds of colorful Art Deco buildings in Miami Beach, which has the largest collection of Art Deco architecture in the world. A decade or so later, however, hard times had befallen the famed Art Deco area, which was by then populated mainly by aged retirees and drug dealers. Many of the rundown buildings were destined for the wrecking ball, when a group of local visionaries set out to save the neighborhood. In 1979, the Art Deco Historic District was added to the National Register of Historic Places, and investors began renovating the buildings and repainting them in lively pastel hues. This renaissance got a further boost when the 1980s television show Miami Vice popularized the area among its legions of viewers. Fashion designers and photographers fell in love with the scenic backdrop, and soon tourists were flocking to Miami Beach once again.

Today, the Art Deco Historic District, with more than 800 historic structures, represents the largest collection of Art Deco architecture in the world. It is also the hub of South Beach, the trendiest neighborhood in Miami Beach, which features hundreds of nightclubs, restaurants, boutique hotels—and that famous wide expanse of beautiful white sand beach.