

“How Fortunate We Are in Miami Beach”

By Jeff Lehman, Vice Chair, Miami Beach Visitor and Convention Authority (MBVCA)



When I arrived in Miami Beach almost 20 years ago, the beach was on the cusp of recreating itself. Art Deco, film, fashion, and tremendous real estate opportunities were the order of the day. Yet the city was surrounded by less impressive neighbors: Bal Harbour was only beginning some serious new construction; downtown Miami was a scary place after dark (this was pre American Airlines Arena and Arsht Center), Brickell was closed at 5:00 P.M. On the beach, there were no branded hotels except the Fontainebleau Hilton. Not a single Marriott in sight. No Kimptons, Loews, Ritz Carlton. I began working with an independent hotel (then called the Miami Beach Ocean Resort at 30th and Collins). Soon after (in 1996) I moved into the heart of South Beach, to the National at 17th and Collins. Delano had recently opened next door to great acclaim. The National opened in 1997, and only 3 hotels - Delano, National and the Tides – competed for all of the higher end business that was starting to come to the beach.

As each new project came along – the Loews, the Ritz Carlton, the Marriott South Beach, The Royal Palm – many felt and expressed that the changes would “ruin the beach”. Each time a major player came in, though, the destination marketing and positive PR and excitement about the growth of our little island helped fuel a worldwide interest in the destination, which in turn brought even more growth – and more tourism. Growth was not managed perfectly by our government – but considering that the City had been somewhat ignored for so many years, they did the best they could. People who cared spoke up, got involved, and tried our best to guide the administration(s) as well as the private investors who were recreating the destination. Mega projects, like the rehabilitation of Lincoln Road or the Collins Avenue Reconstruction project were major hurdles, but we held steady with a vision for unique world class destination. Not even the events of 9/11 could deter us for long, and within of year of that horrific event, the hospitality industry was back on track.

Today, in 2011, we are again facing some watershed moments, from the opening of the new Marlin Stadium to a revitalized downtown and Wynwood, to the gambling issue that is again (not for the 1st time!) coming up. The difference today is that we have recent history to rely on, and an infrastructure that is certainly a more solid footing to build on. All of the partners involved in our industry from the GMCVB to the MBVCA and most independent and large scale operations, have moved into the age of technology successfully, and are basing business decisions not on yesterday’s or today’s successes, but the promise of what tomorrow will bring for all of us. The MBVCA has recently expanded its own horizons, originally established in the 60’s, to bring technology, outreach and visitor awareness into the 21st century in a way that competes with cities like New York City and San Francisco. It is a very exciting time, and holds much promise for our children’s Miami Beach. As I write this, the GMCVB is celebrating 25 years of service to the community – and to their credit, one would have to travel to the most remote corners of the world to find ignorance about South Beach, where we all have the pleasure to live and work.

As we all offer our insight and support to the evolution of Miami Beach, let's remember that we are indeed fortunate to live and work in such a vibrant, dynamic and ever-evolving community. As long as we keep the best interests of Miami Beach as our primary concern, the next chapter in our history is bound to be one of success and unparalleled excitement!