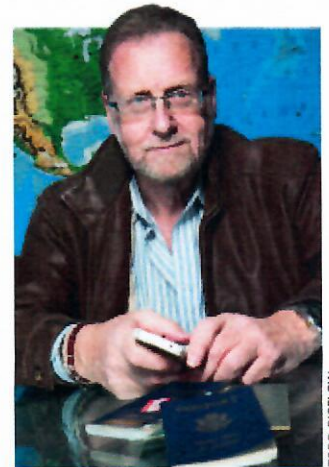




# Lauding Fort Lauderdale

## It's not just for spring break anymore

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TODD BIGELOW

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IN MY COLLEGE years, I avoided Fort Lauderdale, as it was ground zero for spring breakers. But now, Venice-style waterways, great parks and a thriving museum, art and food scene combine to make Fort Lauderdale my south Florida destination of choice.

#### The beaches

There are great beaches in Fort Lauderdale, but if you're looking for a special, uncrowded one, these two parks are my picks.

Hugh Taylor Birch State Park is a Fort Lauderdale must-see, especially Park & Ocean, a new restaurant and bar that opened inside the park this year. Its farm-to-table menu has options such as green smoothies and acai bowls for health-conscious travelers, as well as burgers and brisket grilled cheese for those who want to indulge. The park also offers a variety of activities, such as art classes and Segway tours. If you happen to be in Fort Lauderdale during a full moon, sign up for a full-moon kayak tour, which lets you paddle down Coastal Dune Lake at night.

Riverwalk, the 1.3-mile park that spans the bank of the New River, has always been a great way to see Fort Lauderdale by foot, but now there's the Riverwalk Connection, a project 30 years in the making that links Las Olas and the historic district to uptown Fort Lauderdale. With this new addition, taking a stroll toward the Broward Center on the Riverwalk means you can check out the Stranahan House, King Cromartie House and Shippey House on your way. You'll also find free drop-in yoga classes and Sunday Jazz Brunch concerts.

Many locals use the water taxi as a practical way to get around. But smart travelers use it as a great way to see and experience Fort Lauderdale's hidden gems. The 20-stop route goes by several celebrity mansions and yachts, and you can hop on and off along the way.

Most visitors never get to Fern Forest, a nature center that's a 20-minute drive from

Fort Lauderdale. Admission is free to this 244-acre gem, complete with hiking trails, restored wetlands, armadillos, owls and even a gopher tortoise.

#### The cuisine

There is no shortage of coffee shops in Fort Lauderdale, but Brew Urban Café in FAT Village is also a recording studio and library, and deep inside there's a secret bar. The coffee shop is connected to a warehouse turned studio called Next Door at C&I Studios, a versatile space with a bookcase that doubles as a secret door. The "secret door" through the bookcase is normally kept open for people to freely walk through to see the performance space on the other side. During the day, you can grab a coffee from Brew, a book from the café's library and make yourself comfortable. At night, stop by Next Door's secret bar and take in a concert, karaoke or open mic night.

Next, head to Hot & Soul—a great destination for international comfort food—located in an unassuming shopping center off North Federal Highway (U.S. Highway 1). This is where local chefs go to eat on their days off.

Hot & Soul's menu includes dishes from Louisiana to Japan and everywhere in between, with curried chickpeas, gumbo, soba noodles and even oxtail gnocchi. Try to go on Sunday, for their crawfish boil. And save room for my favorite dish (which is usually followed by a nap!): their dulce de leche bread pudding.

For excellent West Indian cuisine, Shalama's Halal Roti Shop is located in a strip mall, in this case in Margate, north of Fort Lauderdale. Though it's far from the typical tourist locales in Fort Lauderdale, the Indian-Caribbean food is well worth the drive. For anyone new to Trinidadian cuisine, Shalama's bara (fried flatbread) with chana (curried chickpeas) is a delicious introduction. Add to that its daily pelau (rice and peas with chicken). Don't look for style points here; Shalama's is a hole in the wall. Just good food, locals and great conversation. **C**



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