

Understand Miami & the Keys

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Miami & the Keys Today

The South Florida region is one of the most populous, diverse demographic conurbations in the United States. And it doesn't neatly fit into any of the country's cultural regions – it's too Latin-Caribbean to be Southern and too tropical to be Northern. The political forces affecting life in Latin America, and the geologic trends that are shaping the future of the world's tropical coastlines, have greater impact here than anywhere else in the USA.

Best on Film

Key Largo (1948) Bogart, Bacall and a lot of neon-soaked noir.

Scarface (1983) Al Pacino turns the American Dream into a nightmare.

The Birdcage (1996) Robin Williams and Nathan Lane as gay lovers.

There's Something About Mary (1998) On love, Miami and hair gel.

Adaptation (2002) Surreal adaption of *The Orchid Thief*.

Porky's (1982) High-school kids want drugs and sex.

Best in Print

Swamplandia! (Karen Russell) Tragically comic saga of a family of Everglades alligator wrestlers.

Cold Case Squad (Edna Buchanan) Miami noir.

Continental Drift (Russell Banks) New Hampshire worker flees for shallow promises in Florida.

The Everglades: River of Grass (Marjory Stoneman Douglas) Rich tribute to the Glades, written in 1947.

Hoot (Carl Hiaasen) Hiaasen on kids, Coconut Grove, conservation and spotted owls.

Shadow Country (Peter Matthiessen) The American Western reframed in the Florida swamps.

92 in the Shade (Thomas McGuane) This tale of rival fishermen may be the ultimate Key West novel.

Rainy Days Ahead?

In 2014, rains that would have only slowed traffic a decade before began flooding main thoroughfares such as Alton Road. In response, the city governments of Miami Beach and Miami – to use a technical term – flipped out.

The problem was rising sea levels. Florida is a flat, low-lying state, and South Florida is the flattest, lowest-lying part of the peninsula. It's also exceedingly developed, even in a place where real estate and commercial development are practically official sports. This low-lying plain occupies the site of a drained swamp and mangrove forest (that sits on the summer migration route of Atlantic hurricanes), and its largest source of freshwater is barred via a series of artificial canals. Yes, somehow, that conurbation of ecological and geographic red flags is home to the eighth largest metropolitan area in the country.

We're not saying Miami shouldn't be where it is. The Netherlands hasn't exactly let issues such as elevation and sea levels get in the way of building a robust state and society. Neither has the United States, which in the early 20th century had a lackadaisical attitude toward the ecological consequences of urban planning. But where the Netherlands has a long legacy of dealing with the relationship between topography, geography and population centers, the US, via Miami, is in some ways just now facing the consequences. Miami (and South Florida in general) are case studies for how American urban areas will react to changing environmental and climatic conditions.

And those conditions are definitely changing. The impact is being felt across the region. The good news is folks are smelling the coffee. Miami, Miami Beach and neighboring suburbs and cities are creating plans that address the effects of climate change on vulnerable