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South Florida's Sun-Soaked Meetings Offerings

Naples is open for business and the Keys move forward, while the Atlantic Gold Coast undergoes a building boom



There's a building boom going on along South Florida's Atlantic coast, including Miami, the Palm Beaches, and Fort Lauderdale, while on the Gulf Coast -- in the Naples and Marco Island area -- virtually all the work is wrapping up. The Keys will take a little longer, but the area is mostly up and running.

While Naples and Marco Island were among the hardest hit by Hurricane Irma, the damage to the resorts was not nearly as bad as the national news outlets made it out to

be, notes JoNell Modys, public relations and communication manager for the Naples, Marco Island, Everglades Convention & Visitors Bureau. The main delay was with now-finished power and infrastructure repairs, she adds.

"People still assume our beach was destroyed, but we did not get that 16-foot storm surge they were predicting," she says. "It never happened. But everyone saw the hysterical pre-storm coverage, and the national media never comes back two or three weeks later."

In fact, the hotels and resorts are 98 percent back to normal, Modys says, with the Naples Grande Beach Resort reopening in mid-December. Like the the LaPlaya Beach & Golf Resort, which reopened in November, the Naples Grande took the opportunity to move up renovations of the guest rooms, public spaces, pools, and landscaping that had been planned for the relatively near future.

The only other holdout, the Hilton Marco Island Beach Resort & Spa, was renovating before the storm and will reopen in March. Its meeting and event space, and its restaurants are already open.

The newly rebranded JW Marriott Marco Island Beach Resort & Spa has reopened 719 renovated rooms as work continues on its new adults-only, 94-room Lanai Tower, which will include a new rooftop lounge, pool deck, and meeting space with grand beach and Gulf views. That work will also wrap in March.

The AAA Four-Diamond Naples Beach Hotel & Golf Club, which has undergone \$50 million in renovations over the past few years, has wrapped up a total redesign of its historic golf course with input from its original designer, Jack Nicklaus.

If the Island area came through the ordeal smiling, it's not only because the damage was not as bad as predicted. For the second year in a row, the Gallup-Healthways State of the American Well-Being Community Rankings put the Naples, Marco Island, Immokalee metropolitan area as the No. 1 Happiest and Healthiest City in the United States. It also placed No. 11 on the National Geographic/Blue Zones Index of "The 25 Happiest Cities in the United States" - a list based on National Geographic Fellow Dan Buettner research into the places where people are the happiest and live the longest. So, it shouldn't be very surprising that the area is working on reinventing itself as a wellness destination, Modys says.

Miami

The big news in Miami is of course the planned completion of the Miami Beach Convention Center following a \$615 million renovation and expansion project next year. It will unveil a state-of-the-art, LEED Silver-certified facility spanning 1.4 million square feet with more than 500,000 square feet of exhibit space, including a new 60,000-square-foot ballroom and 81 breakout rooms accounting for 190,000 square feet. And new green space in the surrounding area will include six acres of asphalt replaced with a park, as well as 300 new trees planted along with 200 that are being preserved during construction. The Grand ballroom and its pre-function space have been designed around the carefully preserved, showpiece Strangler Tree.

"The Miami Beach Convention Center project reflects our commitment to not only being a world-class destination for meetings, conventions, and events, but a home for some of the most advanced environmental thought leadership and sustainable technology," says William D. Talbert, III, CDME, president and CEO of the Greater Miami Convention and Visitors Bureau. "From landscaping and lighting to architecture and recycling, our LEED Silver-certified facility will truly set the bar amongst convention centers around the world."

Other Miami news includes the opening of The Julia, a boutique, 29-room property in South Beach's SoFi neighborhood. The renovation of the meeting rooms, lobby, and reception area of the Palms Hotel and Spa. And early 2018 will see the addition of the 132-room boutique property, The Celino South Beach, on Ocean Drive. It has a Latin style with tropical highlights, and sports a glass-bottomed rooftop pool.

The Palm Beaches

The Palm Beach County Convention Center unveiled a number of upgrades this year, including new LED lighting through the Exhibit Hall, more move-in and truck parking, an eight-story connected parking garage, and direct connection with the Hilton West Palm Beach.

At the beginning of the year, a 200-room Hyatt Place hotel opened in Boca Raton's downtown, the heart of downtown, near Mizner Park. The next two years will see far more growth, including an Aloft Delray Beach which will bring 121 upscale and cool but casual modern rooms in the SofA district in 2019. The following year will see the debut of the 118-room Boca Raton Mandarin Oriental, also in the city's downtown neighborhood. Features will include plenty of meeting and event space, including a 4,500-square-foot ballroom, adaptable conference rooms. A spa, fitness facilities and championship golf amenities are also on the menu, as well as 65,000 square feet of luxury retail. The PGA National Resort & Spa has given its 40,000-square foot spa, Sports and Racquet Club, and championship Palmer Course links big revitalizations.

Beyond that, 2018 is scheduled to see the addition of a 122-room Residence Inn Palm Beach Gardens, 125-room Fairfield Inn West Palm Beach, and 97-room Springhill Suites Downtown West Palm Beach. The Embassy Suites Boca Raton renovated its pre-function space earlier this year.

Other venue news includes the opening of the 6,500-seat Ballpark of The Palm Beaches earlier this year, as the spring training facility of both the Washington Nationals and Houston Astros. Next year, the iconic Norton Museum of Art will unveil a major expansion and renovation of its 6.3-acre facility that began in February 2016. It includes another 12,000 square feet of gallery space, state-of-the-art auditorium that can seat 210, 9,000-square-foot sculpture garden, and education center with two new classrooms, among other things.

Fort Lauderdale

Fort Lauderdale has a long list of new and renovated properties that opened in 2017 or are opening in the next couple years. These include the recently opened, 290-suite Conrad Fort Lauderdale Beach Resort, which features 20,000 square feet of flexible meeting and event space, a 4,000-square-foot spa and fitness center ocean views, and an elevated new pool deck; the 163-room Plunge Beach Hotel in Lauderdale-by-the-Sea --on the site of the Lauderdale Beach Hotel -- with direct beach access for its three buildings, each of which has its own design aesthetic; and the HYDE Beach Resort, which opened in Jan 2017 with 362 bedroom suites, and a pool, spa, and restaurant.

Coming in 2018 are a 150-room Four Seasons that will have two restaurants, a spa, fitness center, and ballroom and meeting facilities; the \$23 million, 150-room Tryp by Wyndham Maritime Hotel will be opening its doors in the first quarter of 2018; the 136-room Aloft Weston, with 600 square feet of meeting space; and a dual branded, 323-room Starwood property with 12,000 square feet of meeting and ballroom. It will feature a 114-room Element by Westin and a 209-room Starwood Tribute Portfolio property. In 2019, the Aloft Fort Lauderdale will open with 1,500 square feet of meeting space. On the renovation front, the biggest news is the Seminole Hard Rock Hotel & Casino in Hollywood, which is adding a \$1.8 billion, 800-room tower in the shape of a guitar to its 500 existing rooms, as well as some 50,000 square feet of function space. It is set to wrap in 2019.

This year, the Diplomat Beach Resort, Curio Collection by Hilton in Hollywood, FL, has undergone a \$95 million transformation including all guest rooms, the lobby and its restaurants and lounges. The W Fort Lauderdale has wrapped a \$55 million renovation of its 430 rooms, and all public space, including the lobby and pool decks, while adding a new 500-square-foot ballroom and ocean-view restaurant. The B Ocean Resort Fort Lauderdale's overhaul included its guest rooms, lobby, bar, spa and fitness center, restaurants, and 14,000 square feet of meeting space. The Fort Lauderdale Marriott Harbor Beach Resort & Spa's ongoing overhaul includes its guest rooms, the spa and the lobby and meeting space.

The Keys

Down in the Keys, about 70 percent of the hotel and resort properties are open, including roughly 95 percent on Key West and 85 percent on Key Largo. In general, the Keys' oceanside was hit harder, but infrastructure was repaired quickly, and the first cruise ship returned to Key West two weeks after Irma and found plenty for guests to do, according to Carol Shaughnessy, a spokesperson for the Florida Keys & Key West.



It's not all rebuilding, either. Key West's 27-room Marquesa Hotel opened a new sister property in October, the 14-room Marquesa 4-1-4, a block from the main property. Both hotels' guests have access to the pools and other amenities at either property. The 135-room, all-inclusive Bungalows Key Largo will open early next year.

Hawk's Kay Resort on Duck Key, between Marathon and Islamorada is doing major renovation work beyond just rebuilding, and the property will open in stages because of the work. No opening date has been set for either it or Little Palm Island Resort & Spa, located between Marathon and Key West.

Cheeca Lodge & Spa on Islamorada is targeting an opening date in early 2018, as it continues work on a \$20 million-plus renovation that was already underway before Hurricane Irma. This will include expanded space for meetings.

The Ocean Reef Club in Key Largo sustained substantial damage but will welcome its first group back on Jan. 2, according to Molly Carroll, a spokesperson. Neither of its largest meeting spaces, Town Hall and Carysfort Hall, were damaged, and both golf courses and the oceanfront recreation area including its two pools are already open. The Dolphin Inn rooms are undergoing touch-ups to the renovation work completed before the storm and will reopen in December, as will the retail shopping village. Playa Largo Resort & Spa, an Autograph Collection Hotel, is open.

The forthcoming 135-room, all-inclusive luxury property Bungalows Key Largo is still scheduled to open next year.