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in the World



CREATIVE SUITE

With its commitment to showcasing the arts, the Betsy isn't your typical Miami Beach hotel. **BORIS FISHMAN** arrived for a weeklong writers' residency—and ended up finding a second home.

YOU COULD SAY I moved to South Beach because of the Betsy Hotel. That may sound counterintuitive—living in the same town as your favorite hotel would seem to make staying there unnecessary. But the Betsy, a colonnaded rarity of Georgian architecture in Art Deco South Beach, is much more than just a very lovely luxury hotel. And I had never stayed there in the traditional sense.

The Betsy makes an artists' residency available, free of charge, to a different writer or performer every week, in tribute to Hyam Plutzik. He was a three-time finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in poetry and the father of Jonathan Plutzik, who has owned the hotel with his wife, Lesley Godwasser, since 2005. The Writer's Room began to host artists in 2009; more than 850 have stayed there in the past

decade. In April 2017, I got the chance to be one of them. I alternated mornings of work on a novel with afternoons spent making the difficult choice between the rooftop pool and the blue sweep of the Atlantic.

A writer doesn't get to make that kind of decision very often, as I said to Jonathan when he drove me to Florida International University, where I was to give a talk in return for the residency. Typically, these talks take place in the Betsy's library. But this time, FIU's Exile Studies program, which has a partnership with the Betsy, had invited me to speak about the immigrant history in my first novel, *A Replacement Life*, the story of a failed writer who starts forging Holocaust compensation claims for old Russian-Jewish immigrants in Brooklyn.

"After we bought the hotel, I sat outside and looked at who walked by," Jonathan said. "It was diverse in every way. There are so many interesting people here, and I thought that they wouldn't be satisfied by surface gloss—not to knock the importance of luxury. What if you had a hotel with a genuine commitment to arts and culture? What if you brought in the most talented people?" Jonathan wanted the Betsy to be part of the South Beach vanguard.

In my remaining days there, I began to ►

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► appreciate the hotel's cultural offerings in a new way: live music in the lobby every night; art exhibits in the hallways and in a dedicated gallery; lectures and salons, often with a focus on social justice; artists' talks, with Jonathan or his 30-year-old son, Zach, hosting in the library. Curated in-hotel experiences are becoming an all but mandatory part of high-end lodging, but the Betsy's were so interesting and unusual that the hotel, its light-filled interiors a cross between an elegant safari lodge and a Havana social club, felt like the world's most comfortable cultural foundation.

Jonathan's words stayed with me. After 15 years in New York City, a matchless place where, nonetheless, my direction seemed always to be uphill, the idea of that kind of vibrancy in a place as inviting as South Beach was seductive. But what he did stayed with me even more. Here was the very successful and very busy owner of a hotel—Jonathan is a former vice-chairman of Credit Suisse and the present chair of Fannie Mae's board of directors—not only attending my talk an hour away but driving me there. If this was what people in South Beach were like, I wanted to meet more of them. After a year of hand-wringing, my pregnant wife and I loaded up a truck and moved down, in 2018.

Among the first things we realized was that very few people in South Beach were like Jonathan Plutzik and his family. Outside the ocean-adjacent tourist zone, it felt like a sometimes rough, transient place. My wife loves misplacing her iPhone, and in more than a decade in New York, it had been returned to her every time; in South Beach, 10 minutes in the basket of a Citi Bike was enough to lose it for good. A shroud of indifference seemed to hang over the place. Almost no one recycled; almost everyone texted while driving. And though South Beach did offer much of the cultural largesse Jonathan referred to—the Miami Beach Cinematheque's screening calendar made your typical art-house cinema seem lowbrow—sometimes the performances and exhibits felt airless, as if not enough foot traffic had scuffed up their pristine, well-funded host venues.

There was one place, though, that delivered on every hope I'd had. I ended up at the Betsy almost every day. Sometimes I'd head for the library, which became the only place I've ever

been able to write outside my home. Sometimes the lobby bar, an informal headquarters for the area's intellectual life. Sometimes the gallery, for a talk or a concert or an art exhibit. Sometimes at one of the Expat Lunches Jonathan hosts for snowbirds whose lives up north involve things like advising American presidents on economic policy. Sometimes at that rooftop pool, for a whiff of the excitement I once felt at the prospect of moving here.

A noble spirit prevailed inside the Betsy's walls, of the possibility of a life filled with leisure as much as drive, community as much as enlightenment. I loved hiding out in one of the hotel's nooks and watching the guests. I loved being able to text Jonathan or Zach at 6 p.m. to see if they were free for dinner that evening, and sitting down with them an hour later, because South Beach is a village, and because they're like that. I loved watching Jonathan stop to talk to every guest curious to meet the owner. It gave me faith to see people of such considerable influence and power choose to be so conscientious, accessible, passionate, and invested. I love that the Betsy was the first place in this world, outside the hospital and our apartment, that my daughter encountered.

Gradually, Jonathan, Lesley, and Zach became friends—shared dinners, creative collaborations, endless e-mail traffic about the issues of the day—and the Betsy turned into even more than a refuge in a false paradise. It became, finally, a kind of home, something I've struggled to find even in New York, where I emigrated from the U.S.S.R. at age nine. It is a bittersweet irony that I came so close to finding that sense of home in a hotel, and that we made some of the best friends we've ever made in a town that was so alienating in other ways.

I use the past tense because after nine months, Jessica and I—and baby Agnes—called it quits and loaded up another truck, this time to head back north. It's scary to upend one's life for no reason "greater" than curiosity, and upsetting to admit it was a mistake and return, tens of thousands of dollars in the wastebasket. A kid, jobs, the world melting down—it's tempting to decide, after an adventure like that, never to try another. The Betsy's ultimate gift is the reminder that it would be a mistake to stay home. 🍷

thebetsyhotel.com; doubles from \$695.