

A Warm, Dog-Friendly Escape

Let your puppy make a splash in the Miami-Fort Lauderdale area.

Sally Deneen

On the same stretch of beach that propelled Fort Lauderdale onto the national scene as a bikini-and-bare-skin spring break capital, my German Shepherd Dog mix Maggie eyed the Atlantic Ocean warily. She seemed to consider it a giant bathtub, like all bodies of water. While other dogs plunged into the salty waves, Maggie burst into a gallop along the broad expanse of beach and avoided the foamy breakers, leaving a trail of pointy paw prints in the sand.

Cult film fans may recognize this sandy strip from Connie Francis' 1960 beach-blanket film *Where the Boys Are*. But people nowadays joke it's "where the dogs are," because spring break has all but been killed off by local officials in favor of families and foreign tourists. So, three late afternoons a week — Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays for a four-hour period — a 100-yard stretch of sand turns into Canine Beach, also known as Dog Beach. It's open to dogs whose owners buy a permit sold on site. (954) 828-7275.

Beaches, the vast Everglades, and the sidewalk cafés of South Beach virtually define the Miami-Fort Lauderdale metropolis. Provided that a dog and her owner know where to go, she can sample each of these quintessential experiences, as my husband Robert and I did with Maggie.

We found Fort Lauderdale beach to be the best dog-permissible beach in southern Florida, partly for its attributes and place in pop culture, but also for a practical reason: Dogs are officially banned from nearly all beaches in southern Florida. The short hours at Canine Beach can be a turnoff; some locals prefer bigger off-leash parks that open daily, such as the city's Bark Park at Snyder Park, 3299 S.W. 4th Ave., Fort Lauderdale; (954) 828-4585.

The canine Mecca for sidewalk cafés happens to be where lots of tourists go and where locals glide on in-line skates, occasionally pulled along by a dog: Miami Beach's hip Lincoln Road, a long, pedestrian-only street mall in the trendy South Beach neighborhood off Alton Road. I once accompanied a local TV producer and his Yorkshire Terrier here for a TV segment featuring dog-friendly spots. We all arrived together in a classic Rolls-Royce driven by a chauffeur who wore a Nehru jacket and riding pants. The limo company, Vintage Rolls-Royce Limousines of Coral Gables, permits well-mannered pets, preferably small ones. About \$175 an hour, plus tip; (800) 888-7657.

On decidedly lower-budget personal visits to Lincoln Road, Maggie gladly plopped down at our feet as my husband and I people-watched from one of the café tables generously scattered along the broad avenue. We watched a man on an adult tricycle pedal by with his Boxer in a basket as we waited for a meal at Balans, home to what USA Today calls the best pancakes in Miami; (305) 534-9191. So many cafés permit pets that our M.O. on visits here was simple: Look over the posted menus, and pick a place that best matched our tastes that day.

Like any good tourist, Maggie liked window-shopping on Lincoln Road. We were tickled when places allowed her inside. She happily accepted a free dog biscuit from a countertop jar at the small, regionally renowned Books & Books bookstore in Miami Beach; (305) 532-3222. She could've tried on cowboy hats, but never fond of strange things on her head, preferred to remain nude at The Dog Bar pet boutique, around the corner on Jefferson Avenue. (305) 532-5654; www.dogbar.com. If I knew how to in-line skate, we could've gone inside together to rent skates at Fritz's Skate Shop, (305) 532-1954.

The oddest thing to do in South Florida requires a drive west from Miami Beach to the Florida Everglades. Along U.S. 41, a handful of businesses such as Coopertown Airboat Tours permits dogs to take sightseeing airboat rides. (305) 226-6048; www.coopertownairboats.com

Water drops splashed Maggie's muzzle as she peered over the side of the open-air vessel, which glided along noisily. People sitting in the row behind us chuckled as she shook her head repeatedly for a few seconds until two cotton balls — for noise protection — flung out of her pointy ears. It's one of our favorite experiences. Water-loving dogs should avoid this trip because alligators live in the swamp. Luckily for Maggie, this proved to be one place where her aversion to bathtubs or any body of water finally paid off.

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