

## Billboard Jungle

Written by Erik Bojnansky -- BT Senior Writer, Photos by Silvia Ros  
August 2013 - Last Updated August 2013

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### **Outdoor advertising is Miami's crack cocaine: The money gets you high, but one day it'll kill you**

One of the nation's top experts on outdoor advertising says Miami has "America's most illegal billboard." Guess where it's located.

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On May 20, Bacardi Limited, the family-owned, Coral Gables-based spirits company that creates and distributes Bacardi rum worldwide, celebrated Cuban Independence Day by launching a massive advertising campaign. The company produced short Internet movies celebrating the exploits of Emilio Bacardi, son of Bacardi rum founder Don Facundo Bacardi Masso, who

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participated in Cuba's independence movement against Spain in the late 19th Century.

Bacardi also ran a television commercial set in U.S.-occupied Cuba in the year 1900, the aftermath of the Spanish-American War, where a sexy female independence fighter introduces a handsome but awkward American soldier to the Cuban concept of rum and Coke. "Cuba Libre!" she shouts before walking away.

You don't need to watch television to be infected with the urge to drink rum. Advertisements with Bacardi bottles and the bat-winged Bacardi symbol proclaiming "Cuba Libre!" or "Vivimos!" are plastered on several buildings that can be seen from Interstate 95 or I-395 in downtown Miami -- at least as of last month.

But it isn't just Bacardi ads. Drive along the interstate or state expressways within Miami's city limits, or various routes in Brickell, downtown, Park West, Omni, the Design District, or Wynwood, and you'll see a whole host of advertisements strapped to high-rise buildings or hoisted on tall billboards.

Alcoholic beverages, new automobiles, car insurance, plastic surgery, STD testing, Internet service, fast-food restaurants, colored water, supermarkets, the next *Smurf* movie, private schools, hospitals -- all these products can be found in the Miami skyline, or on some stretches of the highway, *inste*  
*ad*  
of the Miami skyline.

There are even light-emitting diode (LED) billboards, run by Clear Channel Outdoor, that flash ads, sometimes animated, for supermarkets, the beaches of Palm Beach County, and the latest shows at the Arsht Center.

If those commercial messages don't suit your fancy, visit the American Airlines Arena and watch the "MiamiMediaMesh," a 3375-square-foot video screen above the facility's front entrance. Not only does the display promote the Miami Heat and upcoming concerts, but also watches, banks, insurance, and other things not sold at the arena.

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Or gaze at the façade of the 366-foot-tall InterContinental Miami Hotel at night. Amid light-produced images of a nimble dancing woman or floating bubbles, you can catch a commercial for Toro Toro, a restaurant and club inside the hotel. The lady, the bubbles, and the ad can be seen clearly as far away as South Beach.



Or take a drive up Biscayne Boulevard. Once you get beyond the crush of “murals” adorning the sides of condos, you won’t see as many large advertisements, though notable exceptions include aging aging billboard structures by Soyka Restaurant, a few more farther north in pockets of unincorporated Miami-Dade, and five scattered around Aventura. You can also see advertisements on flat, illuminated signs beside bus benches or affixed to phone booths in Omni, Edgewater, and the MiMo Biscayne Historic District.

And that’s just the beginning.

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The Gusman Center for the Performing Arts, the Miami Children's Museum, and the James L. Knight Center -- three downtown-area institutions -- now have permission to set up 750-square-foot electronic billboards to radiate commercial advertisements. In exchange, Miami will receive up to \$1 million per year in fees and revenue sharing.

In 2010, the Miami City Commission approved developer Mark Siffin's proposal to build a pair of LED "media towers" 350 and 250 feet high on top of a 100-foot-tall parking garage that would continuously broadcast advertisements. Siffin, in turn, promised to pay the city \$1.5 million annually.

The media towers were never built because Siffin failed to close on his \$190 million deal with *Miami Herald* owner McClatchy to buy ten acres of land. But as far as the City of Miami is concerned, it's still legal to build media towers as tall as 500 feet in the Omni redevelopment district, if it's approved by the city commission and a minimum permit of \$1 million is paid. Media towers can also be built in the Southeast Overtown/Park West redevelopment district, although city regulations governing their design are vague.

Lucia Dougherty, a land-use attorney and lobbyist who represents Van Wagner, a company that operates the most mural ads and bus-bench signs in Miami, says outdoor advertisements don't just provide lots of cash for the industry. They're also lucrative for private property owners.

"It can be up to \$500,000 a year, depending on the size and location," Dougherty says. "They did good things for the landlords when the recession hit. Some wouldn't have survived without them."

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