

Tampa, a city transformed and shining

City undergoes rejuvenation, with some neighbourhoods back to their glory days

TIM JOHNSON
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

TAMPA, FLA.—His hands move expertly, precisely and swiftly, at one point buffing so fast that I fear he might start a fire. But instead of a conflagration, Andre Watson puts a gleam on to my favourite pair of Gordon Rush lace-ups, one I haven't seen since I picked them up for a song a few years ago at Nordstrom Rack.

Sitting high in his chair, we small-talk sports and news, but the conversation inevitably turns to Tampa, Watson's hometown. "I was born and raised here, and I wouldn't trade Tampa for nothin'," he says. "Could I ever leave it behind, forget it? Could a tortoise ever forget its shell? Never."

Watson talks about the changes, how even this area — now one of the city's wealthiest — was once a shambles, historic homes in disrepair, decay encroaching from every corner. But now?

"We're like a bun in the oven," he says, with palpable exuberance. "We're a city on the rise."

Watson is shining my shoes in an anteroom just off the lobby of the Epicurean, a luxury hotel that focuses on food, and a prime example of Tampa's recent revitalization.

From massive, multi-billion-dollar projects bringing people back downtown to the return of a number of neighbourhoods to their glory days, this Florida city is welcoming (back) an impressive creative class — as well as travellers looking for more from their sunny vacation than just a day at the beach.

Seminole Heights is a prime example. A four-lane strip once lined with autobody shops and other blue-collar businesses, its fine Spanish Mission buildings have increasingly become home to both funky restaurants and fine dining, including Rooster and the Till, which became a fast favourite since opening its doors more than three years ago.

Its surprisingly chic interior is belied by the restaurant's strip-mall lo-



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Jimmie Marshall says that his clients come up to three times a week to get their shoes shined at his chair in Tampa's Oxford Exchange.

> WHEN YOU GO

Get there: Air Canada Rouge and WestJet both provide direct flights from Toronto to Tampa Bay International Airport.

Stay: An upscale hotel in the historic Hyde Park district of South Tampa, the Epicurean prioritizes top-quality food and drink, from Sunday brunch at Élevage, their

signature restaurant, to drinks at their rooftop bar, Edge. Even the decor is designed to appeal to foodies, from the front desk made of repurposed wine crates to butcher-block style cabinetry in the rooms. epicureanhotel.com

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cation, where co-owners Ferrell Alvarez and Ty Rodriguez tell me they've enjoyed pushing the city's palate on food and wine, featuring lesser-known grapes for the latter and small plates for the former, which range from fried quail to harissa smoked carrots. (I return a couple nights later for a delicious taste.)

And they plan on continuing that with a new, nearby project called Nebraska Mini Mart, opening this summer just off Nebraska Avenue, not far from their current location. Combining shuffleboard and bocce ball

with a modern sound and projection system, they aim to attract a young crowd looking for a chilled-out way to spend an evening, and Alvarez, the restaurant's head chef, tells me the focus will be primarily on food.

"We'll serve food you can hold in one hand, with a beverage in the other," he says. "But we'll do it the right way." For example, fried chicken will be sourced locally — in fact, everything will be sourced locally — and hotdogs, that Saturday-night staple, will feature wild boar sausage.

To the east, I find the same trends



Shoeshine expert Andre Watson at the Epicurean Hotel in Tampa.

taking place in Ybor City, a distinct neighbourhood that served as both home and workplace for the first major wave of Cuban immigration to Florida in the late 19th century. Back then, tobacco was king, imported on ships from Havana, rolled into cigars here, and then placed on rail cars by the hundreds of millions and transported to smokers all the way up the Eastern seaboard. The area fell into disrepair as mechanization replaced hand-rolled operations, but Ybor is again on the rise.

Skirting past a few chickens clucking along to no place in particular, I pass small, handsome, colourful casita houses under renovation. Making my way toward the rich smell of cigars, I pass carefully restored century-old brick buildings with wrought iron balconies on its main strip, Seventh Avenue, stopping in at King Corona.

Not here for a smoke, I simply chat with Don Barco, the owner, as fragrant fumes waft past us. Still hand-rolling cigars and serving up Cuban sandwiches here, he remembers the bad old days. "If you want to see seedy, you should've been here in the 1970s," he says, with a small smile. Now, he says, the streets are lined with craft breweries and micro-distilleries and bars that rock into the night on weekends.

Barco notes the changes in downtown Tampa, too. In the city's core, condos have sprung up as a younger crowd moves back, hundreds every day.

Former investment banker Jeff Vinnik has partnered with Bill Gates, breaking ground last year on a multi-billion dollar project that will include a medical school, heart institute, as well as shops, restaurants, a hotel and office space. It will be a healthy place: Bike lanes will take priority, community gardens will be prevalent and buildings will have lighting tied to circadian rhythms and air-quality meters.

But while that community's completion is still as much as a decade away, downtown Tampa is already transforming.

I stroll along the Riverwalk, a pedestrian trail stretching almost four kilometres, linking together parks and museums, before heading to the Oxford Exchange. Once the stables for a long-closed hotel, its airy, skylit space now hosts a mix of young University of Tampa students and besuited businesspeople, eating lunch at the restaurant or browsing the well-curated bookstore.

After a nice lunch, I finish with another shoeshine. This time behooved in just my well-worn blue Adidas sneakers, I sit in Jimmie Marshall's chair. As I climb up, he taps the padded, wooden chair. "This? It's a throne," he tells me. "And it's a psychiatrist's couch, too."

A shoeshine, he says, is never just a shoeshine. People come in as many as three times a week, he says. And as he works away, buffing out the leather but just cleaning and brushing the cloth part of my running shoes, passersby pause to clap him on the shoulder and greet him affectionately.

Marshall explains that it's all about community. "You develop a relationship. You share things, you become a part of each other's lives," he says. Leaving with my footwear gleaming, having experienced some of Tampa's very best, I know the smile on my face shines a bit, too.

Tim Johnson was a guest of Visit Tampa Bay, which didn't review or approve this story.

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