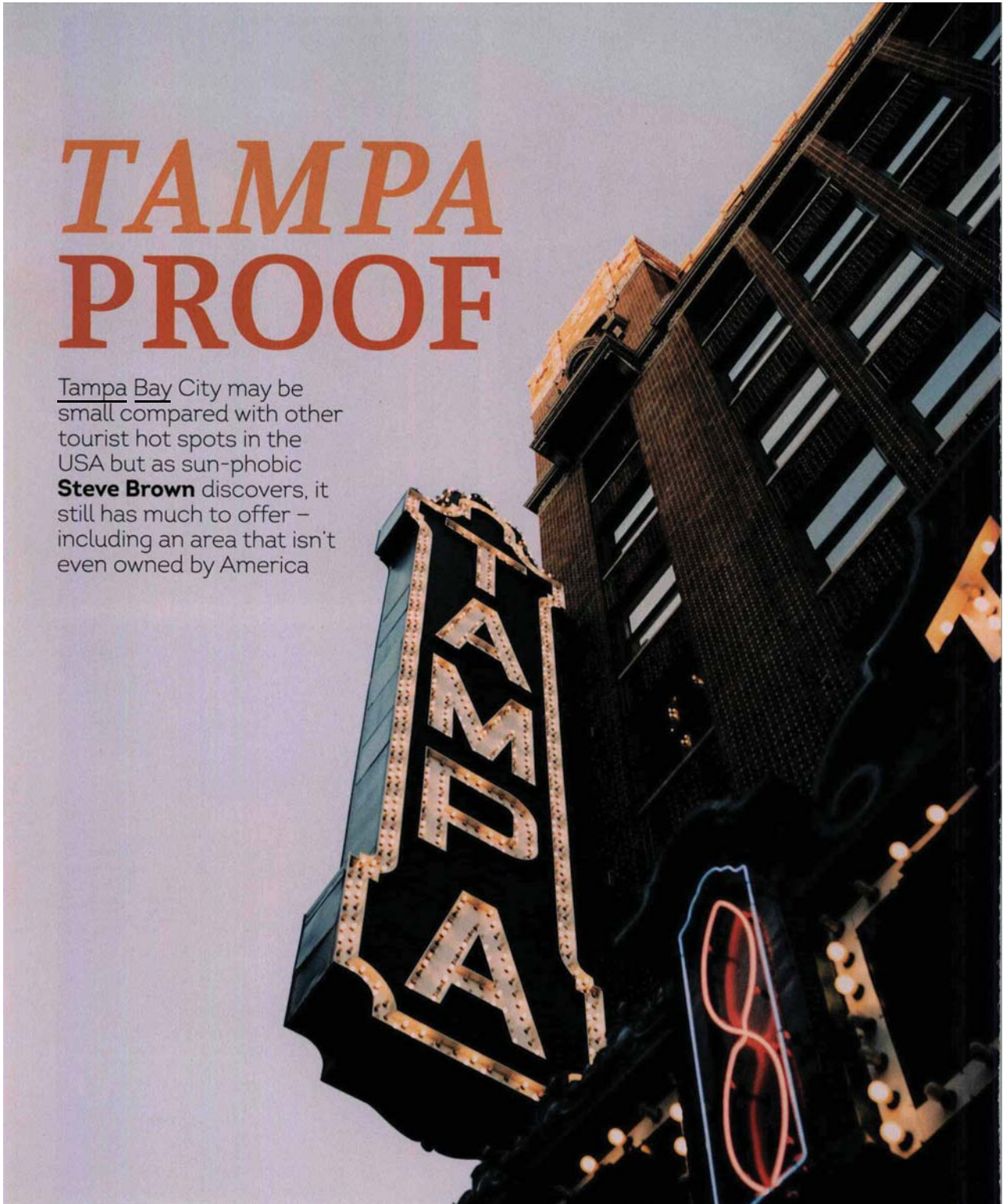


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TAMPA PROOF

Tampa Bay City may be small compared with other tourist hot spots in the USA but as sun-phobic **Steve Brown** discovers, it still has much to offer – including an area that isn't even owned by America



PURPLE REIGNS: The walk-way along the Hillsborough River. Below, Steve seems to have mislaid his paddle-board



AMY MARTZ

The sun and I don't get on. It's a simple fact. I burn in cloudy UK weather so I'm somewhat wary of taking my ghost-like pale complexion to Tampa Bay, Florida. The locals might claim it's autumn but temperatures still reach 30C.

Norwegian's new flights direct to Tampa International airport make getting there easy but as soon as I'm off the plane and through immigration, I'm desperate for air-conditioning.

Travelling to the hotel, it's nice to see that despite Florida having helped swing the presidential election in Trump's favour, **Tampa Bay** is welcoming: rainbow flags fly high in the bars and restaurants in a small city just east of Tampa called Ybor City. It even has a Gay Chamber of Commerce, which gives a business voice to the LGBT+ community, but more on that later.

There's an old joke that everything in America is bigger than anywhere else in the world and that certainly seems the case with my room at the Hilton Downtown. It's huge. In fact, the bed is bigger than entire rooms at other hotels I've stayed at. What a waste that there's no one to share it with...

Unsurprisingly, maybe, food portions are also ginormous. On my first morning, I have breakfast in the hotel restaurant. There's a buffet on offer as well as a full menu. I opt for the pancakes and they arrive piled

high and drowned in chocolate and syrup. Trying to counter the sugar-high come-down I know will follow — and in a desperate attempt to be healthy — I add strawberries, bananas and some other berries. It's delicious but there's enough for me and that man who could be sharing my bed. How anyone can eat like this every day is beyond me.

The food portions are much the same everywhere but I'm told Tampa is mounting a big push for fitness and a healthy lifestyle, so it's off for the 2.4-mile long walk along the Hillsborough River. Think London's South Bank but with sunshine and less hectic.

It might be "quiet season" but there are still a few good-looking men exercising along the way who catch my eye.

The city of Tampa is relatively small compared with others in the US, and they clearly rely heavily on tourism. Bars, restaurant and cafes can be found on virtually every street corner. High-rise buildings are being built left, right and centre.

For those who don't know — and I was one of them — Tampa is home to the Bay Lightning, a top ice hockey team also known as The Bolts. Florida and "winter" sports may not seem the most obvious bedfellows but I'm

assured that the Amalie Arena is full for every home game and I find the atmosphere safe and comfortable.

More to my taste is our visit to Ybor City. Nestling north east of Tampa, it's well worth your time. Founded by Vicente Martinez-Ybor in the 1880s,

the city was built solely for cigar manufacturers and was populated by thousands of immigrants, mainly from Cuba, Spain and Italy.

Reminding me a bit of New Orleans, Ybor City is one of the most beautiful places I've ever seen. In its heyday, the city was home to 230 cigar factories, turning out millions of "stogies" every year. Now there is just one left, and today, Vicente's first factory is home to a church of Scientology. Sadly, there's no sign of Tom Cruise or John Travolta as I stroll along the streets



"Ybor City is one of the most beautiful places I've ever seen"

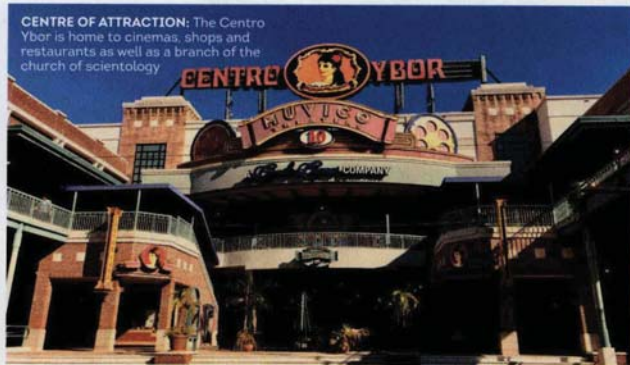
with tour guide Lonnie Herman from Historic Walking Tours.

The remaining original houses are built on stilts, so people wouldn't get attacked by alligators and snakes — or panthers, according to Lonnie — and it looks like something you'd find in a Hollywood movie.

One of the most interesting spots in Ybor is a small plot of land on its western edge. This is the only piece of soil in America owned by Cuba, so you >



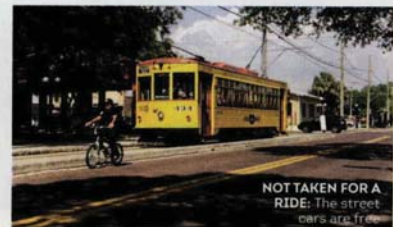
TIME TO REFLECT:
 Part of Tampa's skyline



CENTRE OF ATTRACTION: The Centro Ybor is home to cinemas, shops and restaurants as well as a branch of the church of scientology



FLAG-BEARERS: Welcoming LGBT symbols are a staple Florida voting Republican



NOT TAKEN FOR A RIDE: The street cars are free

can visit both Florida and Cuba in the same day. About the size of a basketball court, Jose Marti park is dedicated to the 19th-century poet, journalist and soldier who fought to free his island home from Spanish rule.

But Ybor is also the main LGBT+ area of Tampa. The bars are decked out with rainbow flags, drag acts are advertised in almost every window and it has that Gay Chamber of Commerce.

One establishment in particular catches my attention: The Castle. The multi-level nightclub is known for its Gothic and fetish theme. We're talking about arse-less chaps, guys.

Speaking of bars, I visit a stunning speak-easy gin bar within Tampa. Decorated in the traditional speak-easy style, The Gin Joint is one of the best bars around.

But wherever you are, there's no escaping those massive portions of food. During my stay, I probably put on at least 12lb and it's safe to stay that I will be hitting the gym hard as soon as I get back to the UK.

Everything is excessive. Pancakes, bread, cheese, nachos, fries. I think there's only one meal where I have a plate full of vegetables and that is on the flight home!

It probably doesn't help that I'm eating at the best-known restaurants in the area: Ocean Prime, Columbia, Oxford Exchange and Osteria.

Although I'm eating like a mammoth every day, I'm pleased

to report that every restaurant accommodates my vegetarianism.

Even the likes of Ocean Prime, a fish and steak restaurant, goes out of the way to create a vegetarian dish just for me. It really does put into perspective American's push for good customer service — the mandatory tipping helps, I'm sure.

Luckily, Tampa is known for its cuisine. Having been home to immigrants from all over the world, many cultures inspire the food flavours. The Columbia lays claim to being Florida's oldest restaurant and one of the largest Spanish restaurants in the world. It's famous for the Cuban Sandwich: ham, roasted pork, Swiss cheese, pickles, mustard and salami. Phew! Can you feel your arteries hardening already? Happily, the vegetarian alternatives are also delicious.

The Hillsborough River runs straight through downtown Tampa and the locals make the most of it, with activities including paddle boarding and river biking. To my amazement, paddle boarding turns out to be one of the best experiences of my life. I admit that my balance is truly tested but I manage to avoid falling in — although part of me

actually wants to so I can cool down.

Being on the board is surprisingly relaxing. Everything else seems to disappear while I'm out on the open water. Staff at Urban Ki, which hires out the equipment, promise me there are no alligators in the water so I spend the 45 minutes paddling trying to catch a glimpse of a manatee, but none show up. However, I do spot a small shark so I make sure to steer well clear.

Being out on the water should give me time to work on my tan but coating myself in the Factor 50 sun cream keeps my pasty-white skin exactly that. Despite the heat, I could spend hours on that board.

If I ever visit Tampa Bay again, I want to explore the outskirts of the area. Most people will know Busch Gardens and Walt Disney World Florida are nearby but there is

more to see and do without being surrounded by tourists. St Petersburg — home to one of the best beaches in America — is just 20 minutes away. Mind you, even if I went there, I'd still return home paler than when I left. ☹️

hilton.com
norwegian.com
visittampabay.com



"Staff promise me there are no alligators in the water but I do spot a small shark"