

TRAVEL WEEKLY

Miami's visitors are taking Zika in stride

By Robert Silk

MIAMI BEACH — On a typically hot afternoon in South Beach last week, Jasmine Diaz and Jennifer Hernandez sat in lounge chairs on the sand near the 10th Street beach entrance, soaking up the rays.

But despite being within what on Aug. 19 became the second area in the U.S. to be officially declared a Zika-transmission zone, the two visitors from New York said they weren't worried.

In fact, Hernandez, 27, said she had only worn bug spray once during the first three days of her trip for a night out in the area's other Zika-transmission zone, the Wynwood district north of downtown Miami. She wasn't wearing any on the beach.

"We don't play into the hype," Hernandez said.

As of last Wednesday, the Florida Department of Health had confirmed five cases of locally transmitted Zika within a significant swath of Miami Beach. The zone, which stretches the width of the island from Eighth Street to 28th Street, encompasses the majority of South Beach, including much of Ocean Drive as well as the upscale Lincoln Road pedestrian mall and the Miami Beach

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Convention Center.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has advised pregnant women or couples trying to get pregnant to avoid the area.

Those five cases were among a total of 43 nontravel-related Zika cases in Florida that had been confirmed as of Aug. 24. Thirty-five of the cases had been reported in Wynwood, across Biscayne Bay from Miami Beach.

Of the three other confirmed cases, one was in Broward County, where Fort Lauderdale is located, one was in Palm Beach County and one was in Pinellas County, the home of St. Petersburg.

Because only one case had been confirmed in each of those areas, however, they were not considered by the CDC to be Zika-outbreak zones. For such a decla-

ration, a second case must be confirmed in an area.

Meanwhile, Zika is continuing to spread throughout the Caribbean. On Aug. 23, the CDC issued a travel notice for the Bahamian island of New Providence, home to Nassau; four Zika cases had been confirmed on the island.

Still, on the streets and sands of Miami Beach, tourists and residents alike were largely downplaying concerns about the thus-far minor outbreak.

"It's almost as if it's not a big deal," said Angie Lecke, concierge manager of the Hotel Astor, which sits on the corner of 10th Street and Washington Avenue, within the Zika zone.

Only one reservation for the Hotel Astor had been canceled after the Zika outbreak was confirmed, said Lecke.

Back on the beach, a lifeguard (who declined to give his name, citing city of Miami Beach policies on staff members speaking to the media) said that the crowds were as large as usual for this time of year.

"The beach is still busy," he said as people occupied most of the lounge chairs that spread out to the south of the guardhouse.

Aly Rodriguez, who works at a snack concession on the beach, said she had been keeping bug spray at the counter in case anyone wanted to apply some. But Rodriguez said that in the five days that followed the local Zika-transmission confirmation, there had been few takers.

"I've only had two people come up to me," Rodriguez said.

Nearby, along Ocean Drive, outdoor cafes were busy, even around 4:30 p.m., between lunch and dinner.

But there were still signs that things on Miami Beach were not exactly normal.

Inside the Betsy Hotel, an upscale, boutique property on the north edge of Ocean Drive, two containers of Off bug spray had been placed neatly in a wicker basket on the check-in desk.

Next to the basket sat flyers informing guests about the status of the Zika outbreak in Miami Beach and about the ho-

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tel's own efforts to protect guests' health.

"For your well-being, our staff conducts preventative measures including distribution of complimentary bug repellent, daily inspections and an increase to weekly extermination spraying on the grounds," the flyer said.

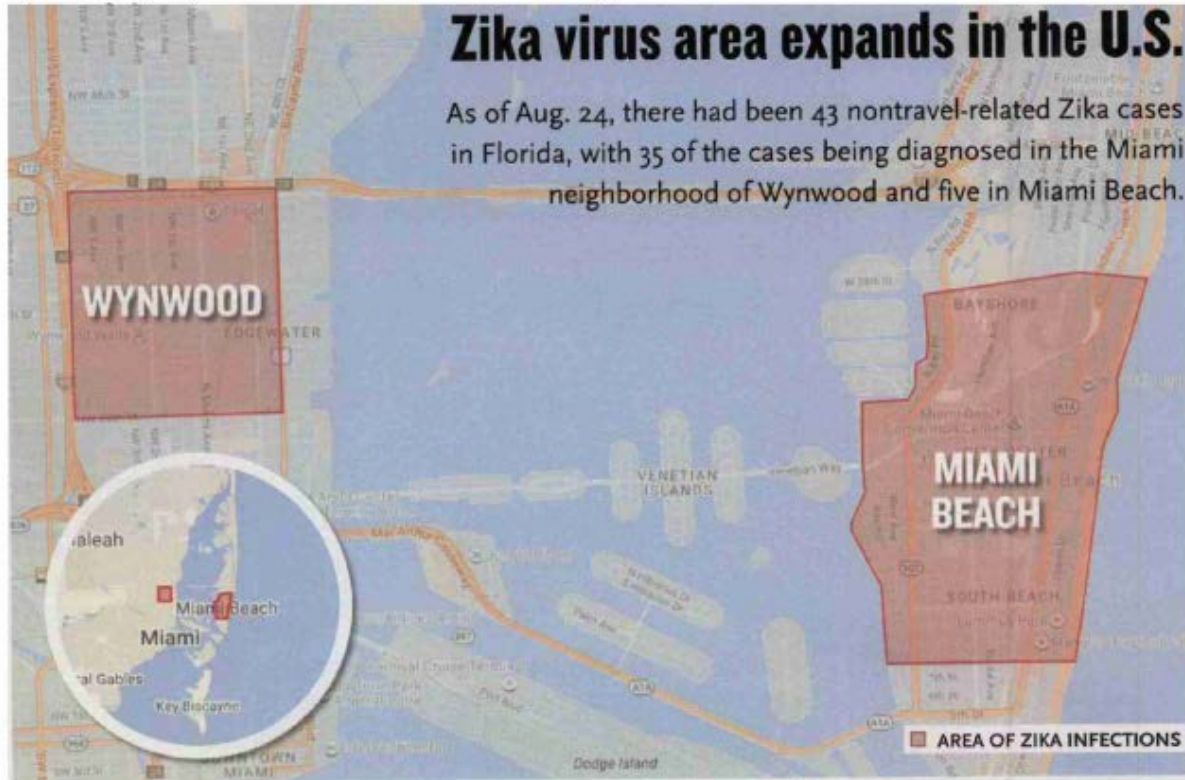
The Greater Miami Beach Convention and Visitors Bureau did not respond to an interview request for this report. But the City of Miami Beach has prominently posted information on its website about its own efforts to reduce mosquito populations as well as the steps individuals should take to protect themselves.

"As we pull together and we work together, we're going to make sure this thing

goes away," mayor Philip Levine said during an Aug. 19 press conference.

Back on Washington Avenue, the Golden Bar boutique also provided a clue that Zika just might have Miami Beach a bit more concerned than some are letting on. A bovine-shaped sign board outside the shop was affixed with the message, "Holy Cow! Natural repellent 4 Zika." Inside, saleswoman Sarah Gabriela said the Golden Bar had sold three times more of a lemongrass-infused repellent than usual in the days after the outbreak was declared.

"There are tourists who get afraid because South Beach has a virus and they don't want to get it," she said.



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