



(West Palm Beach Brightline Station, via Brightline)

# BRIGHTLINE AND THE UNIFICATION OF SOUTH FLORIDA

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By: Marlowe Dunn Flom  
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South Florida has always been but has increasingly become one of the most enigmatic locales anywhere not just by American but also Floridian standards. Yet one constant has emerged in recent years to the benefit of locals and tourists alike: **the Brightline**. For as recent as the high-speed rail way is to the area, having begun service between the sunny cities of West Palm Beach, Fort Lauderdale, and Miami barely five years ago followed by the recent station additions in Aventura and Boca Raton, Brightline rapidly established itself as the premier form of travel along the Gold Coast. With the soon to be opened Orlando station within the next few weeks and the plans for a Tampa station, it is clear that Brightline has had a kind of palpable success in South Florida that others in the state expect to replicate.

The question becomes though, **what kind of success is this?** There is certainly an economic success, as with both the current and future stations, Brightline states how it has brought jobs to tens of thousands of Floridians and tens of billions of dollars in economic impact and contribution to the state economy. There is





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even an aesthetic and experiential success, with Brightline being known for its modern, luxurious, and accommodating travel experience unparalleled in Florida.

Yet, there is a more significant success that Brightline has achieved that encompasses economics, luxury service, stunning speed, fabulous Florida destinations, and more...and that is **a new perspective on South Florida**. More specifically, how Brightline is capitalizing on and contributing to the meteoric rise in popularity of South Florida as a whole by making each of its communities both more united and accessible, while also shining in their own right bright enough to even have local residents appreciate their home more.

While a myriad of standard reasons pull tens of thousands of residents into South Florida each year at an exponential rate, it can be easy for current residents, particularly those who are younger and have lived here their whole lives, to forget what exactly is so great about "living where they vacation." A flurry of snowbirds, flying in with their excess traffic, occasionally carrying their walkers every year can cause many young Floridians to lose sight of the thriving and growing attractions of the paradise they call home; that is until they see it through Brightline.

While many aspects of Brightline are remarkable and worthy of praise, it is the kind of transportation it provides that guarantees a new way to experience and appreciate Palm Beach, Broward, and Miami Dade county's offerings individually and as a South Florida unit. This railway is less of a bridge or link between the great coastal cities of South Florida and more a golden seam that ties the area into one, with each stitch telling a tangible story all on its own and as one. Ben Gines, a South Florida resident for more than 30 years and a proud employee and passenger of Brightline, has experienced this unique phenomenon afforded to him by Brightline. The beauty of such a transportation experience is that "it's all about exploring different places I hadn't been before, or hadn't explored because I didn't want to drive and worry about parking." To both the untrained and weary eye, all of South Florida can seemingly blend together, but the beauty of transport like Brightline is that each beautifully furnished, modern, and secure station is located practically in **the heart of each of South Florida's commercial and cultural centers**. Riders can immediately immerse themselves the moment they leave the platform into some of the most distinct and infamous areas of each of South Florida's cities, from the modern boutiques and high-rises of Brickell, to the galleries and theaters of downtown

(From top to bottom: Downtown West Palm Beach via iStock; Group of Brightline passengers via Brightline; Brightline's Miami Station via Brightline)





(From top-left down to bottom right: Annual Lake Worth Street Painting Festival via Lee Hershfield / South Florida Sun Sentinel; South Florida shopping plaza via Brixmor; celebration at Miami's Ultra Music Festival via Matias J. Ocner/ Miami Herald; East Fort Lauderdale via Arpad Benedek)

West Palm Beach. Even as each of these cities offers something unique and intrinsic to the type of Florida one wants to experience, be it for an afternoon or a lifetime, the journey to them is just as meaningful.

Traveling through each unique neighborhood and district in between and blooming around each distinct downtown adds a unique character to each urban center in South Florida. Simultaneously, it presents the charming similarities across the area.

Even though the fast train ride literally and figuratively blurs together the various communities of South Florida surrounding the downtowns, it creates the impression of a greater South Florida community and culture, with just enough similarities to make their differences shine that much more. One can explore **the diversity of a downtown** area or particular neighborhood while knowing a few blocks away the **creature comforts of typical South Florida** living can be appreciated.

The smell of warm, summer air with a faint touch of salt from the sea blows through palm fronds rustling around you. The sun warms your skin as you walk past different neighborhoods with shopping plazas in front of them bearing red tile roofs as sun-kissed as the asphalt. Even if you don't have that memory of a South Florida neighborhood, you can see it and even want to feel it while passing through a route such as Brightline's as it weaves through the three counties crafting an image of a whole South Florida ripe for exploration. Of course, it can be said that the realizations of these similarities and differences are more profound for a local South Floridian than for a visitor to the area. Yet these aspects of South Florida are still detectable and better yet accessible thanks to Brightline.

While it is equally true that Brightline is also not the most inexpensive option or the only way, even by train, to travel around South Florida, it is at the moment the most attractive and moving option, with both speed and aesthetics on its side. Ben Gine remembers how on his first ride on Brightline and how he "fell in love with the train, the service, and the warmth with which everyone greeted us. It was very reminiscent of the Eurostar-London to Paris." Aesthetics being something increasingly important to a younger demographic now drawn to the new South Florida



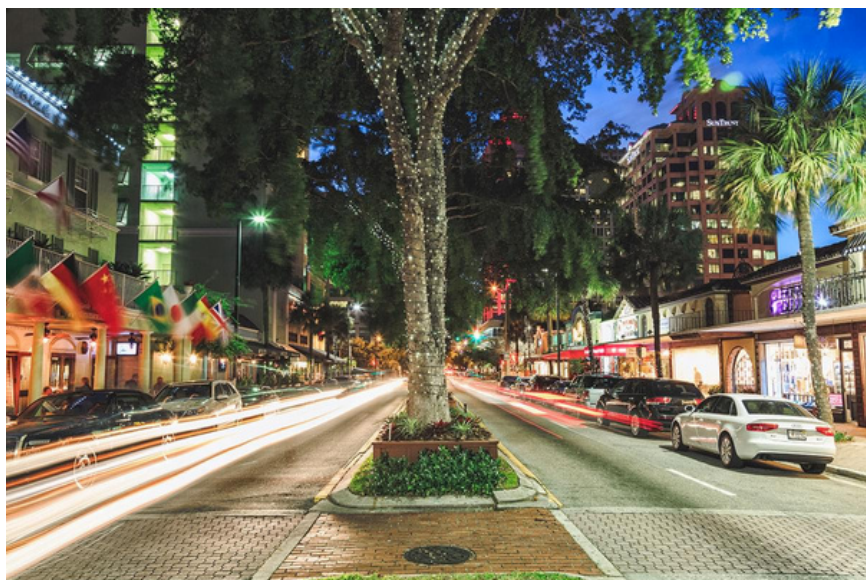


starting to be offered to them. It has and always will be a paradise for the more 'mature' crowd, but with the sheer number of galleries, music festivals, sports and entertainment events, unique restaurants and bars from the upscale to the underground, and more, **the young are coming in droves.**

Not only that, but the young that already make South Florida their home are having a growing appreciation for the area and what it can offer. Furthermore, they can actually take advantage of what is offered with ease in part thanks to projects such as Brightline, with this kind of transportation also helping to reduce the number of cars on the road and their carbon emissions making it also appealing from an environmental angle. This greener, more efficient, and frankly more enjoyable aspect of traveling via Brightline is what makes the opening of the Orlando and plans for the Tampa station that much more significant. As Ben states himself, "I almost feel that getting to either city (Orlando and Tampa) via train is far more comfortable and relaxing to get their by train than by car. They're a pain to drive to, and way to short to fly. The train is the next best thing, connecting South Florida to Central Florida and, eventually, the west coast. Florida, as we currently know it, will look very different five to ten years from now, thanks to Brightline."

As mentioned earlier, there are plenty of other ways to travel the new South Florida,

*(Lighthouse Point via Bai Capital)*



*(Las Olas Blvd in Ft. Lauderdale via Arpad Benedek)*

more accessible and exciting than ever, but this excitement and accessibility of the area is simultaneously the result of and aided by Brightline. In time, there may and should be other transformation systems put in place such as Brightline to further brighten the future of navigating South Florida; Brightline in the meantime is **a shining example** of what can be.

Moreover, it shows how an overlooked issue such as transportation in the area can contribute immensely not just to economics, but to the culture of the region that many youth such as myself from the area grow to love more as we get older and begin to see different parts of the country and the world. We may already miss home as it is, but when news abounds of the many celebrities moving to South Florida as brand new high rises, art districts, shopping destinations, and nightlife blossom in our absence, **we can't help but want to go back.**

The young, be they residents or tourists, immediately and eagerly think of the Brightline when coming up with their plans that traverse Palm Beach, Broward, and Miami. It is the immediate point of reference for us when thinking of the best way to meet up with friends from all over or simply have fun trying out all there is to do in South Florida. Furthermore, it's what all generations—older and younger than us—point to as the best and most effective means of travel. Ben characterizes the "several appealing factors" of Brightline passengers consider. "The first is that you don't have to get behind the wheel and drive to WPB, or Miami. There is therefore, no stress added to going out, no wear-and-tear on your car, no paying for gas to



make a special trip north or south, and you don't have to worry about parking."

While all of this gives an immense amount of credit and focus to Brightline, the point is to explain how Brightline appears to serve the growth of South Florida and in doing so, adds another layer to this growth. This layer being South Florida and its cities being experienced and seen together more easily by residents and tourists alike. They can now see the beauty of the **shared cultural cornerstones** of the different cities of South Florida while being able to appreciate and enjoy the differences of each.

*(Brickell in Miami at sunset via iStock)*



*(The Square in downtown West Palm Beach via Visit Florida)*

## "IT'S A GREAT FEELING TO KNOW WE ALL PLAY A ROLE IN CHANGING WHAT **THE FUTURE** WILL LOOK LIKE FOR SOUTH AND CENTRAL FLORIDA"

The movement of people around this land of endless summer will grow a fondness for the area as a whole, as people begin to identify all of it either as their home or as what they want to call home. "We're getting passengers to visit counties they haven't been to before—or as much" exclaims Ben on this growth of South Florida enthusiasm and passengers on Brightline. "They come for a car-free, care-free ride, and come back for the service. They bring their parents, friends, kids, co-workers. And you know what? It's a great feeling to know we all play a role in changing what the future will look like for South and Central Florida." **This kind of growth and future is as unique as South Florida** is from the rest of the country, and I think back fondly to my first time in the Brightline that enlightened me so well to this.

In my own experience heading down from West Palm Beach to Miami for a concert just at the station alone, I was able to appreciate all my hometown had to offer surrounding the station. All of it peaking my interests and all of it being steps away from the train platform. Once on the train, having ordered a beverage, and fixing my gaze out the window, my community and others like it were presented to me through a brightened gauze from the comfort of my seat. My vision was framed by palm trees swaying between shimmering glass spires of glossy downtowns that gave way to multicolored stucco streets brimming with energy, all reappearing within each other as I zoomed by in excitement. Excitement that I would be seeing my concert. Excitement that I would actually make it down to Miami without having to face rush hour traffic. Most of all, excitement at what future stops I would have on my next trip through **somewhere familiar enough to be comforting, yet unique enough to be entrancing**. Somewhere only South Florida can be.

