

THE MOTHER OF MIAMI

At the end of the 1880s, Miami comprised nothing more than a few plantations and trading posts. The first proper community, south of the Miami River, was Coconut Grove. But it was only after Julia Tuttle's husband died, in 1886, and she relocated from Cleveland to a plot of land north of the river, that things picked up. Tuttle approached Plant and asked him to extend his railroad to Miami. When she was turned down, she went to Flagler, whose own railway line stopped at Palm Beach, just 66 miles to the north. He, too, refused, saying there was nothing in Miami.

Tuttle knew that without the railroad, the tiny settlement would be too isolated to prosper. Even the simple act of sending a letter from Palm Beach to Miami took two months: the letter went to a lighthouse at Jupiter, then by Indian river steamer to the railway at Titusville, then by train to New York, then by steamer to Havana, and finally by a trading schooner that docked at the Miami River – a total journey of 3,000 miles. Nature, though, soon intervened.

In the winter of 1894-5, a killer frost devastated the orange crop in the north of the state, but Miami, being further south, escaped the freeze. According to legend, Julia Tuttle sent Flagler a handful of orange blossoms to show that her crop was unaffected. When she agreed to give Flagler half her land (300 acres), along with some of William Brickell's, the hard-nosed businessman agreed to extend the railway.

When the first locomotive arrived in Miami on 15 April 1896, all 300 residents turned out to greet it. But some of the old-timers had never seen a train before and fled to the woods in fright. Thousands of new settlers and investors flocked down in anticipation of a boom. Ralph Munroe, a yacht designer, was one of them. His 1891 Coconut Grove house, the Barnacle (*photo p19*), is the last vestige of pioneer architecture, and the oldest house in Dade County.

BIRTH OF A CITY

The shallowness of Biscayne Bay had hindered the growth of the area, but the extension of the railroad meant that machines, supplies and people could easily get to Miami now. A month

process of ranking storms in categories of severity – from 1 (winds of 74-95mph) to 5 (winds of more than 155mph) – is also viewer friendly. All a bit thrilling, then, for channel surfers. But the storms have taken a tragic toll.

On 18 September 1926, a Category 4 hurricane killed 800 people and left 50,000 homeless in Miami. Without radios, most people were oblivious to warnings; many died when they went outside during the lull of the storm's eye, only to be killed when the rear of the storm whipped in from behind.

On the night of 16 September 1928, 2,000 people died when a Category 3 roared into Lake Okeechobee and swamped local villages.

On Labor Day 1935, the most powerful hurricane in American history flattened the Keys. One of only three Category 5 storms to ever hit the US, it generated winds of 200mph. Anyone caught outside had their clothes ripped off by the sheer force of the gusts; every tree in Matecumbe Key was felled. The hurricane also destroyed Henry Flagler's Overseas Railroad – of the storm's 408 fatalities, 259 were World War I vets working on the tracks.

In September 1965, Hurricane Betsy confounded forecasters – and science – with its byzantine trajectory. After bypassing Florida and taking aim at South Carolina, the Category

3 storm suddenly reversed direction and slammed into a bewildered Miami.

But Hurricane Andrew was truly biblical in its rage. Miami had gone for 27 years without a direct hit, and the 1992 storm made up for it: a Category 5 hurricane, it made landfall near Homestead on 24 August with 165mph winds and proceeded to destroy Dade County, wrecking trailer parks and leaving 150,000 homeless. With damage of \$30 billion, it remains the second-most costly natural disaster in the US – after Hurricane Katrina.

After Andrew, the storms kept coming. In 2004, four hurricanes hit south Florida; Miami was affected by Frances, a Category 2, and Jeanne, a Category 3. In 2005, the worst season on record, Miami was hit by a fledgling Katrina on its way to New Orleans, and was then clobbered by the freakish Wilma. Not only did it form in late October, but the Category 2 storm hit Miami from behind, sneaking in from the Gulf Coast to kill 25 people.

Not, perhaps, the ideal time to book a trip, but adventure tourists are not daunted. Just as millions of people evacuate, storm chasers arrive en masse, video cameras at the ready.

Tours of the National Hurricane Center (305 229 4404, www.nhc.noaa.gov) are available from January to mid May by appointment.