

Virtual reality, dreamy food and fantastical murals add to sunny St. Pete's allure

Posted: Sunday, February 7, 2016 12:00 am

By **Roberta Soslow** Special to The Roanoke Times

Salvador Dalí, Walt Disney, virtual reality — does this combination sound bizarre? Not after donning an Oculus Rift headset and diving into the new exhibition at the Dalí Museum in St. Petersburg, Florida. “Disney and Dalí: Architects of the Imagination” is one of many experiences worth traveling for as this Tampa Bay-side downtown undergoes a cultural boom.

People still go to St. Pete for the warm, sunny weather and pretty Gulf Coast beaches, but increasingly, they stay for the art popping up everywhere: alleys, streets, boutiques, historic hotels, breweries, and plates at new and refreshed restaurants.

St. Pete nests between the Gulf of Mexico and Tampa Bay. Commanding respect in global art circles in recent years, its downtown neighborhoods are more colorful than ever.

Street murals by local and international artists display a range of styles and subjects from hypnotic abstracts to madcap cats to Frida Kahlo and Twiggy, the 1960s fashion model. Florida CraftArt, a hotspot for unique gifts and eye-popping exhibits, is the starting point for new Saturday morning mural walking tours. Galleries and vintage shops are opening and expanding. And the modernist headquarters of the Morean Arts Center brims with glass and other art and draws crowds for its several-times-daily glassmaking demos.

Fantasy landscapes

The Dalí Museum’s new “Disney and Dalí” exhibit, on view through June 12, illuminates the childhoods, early artistic mastery, ambitions, influences and career paths of these two geniuses who created striking imaginary landscapes that influenced visual culture. Visitors learn about their friendship and collaboration on a surrealist animated film called “Destino.”

Media range from snapshots of the two men relaxing together (one picture shows Dalí riding on Disney's miniature train) to plentiful film clips (for example, Disney's "Fantasia" and "Bambi" and Dalí's 1929 "Un Chien Andalou") to a video wall screening footage from Dalí's trippy "Dream of Venus" pavilion at the 1939 World's Fair in New York City.

The exhibition's highlight is "Dreams of Dalí." At this three-seat, three-screen virtual reality station, you enter and navigate the realm of the artist's 1935 painting, "Archaeological Reminiscence of Millet's 'Angelus'" — a symbol-laden interpretation of Jean-François Millet's 1859 masterwork. The virtual reality landscape includes motifs from other iconic Dalí works, including "Lobster Telephone" (a 1936 object that, like other Dalí concepts, influenced the field of product design) and "First Cylindric Chromo-Hologram Portrait of Alice Cooper's Brain" (a 1973 manifestation of Dalí's interest in the then-new medium of holography, which employs lasers to display a two-dimensional image in 3-D form). The museum recruited a Goodby Silverstein & Partners team led by digital virtuoso Nathan Shipley to create this global milestone in gallery design.

Allow two hours to tour the museum's permanent collection; take a docent tour or use the new audio-visual iPod guides (or phone app), which have no additional charge. The admission fee is a bargain considering the experience includes boundary-busting art, ideas and access to other worlds.

Nearby, enter a dreamscape of glass at the Chihuly Collection. Several times a day, docent tours reveal Dale Chihuly's techniques and secrets about his sculptures. The collection moves this fall to the Morean Arts Center's block in the Central Arts District. By the bay, the Museum of Fine Arts transports viewers back in time with exhibits such as John Scott's moving glass-block tribute to the 1963 Birmingham church bombing to Christian Marclay's multimedia collage of telephone scenes from 130 Hollywood movies, a reflection on social customs.

Food oases and drinksapes

A fresh crop of chef-driven restaurants gives diners plenty of choices. A new Central Avenue star is Cider Press Cafe, which elevates raw vegan cuisine to gourmet status. In sleek, airy, window-walled quarters, scenic dishes burst with flavor, from pad thai made with kelp and zucchini noodles, spicy tamarind sauce and fresh veggies to sassy Buffalo cauliflower bites to slices of dark chocolate ganache. Fresh-squeezed juices, smoothies and the wine list are impressive; the servers are warm and knowledgeable.

A block east, Il Ritorno has earned a loyal following of foodies since 2014 with Italian-accented dishes that celebrate the robust and subtle flavors of

seasonal produce. In January, a teaser of artichoke and heart of palm puree with roasted apple, fennel and basil oil set the stage for the chef's popular five-course tasting menu.

Meticulously presented fare also fills classic dining rooms like Marchand's Bar & Grill at the Vinoy Renaissance Resort. Opened in 1925, restored in 1992, revitalized in 2008 and now graced with Chihuly and local glass art, the Vinoy beckons visitors into a world of old-time elegance. Take a free morning tour of the historic hotel's dreamy corridors.

The drinking scene has its share of memorable settings. Green Bench Brewing Company pours richly hued beer (including some award-winners) distinguished with local ingredients in a handsome building and garden featuring games, movies and picnic seating. Newly opened Cage Brewing is decorated with cheerful murals. One features a coterie of acrobatic cats. Cycle Brewing is a cavern-tavern lined with neon.

At Cider Press Cafe, I hesitate to ravish the dishes placed before me. The food, artfully prepared by Chef Christina, looks too good to eat. But one bite and I can't put down my fork. This is a city where you'll want to dig in and dig deep.

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