

Miami's successful pitch to tech firms: How can we help?

January 24 2021, by Leila MacOr



This file photo from May 22, 2019, shows an aerial view of Miami; the Florida metropolis, already a financial hub, is striving to become a leading technology hub as well

The city of Miami, with a growing reputation as a financial services

center enhanced by its balmy climate and low taxes, is now making a concerted and increasingly successful push to attract hi-tech firms from Silicon Valley and New York.

Goldman Sachs and other [financial firms](#) already have a presence in the southern Florida metropolis.

The latest arrival is New York firm Blackstone, which earlier this month rented a building for a technology unit.

And now "techies" are starting to arrive in increasing numbers—investors, designers and engineers—attracted by a thriving technological ecosystem, by word of mouth from their earlier-arriving peers, and by pandemic conditions in some ways more favorable than in hotspots like California and New York.

Also arriving this month was PayPal co-founder Bill Harris, who in his LinkedIn profile has announced he is "building a new fintech in Miami"—a digital consumer [financial services](#) firm.

Viral tweet

One of those responsible for the surge in tech arrivals is Miami Mayor Francis Suarez, who has become a star of the tech Twittersphere.

His popularity on that social media platform was instantly confirmed in December when Delian Asparouhov, director of the venture capital firm Founders Fund, asked rhetorically, "what if we move Silicon Valley to Miami?" and the Republican mayor immediately responded, "How can I help?"



Miami Mayor Francis Suarez, seen speaking to reporters on May 29, 2019, is pushing hard to make his Florida city a major technological hub

That tweet went viral and attracted 15,000 new followers to Suarez's account, including even Twitter co-founder Jack Dorsey.

"We're building a holistic infrastructure where people will want to come to school here, stay and work here, start their business here, raise their children here," the Cuban-American mayor told AFP.

He has spent countless hours over the weeks in relaxed meetings with investors and technical advisors on how best to build and convert Miami into a hi-tech hub.

'Cafecito talks'

In his latest "cafecito talk"—as he calls such meetings—Suarez chatted with Cameron and Tyler Winklevoss, the twin brothers who co-founded Facebook, about the possibility of establishing a Miami headquarters for their cryptocurrency firm Gemini.

Also announced on social media were the moves in December of high-powered "unicorn" investors Keith Rabois, who began his career with PayPal, LinkedIn and Square; and of Backend Capital's Lucy Guo, who co-founded the artificial intelligence platform Scale AI.

"It's a wave. Every day new people are moving to Miami, often announcing their arrival on Twitter," Matt Haggman, vice president of the economic development group Miami-Dade Beacon Council, told AFP.

Both Suarez and Haggman stress that the attractions of their "magic city" are not limited to low taxes and a pleasant year-round climate.



This file photo from December 23, 2020, shows a sign urging Miamians to wear masks against the coronavirus; the southern city has an advantage over northern locales like New York: the balmy climate facilitates outdoor meetings

"What we've been quietly building over the last 10 years is the financial and educational backbone to support the entrepreneurs and businesses that are now seeing what Miami is all about," the mayor said.

The coronavirus pandemic has provided Miami with an added attraction: its balmy weather facilitates outdoor meetings, and sanitary regulations are relatively relaxed.

The COVID factor

"The trend of people moving to Miami has been going on for quite a while, but COVID has accelerated this in a big, big way," said Haggman, while adding that he had no numbers to support that observation.

For Lucy Guo, summing up the city's attractions is simple: "weather and friends," she told AFP.

Plus, she wanted to find a city where her favorite gym—Barry's Bootcamp—was still open despite the pandemic, which "narrowed it down significantly," said the 26-year-old businesswoman.

She said Mayor Suarez had persuaded her that Miami "is most likely to become the next startup hotspot."



As Miami sees a growing wave of hi-tech arrivals, locals wonder whether they will adapt to city traditions—like multiculturalism and loud reggaeton music on the beaches—or will be more of an invasive species

A conditional welcome

According to Suarez, Miami's defining demographic—more than half its population speaks Spanish—makes it a perfectly welcoming place for new arrivals.

"Miami is a startup in and of itself," he said. "Our people know what it means to struggle and fight hard for what you believe in."

The question for those techies already in Miami is whether the new wave of digital nomads will act like an exotic, invasive species or will work to fit in.

Will they be able to live with reggaeton tunes played at full volume on the city's sunny beaches? Will they grow to love snacks of croquetas with coffee? Or will they merely drive up local housing costs while bringing little in return?

More than 350 people who have been building Miami's technological ecosystem for years signed their names to a manifesto welcoming the newcomers but asking them to embrace the city's principles of inclusion, multiculturalism and multilingualism.

"There may be a lack of concrete plans to welcome new arrivals, or (adequate) incentives to create a tech district" like in San Francisco or New York, said Rosa Jimenez Cano, a technology expert who signed the #MiamiTech manifesto.

"But it is a great opportunity to create something that did not exist."

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