Flying into the seaside city of Batumi from Moscow in January may be a shock. With ice-bound Moscow only two hours behind, disembarking passengers are enveloped with warm air and a sea of greenery that seem to defy winter. The road to town runs past plantations of fragrant tangerine trees laden with bright orange fruit. Sprawling two-story private houses with surrounding verandas, grand staircases, and fancy cast iron gates sit amidst orchards and flower gardens. For a visitor from Russia these are real villas. The streets are jammed with disorderly hosts of private cars and lined with stately and exotic trees.

It is off-season, and crowds milling in the streets and city bazaars are blessedly free of tourists. The colorful look and sound of the people instantly evoke the image of cosmopolitan ports of the eastern Mediterranean: Here Georgians, Russians, Armenians, Greeks, and Turks all mix together. Even a newcomer unable to distinguish between most non-European peoples will soon notice that many Georgians speak Georgian curiously intermingled with Russian words, and many who speak Georgian are not of dark Mediterranean complexion, but blue-eyed redheads - native Muslim Adzharians from the mountains towering above the city. Wearing skullcaps and fingering amber prayer beads, old Adzharians linger in smoke-filled coffee houses that cluster in the port area amidst quaint blocks of turn-of-the-century modern art townhouse, relics of Batumi’s glorious past as a booming free port.

What a difference a few centuries can make or the vagaries of weather! If the wind had shifted just a bit in direction in October 1492, Mr. Columbus might well have waded ashore somewhere near Daytona Beach instead of onto one of the least impressive isles in the Bahamas. Such a brush with the North American continent would not have been too encouraging for someone with the mercenary appetites of the Great Navigator. Beyond a coastline blocked by a succession of sandbars and having virtually no decent natural harbors, he would have seen endlessly flat, steamy, mucky terrain of questionable fertility and few resources.

Yet five hundred years later, nowhere else in the world is there anything like the seemingly endless East Florida conurbation, a narrow, uninterrupted strip of grandiose urban tissue reaching all the way from Miami’s southern suburbs northward to Jacksonville for a distance of nearly 400 miles. Where Federal or state regulations or the physical limitations of the coastal zone do not discourage it, the same sort of hodgepodge of hotels, condominiums, resorts, marinas, fast food outlets, shopping centers, and parking lots that make up the modern American city seems to be materializing along Florida’s west coast.

The transformation of peninsular Florida and so much of the Gulf Coast in the 20th Century has been amazing, a Cinderella story verging upon a geographic miracle.
FROM BACKWATER TO NOUVEAUX RICHES

For the most part the Tropical South consists of a narrow strip of the coast squeezed between the sea and the mountains. Though tiny on the map, the region can rightfully boast of an ancient history and a role far out of proportion to its small area. Almost completely enclosed, the Black Sea is in many ways an appendage and a smaller version of the Mediterranean. Since the seventh century B.C., Greek colonies dotted the shores of the Pontus Euxinos - the Hospitable Sea - making the straits of Bosporus and Dardanelles one of the world's busiest waterways. The Mediterranean connection was maintained as the coasts became part of consecutive empires focused on Constantinople: Roman, Byzantine, and finally, Ottoman. All of them embraced the Black Sea with two narrow arms of coastal footholds. Until a century or two ago, the political and ethnic history of this coastal ring was quite separate from the hinterland, making it a beaconhead of the Mediterranean-Balkan realm. Under Ottoman rule, the coasts were strongly Islamized and faced off against Christian Georgia and Russia. In the words of the famous Prince Potyomkin, Crimea was “a wart on Russia’s nose.” The Hospitable sea of the Greeks was the ominously Black sea of Muslim threat for the Russians. The Islamic beachhead proved to be precarious, though, as Russia took over the coasts in late 18th to early 19th century, turning the region that had been the periphery of Mediterranean empires into the “South” from a Russian perspective. And yet, the region until the twentieth century was a sleepy and nearly unpopulated backwater. Surrounding states were uninterested in the Black Sea except in terms of strategic value. The accounts of travelers who moved through western Georgia a mere hundred years ago speak of the unimaginable poverty and primitive lifestyle of the peasants: in a sense, the tradition of slavery continued in Western Georgia until 1912. In an amazing turn of fortune, the region that in the past epitomized poverty has been miraculously transformed in modern times. Dense forests and swamps with a scattering

A LATE BLOOMER

For a surprisingly long time, Florida remained one of the orphan regions of the Western World. Even in 1892, anyone surveying the area would have noted remarkably little change from the time of Columbus, especially in comparison with the rest of the bustling republic farther north. The Gulf Coast fared somewhat better. Control of the mouth of the immense Mississippi, and thus of the wealth and commerce of its vast drainage basin, excited interest among the French in the early 1700s, the Spanish a little later, and subsequently the Anglos. From its earliest days, New Orleans became a prize worth jostling over. Lacking any hinterland worth bothering about, coastal Florida was neglected; aside from a token, poorly provisioned garrison at St. Augustine, a few small, ineffective coastal and inland church missions, and a scattering of place names, the Spanish impress was negligible. The only perceived value was geopolitical: as a staging area for naval and military efforts to keep marauders out of West Indian waters, the source of so much European wealth, the region where all the real action was taking place. Simply because of its location, the French and British intermittently challenged Spanish sovereignty over Florida, and when the United States finally scooped up the state from an enfeebled Spain around 1819, the transaction was almost absentminded and stirred little political interest among the American populace. Furthermore, over the next several decades settlement and development remained minimal in the southern two thirds of the state. During the same period, the only notable growth in activity along the Gulf Coast was in New Orleans and a few other port towns. Elsewhere, populations were sparse and economic enterprise was stunted and desultory. As for the indigenous inhabitants, which probably numbered in the hundreds of thousands, most had perished during the first century of direct and indirect contact with Europeans, chiefly because of susceptibility to Old World diseases.
of cornfields have given way to vineyards, citrus and tea gardens, and huge sprawling villages of two or three storied private houses. Cars replaced the recently ubiquitous water buffalos; and in the rate of private car ownership, the coastal strip from Crimea to Georgia ranked at the top during the Soviet period. Waterfronts have been transformed into almost uninterrupted lines of resorts. The children and grandchildren of poor docile peasants now ostentatiously display their wealth in the expensive restaurants of Moscow or Petrovsk inaccessible to most Russians. Ironically, the Russians, who have good reason to believe that much of this prosperity is at their expense, still perceive the region through a distorting veil. The condescending romanticization of colorful (“Italian”) southern poverty has been replaced with envious admiration of the region’s loud prosperity. The dramatic about-face in the prosperity of the Tropical South came about through social and economic changes that occurred in what might be called the Soviet Frost Belt (which pretty much coincided with all of Russia). Improved standards of living in the North resulted in a greater appreciation of leisure and “tropical” amenities, creating a uniquely Soviet variety of Sunbelt. The environment closest to tropical could be found along the rim of the Black Sea, and what the region lacked in genuine “tropicalness” could be added by manipulating popular perception.

Tropiki

Strictly speaking, the “Tropical” South is really only subtropical, but even that is amazing so far to the north. In fact, the region embraces the world’s northernmost point of subtropical climate. Moldova lies at the same latitude as Newfoundland, and Batumi (in the southernmost extremity of the region) corresponds to New York City, though its climate is that of northern Florida. This anomaly is due to the protective mountain wall which screens the coastal rim from invasions of cold air. The Greater Caucasus Range and the Crimean mountains provide a sharp divide between the Tropical South and the steppes of the Breadbasket with their harsh winters. Weather forecasts and tourist brochures always treat the region as a separate entity, calling it Tropicka

Other factors account for the prolonged somnolence of the American Tropical South: until the 20th Century, such places were not readily accessible nor environmentally appealing to Europeans who tended to gravitate to habitats that were reasonably homelike, and the Tropical South was emphatically not like Europe. Even the Spaniards, who did colonize various tracts within the American low latitudes, kept to the temperate uplands and shunned the hot and wet coastal plains. Americans considered southern Florida to be a wild and dangerous place, definitely not worth visiting, much less living in. At the time of Census of 1830, Florida ranked 25th among the 27 states and territories, having only 34,730 inhabitants, and nearly all of them living outside our region within the northern quarter of the state, an area that, in terms of economy and culture, was little more than an extension of Georgia. Even as late as 1876, the entire voting population of what are now Dade, Broward, and Palm Beach counties was only 73. In an incredible change, the statewide population tally for Florida by 1990 had reached 12,938,000, a figure surpassed only by California, New York, and Texas; and the great bulk of these people were located in the peninsular section of the state.

How did this neglected region achieve such an amazing transformation in popularity? Miami, Orlando, Tampa St. Petersburg, and New Orleans have experienced a localized expression of much broader trends operating among highly advanced modern societies everywhere: millions of middle-class people now enjoy a surplus of leisure time. But also relevant is what might be called the Tropicalization of American Life. For most persons, the summer season has become the emotional climax of the year. And, of course, the best way to accommodate the lure of the tropics is to move southward for a few days - or better yet, for a lifetime.

Tropicana

Climate is a key consideration in explaining the metamorphosis of the Tropical South. Year round warmth and abundant sunshine have been powerful enticements for
“The Black Sea Coast of Crimea and Caucasus.” The part of the region that fits closest to the stereotypical images of the tropics, is Adzharia, a small area blessed with a second line of mountain defenses against northern air. The Lesser Caucasus Mountains trap moisture-laden winds coming over the Black Sea, showering Batumi with well over 80 inches of rain per year. Such a greenhouse climate gives this unique area lush flora resembling southern Japan or China. From Adzharia, the zone of humid climate continues into the triangle of the once nearly impassable and desolate swamps of Colchida, and these are the only parts of the former USSR where the cultivation of such “exotic” crops as tea and citrus fruits was possible. From Abkhazia to the Crimea, the climate is much drier, and the landscapes with their Italian pines, cypress trees, and dry-leafed bushes evoke images of the French Riviera and Italy, while the major crops are grapes and tobacco.

The subtropics are a rather conjured-up tropics. Although all of the region has January temperatures above the freezing point, on occasion winter frosts are strong enough to harm citrus trees. Snow occurs almost every year, though it seldom lasts for more than a few days. More importantly, the Tropical South is a bit contrived with respect to its image. No other region of the USSR had a portrait that was so recently and consciously manufactured by agents ranging from Russian literature to Soviet media and mass-culture.

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In earlier days, the “tropics” had been ignored. Russian nobility’s quest for the exotic was satisfied by trips to the Mediterranean, and Russian writers’ thirst for the romantic was quenched by the mountains of the Caucasus, where gallant montagnards resisted the Empire for nearly a century. Only in the 20th century did the growing middle class of capitalist Russia discover the Black Sea as an affordable Russian Mediterranean. Villas, health resorts (sanitoriums), and hotels for sun-deprived Petersburgians began to dot the coast. A new infatuation by Russian writers with the romantic South began to focus the sea. Later the group of early Soviet writers hailing from Odessa portrayed Americans. But warmth is only a relative thing in a region for which the term “tropical” is something of a misnomer. True enough, the mean daily maximum temperature may range near or above 90°F in the summer over virtually the entire region and is in the neighborhood of 70°F in January. On the other hand, there is no mountain barrier between the Canadian Arctic and the Gulf of Mexico to block the bursts of intensely refrigerated winter air masses that do occasionally invade the region.

Consequently, killing frosts occur along the entirety of the Gulf Coast in many winters, and every few years all of Florida as far south as Miami endures freezing weather. This phenomenon is no small matter for a region that banks on the influx of visitors during the cold months, where central heating is almost unknown, and so much of the agricultural economy depends on frost sensitive crops such as citrus, tomatoes, and sugar cane. Even the very warmth that draws people can also cause problems. Relative humidity is often so high as to cause “super tropical” discomfort. If this is a relatively warm corner of the North American continent, it is even more emphatically one of its moistest, with mean annual precipitation up to 60 inches per year. It would seem that drought could not be an issue, but serious rainfall deficits may occur over periods of several months in just about any portion of the region; and in recent times, drought has been particularly troublesome in southern Florida. Such dry spells have meant near disaster for aquatic and other wildlife as well as for farmers and municipal water supplies. On the other hand, numerous floods have punctuated the history of the region, especially along the Gulf.

To add to this meteorological stew, the Tropical South experiences the most thunderstorms of anyplace in North America, more than 100 days of such showers in an average year in southern Florida. With alarming frequency, settlements and farmlands have been inundated in southern Louisiana, Texas, and Alabama. The situation is particularly worrisome along the lower Mississippi, and it has been only
the Black Sea as an invented world of romanticized tropics, with bright colors and noble characters with strong passions. This conscious desire to find a bright make-believe world amidst bleak Soviet realities explains much of the willing self-deception about the “Russian Tropics.”

Under Stalin, an ethnic Georgian, the image of the Tropical South was particularly enhanced by official propaganda keen to accommodate the dictator’s tastes. In Soviet “factory of dreams” movies, the region became the locale for the “all-union health station” (offered as a boon to the best workers) and the land of romance and chivalry. Some former dachas of the nobility were indeed turned into sanatoriums and resthouses for the workers, but more importantly, Stalin added to the old royal villas in the Crimea a whole network of dachas for the new communist rulers of the country, and the region continued to be a playground for the elite. By the 1960s, the mythological foundations were laid and the stage was set for the real opening of the Tropical South, which occurred with major changes in post-Stalinist Soviet society. Considerably improved standards of living produced a new urban middle class of educated professionals who valued leisure and were eager to fulfill the socially prestigious aspirations earlier denied to everybody but the elite. The floodgates opened, and the avalanche of tourists and vacationers quickly followed.

The Tangerine Invasion Of Moscow

The integration of the Tropical South into the Russian mainstream fully transformed the region’s agriculture. Even before the revolution, the first tea gardens were laid out around Batumi, and the famous Botanical Gardens were established north of the town to promote acclimatization of citrus trees, avocados, and other tropical species or fruit trees or medicinal plants. The pressure to develop “tropical” agriculture grew with the Soviet economic policy of self-sufficiency, and the scheme was overall a success. The region largely met domestic demand for tea and tobacco, but transport constraints long after herculean exploits and vast expense that the U.S. Corps of Engineers has been able to safeguard New Orleans and other riverside towns from calamity. Another distinctive regional weather characteristic is a most unhappy one - tropical hurricanes. During the summer and autumn of almost any year, at least one of these potentially devastating storms sweeps in from the lower latitudes of the Atlantic Ocean to lash the Gulf or South Atlantic coast. It is not only the ferociously destructive winds that make these visitors so unwelcome. The accompanying vast surges of sea water that can rush over low lying coastal tracts may cause even greater havoc. As construction and population buildup continues at a merry pace (especially in Florida) in close proximity to the shore, it is all too likely that the worst of hurricane disasters is still to come on that fateful day when a storm of exceptional viciousness hits a densely settled area lacking adequate evacuation plans or facilities. Something close to such an ultimate disaster came to pass in 1992, when Hurricane Andrew laid waste to much of Miami’s southern periphery.

How did this bundle of atmospheric contradictions come to attract one of the biggest population flows in recent history? Perhaps the answer lies within the realm of social psychology. During the past several decades, there has been a remarkable shift in our collective and individual mind sets. Work has become little more than the prelude to play, so that many of us spend our hours in shop or office daydreaming about weekends, vacations, or retirement. Everywhere one turns it seems that hedonism is rearing its lovely head, and the doctrines of pleasure and fun have begun to mold our destinies. What has emerged is a type of social Tropic-ana, born out of the key role that the advertising industry played in forging the region’s image: not too coincidently, advertising came of age at the same time that modern Florida did.

Taking Over The American Breakfast Table

As it happens, a desire to enjoy the country’s very own tropics has been mated with technologically enhanced opportunity, especially in terms of accessibility. Although
impeded the production of citrus fruits. Although the coastal railway to Georgia was finally completed in the 1920s, the transport of perishable fruits was impossible without then-scarce refrigerated boxcars. As a result, never easily obtainable tangerines and oranges (the only fresh fruits available to Russia in winter) acquired the prestige of rare delicacies.

Citrus fruit revolutionized the agricultural scene in the 1960s. While the Frost Belt was discovering Tropical South through exploding tourism, the natives of the Tropical South were discovering the bonanza of northern markets, which the inefficient state sector could never satiate with products of the “Lush South.” The belated spread of affordable air transport and private autos put the European regions of the USSR within easy reach of the Tropical South for the first time. Meanwhile, the increasingly laissez-faire Soviet regime was relaxing its vigilant control over local affairs. All of these factors explain the rapid expansion of private (rather than collectivized) agriculture and the eventual triumph of the shadow economy in the region.

The private plots of collective farmers were rapidly converted into intensively cultivated citrus orchards, flower, and early vegetable gardens, while production in the collective sector was neglected. In the balance, “tropical” produce was kept below demand with monopolistically high prices. Private farming became an extremely lucrative activity, open only to the native rural population. Ironically, it could be such a source of wealth only within the Soviet socialist economy, where a closed domestic market ruled out foreign competition, laws prevented outsiders from buying land in the Tropical South, and the absence of free market prices and realistic taxation boosted the profits made on exotic crops. A shipment of tangerines or flowers delivered to Moscow or Donetsk in the midst of winter could command almost any price, and little wonder that an average annual crop of tangerines from a family lot in Adzharia produced a household income 50 to 100 times higher than a private plot of equal area in European Russia.

most of the Gulf Coast had been approachable by ship or rail by the mid 19th Century, nearly all of peninsular Florida lay beyond the reach of any but the most fanatic of travelers until the 1890s. Shrewdly anticipating the eventual economic and demographic payoff of the region, Henry M. Plant plunged into the wilderness and began to develop a rail system into southwest Florida, while Henry M. Flagler extended his Florida East Coast Railway into Palm Beach by 1893 and Miami by 1896. Modern Florida had been born. People could come in; oranges could go out, both in great volume and at reasonable cost.

As the years passed, Florida’s rail network grew, and the transformation of the environment set in with it. With the availability of power machinery for earth-moving, much of the shoreline of the region has undergone radical change as urban developers have filled in or reshaped wetlands to create new waterfront lots. Inland, there has been the inevitable suburbanization and sprawl of such metropolises as Orlando, Winter Haven, and Lakeland, despite problems in drainage. Wetlands were also transformed into prime orchards and vegetable gardens, and specialized agriculture and horticulture created a family resemblance between the economies of the Gulf and Florida sections of the Tropical South. Their climates enable them to grow a variety of tropical and subtropical fruits, vegetables, and ornamental plants not otherwise available cheaply in the eastern United States and to penetrate northern markets with fresh produce all year.

Thus Florida and Gulf coast growers find it profitable to rush the first lettuce, green peppers, corn, and tomatoes of the season northward every spring while the Midwest and Northeast are still frost bound; and, similarly, mid latitude consumers will pay premium prices for the earliest cantaloupes and watermelons of the year. Here is also the only part of the United States outside Hawaii where sugar cane can be grown and harvested, though at considerable risk of frost every few years. The development of frozen juice concentrate in the 1940s allowed the Tropical South to surpass California in output of oranges, tangerines, and grapefruit; and few people in America can
Such easy wealth in agriculture set off a chain reaction throughout the economy as a whole. The great inflow of money into Georgia pushed up demand and black market prices for consumer goods that could not be produced by weak local industry, thus luring many people into profitable speculative trade. Merchandise purchased at fixed low prices in state shops in cities “up north” was taken south to be resold at several times the original price. Thus, overpriced agricultural produce from the “shadow” private sector went North, just as state-subsidized consumer goods from the north traveled south, creating immense profits in both directions; and in a uniquely Soviet reversal of scenarios common elsewhere, the agricultural South in fact benefitted at the expense of the developed North.

THEME 1: THE SUN-AND-SIN ECONOMY
Manufacturing A Sunbelt
Over half of all Soviets who left their immediate home areas for vacation went to the Black Sea coasts. Moreover, most of them crowded into the central stretch, from the southern tip of the Crimea roughly to Sukhumi, which over the years became something of a linear recreational metropolis. The names of Yalta, Sochi, or Gagra were known to every Soviet as resorts symbolizing middle class prestige.

The developed resort strip is very narrow and even frequently interrupted by mountain spurs falling abruptly into the sea. The mountains prevent physical expansion into the hinterland, putting demand pressure on existing facilities and creating an overall impression of severe crowding. Yet such overpopulated built-up areas are interspersed with undeveloped stretches of the coast or populous villages. The curious combination of densely packed resorts and generally extensive land use could only be possible in the absence of a true market for land. Health resorts were operated like any socialist enterprise, in a strictly planned and “organized” way. There were no readily available sit down to their breakfast juice today without feeling the influence of the region. Despite these successes, two principal problems for the area’s agriculture remain: the recruitment of a transient labor force from domestic and foreign sources and increasingly effective competition from Mexico and the West Indies. But in the case of at least one major (though climatically marginal) crop in Louisiana and Florida sugar cane governmental support has come to the rescue in the form of subsidies and quotas on foreign imports.

THEME 1: THE SUN-AND-SIN ECONOMY
Populating A Sunbelt
Probably more than any other state, Florida has benefited from the building of the Interstate Highway System from the mid 1950s onward. It has brought this subtropical wonderland within one or two day driving time for a considerable majority of Americans. By the thousands and hundreds of thousands they came: the permanently transplanted, the tourists, conventioneers, snowbirds, retirees, refugees, migrant workers, and college students on their spring break, all in search of their version of the latterday American Dream. During every single decade since 1900 (with the exception of the 1910s and 1930s, with World War I and the Great Depression), the total population of the state has grown by at least 30 percent and in the 1950s at the astonishing rate of 78.7 percent. The peninsular segment of Florida claimed the lion’s share of the increment, with a demographic explosion taking place largely in the major cities. Smaller urban centers also welcomed their share of the new arrivals, as did much of the nominally rural countryside. To a degree probably unmatched elsewhere in North America, this region holds many scattered residential developments seemingly in the middle of nowhere. Much of the western component of the Tropical South has not been able to match southern Florida’s feverish growth pattern, a fact that raises some provocative questions. The Mobile and Baton Rouge metropolitan areas have registered
drop-in motels or hotels on the coast. Reservations for state-operated resorts were at a premium and normally obtained through one’s trade union, frequently involving several years’ wait for a turn to go to a more desirable location. As a result, skyrocketing numbers of so-called “wild” visitors rented a room or even just a bunk in a private residence. The incredible congestion of cheaper accommodations and prohibitive prices for better ones explained the high seasonal incomes of those who were lucky enough to be permanent local residents. Always tolerated, this was a rare sphere of officially allowed private enterprise in the USSR. Not surprisingly, since 1897 the pull of the sun and lucrative occupations produced a more than seven-fold increase in the population of the “resort” segment of the coast, making it the fastest-growing region of the former Soviet Union.

In contrast to the resort economy of the Crimean and Russian parts of the Tropical South, it was more lucrative to spend solar energy in Georgia on plants than on human sunbathers. Western Georgia is an endless village that sprawls along all major roads and blankets hillsides. While the line between urban and rural was so sharp in most of the former USSR, it was blurred in Georgia, which remains an essentially rural society with urban population barely exceeding half of the total. The towns are for the most part local commercial and food industry centers, and even in cities much of the income comes from the countryside: either through family channels or by exploiting positions of power.

The lackluster performance of the official economy of Georgia stands in stark contrast to its visible prosperity. If one excludes the three Baltic states of Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia (which ranked first in the USSR in both well-being and economic performance), then Georgia emerged first in the rate of private car ownership, but only seventh in terms of national product per capita. This discrepancy is eloquent proof of the pre-eminence of “shadow” sources of wealth in a generally underdeveloped economy. According to 1980s data, Georgia, endowed as it was with the best only slight gains, the population of Greater New Orleans seems to be at a standstill, and several counties located between southeast Texas and the Florida Alabama line along the Gulf Coast suffered population decline over the same period. What is the explanation for these two quite different trajectories of growth?

Part of the answer lies in the contrasting situations of the two areas at the start of the boom period. Peninsular Florida was almost a clean slate, especially after the elimination of much of the indigenous population. In contrast, the Gulf Coast was already rather well developed; in particular, the banks of the lower Mississippi were taken up by all manner of economic enterprises, and a well entrenched population had preempted all the relatively dry or accessible portions of the bayou country within the Delta. Expansion of the venerable, regionally dominant metropolis of New Orleans, which had consistently ranked among the top half dozen cities of antebellum America, was becoming problematic. In part this has been a matter of the sheer physical constraints of a difficult site, but at a more fundamental level the city is afflicted by the same syndrome of social ills bedeviling the older metropolises of the so called Rust Belt.

The Texas and Louisiana portions of the region are abundantly endowed with petroleum and natural gas both on land and under water and also blessed with some of the world’s richest reserves of salt and sulfur. The mineral wealth of the Gulf Coast makes it much more heavily industrialized in the conventional sense than is Florida, but Florida is well ahead in attracting the newer high tech and information based industries thanks to the siren call of amenities the living conditions that enable the area to bid successfully for skilled technicians, professionals, managers, and executives. As a region so largely devoted to the production and sale of pleasure, the Tropical South is peculiarly sensitive to the crests and troughs in the national and international economy. Overbuilding and excessive expansion followed by temporary collapse has become a familiar cycle. But even more troublesome is the fact that here there is a zone poised between the wealth and glitter of the United States and the poverty of more than a
agricultural lands in the former USSR, ranked only seventh in the value of agricultural product per unit of sown area. Such dismal performance of the state sector stemmed from its degradation into little more than a smokescreen for lucrative underground or “second economy” activities. Carefully cultivated private lots stand in striking contrast to the deplorable state of collective farm fields.

If the Soviet Sunbelt is measured in terms of in-migration or economic power, it would appear to be a failure. Its population has barely reached 5 million (6 million with Odessa) and market reforms now mean that the polluted beaches and expensive fruits of the region will face competition from Bulgaria and the Mediterranean. The palatial houses of the village nouveaux-riches are a facade, with their tasteless decorations trying to imitate marble but still unmistakably stucco. The whole prosperity of the region was based on using the anomalies of the Soviet system. Without this system, each grand villa of the Tropical South may prove to be only a house of cards.

Playing the Black Market

Many people are taken in by the gaudy displays and believe that Georgia’s prosperity is due to an entrepreneurial streak in its population, but reality suggests otherwise. Rather than modernizing the region and helping to develop the western-style work ethic, the massive infusion of unearned wealth into rural areas helped to preserve or revive many traditionalist cultural codes of society, including the leisurely attitudes of a once-numerous petty gentry. The stress on ritual display of goods, on the expenditure of huge sums on elaborate feasts with show-off hospitality and on expensively decorated cemetery plots only reinforces the desperate quest for wealth.

The question of whether to consider the shadow economy of the Tropical South (especially Georgia) as criminal is highly ambiguous. It certainly seemed illegal from the viewpoint of Frost Belt populations who felt exploited; for the local population it
dozen countries just over the horizon. The moral and material tensions between the two worlds are stark and insistent.

Smugglers’ Coves

One of the basic facts of international life is that there is inevitably a lively illegal trade in all sorts of things wherever two countries at very different levels of development are within striking distance of each other. Nowhere in the developed world is there stronger proof of this axiom than in the American Tropical South. It may be impossible to determine precisely the volume of contraband being smuggled, but the indirect evidence is convincing enough. It is likely that the flow of illegal aliens and goods into Louisiana, Florida, and other parts of the region had materialized as early as the 1800’s. The authorities have always been hard put to patrol so long a coastline with its myriad coves and beaches, and it was especially difficult back when so much of the region was thinly settled. But the action became really hot and heavy during the Prohibition Era (1920-1933), when parched Americans were eager customers for the bottled goods carried by rum runners in speedboats and other vessels from the Bahamas, Cuba, and other points.

If this illegal trade has become much more diversified of late, one category of freight strongly dominates the scene: narcotics. This commerce, only a small fraction of which is intercepted and confiscated by government agents, certainly runs into the billions of dollars each year. It relies on all sorts of transport from baggage and clothing of travelers to camouflaged cargo on scheduled airliners and freighters, light planes landing at isolated airstrips, and small ocean craft seeking out obscure inlets. The proceeds from this and other outlaw enterprises generate much of the prosperity of a booming regional banking industry by means of various money laundering schemes.
was simply the clever use of loopholes in the socialist system. Obviously, the second economy existed throughout the Soviet Union, but in Georgia it might well have been larger than the official or “first” economy. Corruption, black marketeering, speculation, and bribe-taking were carried out on an unprecedented scale and with unrivalled daring. The reasons for this were largely in Georgia’s uniquely privileged position in the former USSR.

Open favoritism by Moscow started with Stalin and gave the ruling ethnic elite a free hand within the republic. The combination of local political autonomy with the Caucasian reliance on familial and clan ties in all aspects of life led to the creation of a nearly impenetrable network of mutual aid and protection that clearly excluded those who were not part of the system. Illegal economic operations and exchanges produced great personal wealth for many Georgians, while the official economy of the republic grew only insignificantly. In the sunlit Tropical South, many people prospered by staying in the shadows.

THEME 2: STORMS ALONG THE BLACK SEA

The newly acquired wealth of the region has increased the stakes for control of this valuable prize. Since the coast had almost no tradition of statehood and its rise from poverty was so recent, the political arenas of the states that carve up the coast were traditionally dominated by inland areas, and the rapid ascendency of the coasts has introduced a peculiar dichotomy between the centers of “money power” and traditional power seats. The newly independent states of Georgia and Ukraine have tried to strengthen their grip on the rich coasts, reviving the deep, ancient cultural divide between coast and hinterland.

Ethnic separateness from the “mainland” is about the only unifying thread in the bewildering ethnic mosaic of the Tropical South. The region’s geographic isolation and

In addition to drugs, the Tropical South is the entry zone for such other commodities as prohibited animal pelts and feathers, live birds and other endangered creatures, archeological articles, and art objects. But far surpassing all these in importance is illicit traffic in human beings. As already dismal living conditions continue to deteriorate for much of the rapidly growing populations of the Caribbean and Latin America, many desperate persons have opted for northern flight. Florida has been the principal target for the newcomers, the great majority of whom in recent times have arrived from Cuba and Haiti (the former group for the most part legally), but Bahamians, Dominicans, and many other folks have managed to filter into most regions of the Tropical South.

THEME 2: AMERICAN SHORE OF THE TURBULENT CARIBBEAN

The Tropical South contains a striking internal ethnic diversity that makes it distinct from the rest of the United States. Intra regional patterns show that the mix of people living along the Gulf Coast is decidedly unlike that in peninsular Florida. In fact, the ethnic personality of southern Louisiana is about as different from mainstream America as any sizeable chunk of the country can be. Most of the Black population originated as transferred slaves from the French West Indies. Some residents of New Orleans arrived directly from France, the rest by way of the West Indies or as dispossessed Acadians (Cajuns) from Nova Scotia. Until recently, the back country of southern Louisiana remained one of America’s most isolated regions, and the dwellers in its bayous and prairies preserved and enjoyed their own quite special brand of culture. The “discovery” of the Cajun/Creole enclave has resulted in efforts to maintain the local French patois and to celebrate other elements of the cultural heritage, especially the local cuisine (indeed, many regard New Orleans as the gastronomic capital of North America) and dance music (zydeco).
historic obscurity allowed it to preserve populations ethnically separate from those in adjoining parts of Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova. Thus coastal Georgia is populated with Adzharians, Mengrelians, and Abkhazians. Adzharians speak Georgian, but centuries of Ottoman rule (until 1878) resulted in a strong sense of Muslim identity. Abkhazians are largely Muslim and have a language and political history quite separate from Georgia. Between Abkhazia and Adzharia live Mengrelians, who speak their own language and have an identity separate from Georgian, while the traditional Georgian perception of them has been a pejorative one of rural hicks, the target of ethnic jokes. Coastal Bessarabia is part of Ukraine claimed by Moldova, yet the majority of its population are neither Ukrainian nor Moldovan, but Bulgarian, Russian, and Gagauz (Turkic-speaking Orthodox Christians). Finally, in the Ukrainian Crimea, the population is over 80 percent Russian.

The region's history is filled with dramas of voluntary and forced exiles of whole peoples. Before the Russo-Turkish wars, the coast of present-day Krasnodar territory was populated by Circassians, people related to Abkhazians. Circassians long valiantly resisted the Russian advent, and the impressed victors, eager to vacate the coast from Ottoman subjects, offered them the option of emigrating to Turkey. The majority left, and today Circassians and Abkhazians number about one million in Turkey, more than in Russia and Georgia combined. At the same time, many Crimean Tatars left the Crimea, giving Russians a decisive majority which was later finalized by the deportation of Crimean Tatars in 1944. Today, there are some five million Crimean Tatars in Turkey, while only one million in all of the former USSR.

This gruesome burden of unsettled ethnic accounts was exacerbated by administrative changes during the Soviet period, with the creation of ethnically-based states in which the peoples of the coastal areas were small minorities. Discrimination and nationalism have slowly diluted the ethnic diversity of the coastal strip. Thus, Abkhazia was originally a separate union republic, but in 1932 it was made an autonomous part of In the sharpest of contrasts to the Gulf Coast, the peopling of southern Florida has been a recent affair, with only a small minority of the people in question not themselves migrants. The newcomers to Florida's east coast have originated mostly in the Northeastern states, so much so that the area has begun to mimic New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania in many of its social and cultural characteristics, while along the west coast, the new Floridians have largely originated from the Midwestern states. The popular image of Florida as a haven for the elderly is not illusory. Retirees are definitely over represented statistically in the population, most notably in Tampa St. Petersburg, the metropolitan area claimed by Moldova, yet the majority of its population are neither Ukrainian nor Moldovan, but Bulgarian, Russian, and Gagauz (Turkic-speaking Orthodox Christians). Finally, in the Ukrainian Crimea, the population is over 80 percent Russian.

In geopolitical terms, the Caribbean has been virtually an American lake since the 1820s, when the Monroe Doctrine claimed the Americas as the exclusive arena of the United States. Military incursions into Panama, Grenada, the Dominican Republic, and, by proxy, Nicaragua, are only the most recent of a series of such U.S. interventions that have involved every country in the Caribbean region. The American flag still flies over Puerto Rico, the American Virgin Islands, and Guantánamo, Cuba, and for all
Georgia (the state which the leading Soviet freedom-fighter, the late academician Andre Sakharov, called a mini-empire for aggressive ethnocentrism and discrimination). But the Abkhaz and Adzhur units existed mostly in name, and even the very title ‘Adzharian’ has been struck from the population census lists. An official campaign was undertaken to replace Muslim names with typically Georgian ones, and not a single mosque remains in Batumi. In the 1970s Abkhazians began to agitate openly for greater influence in the affairs of their own region and to favor secession into Russia, until in 1992, the Georgian versus Abkhazian struggle erupted again into all-out war.

In a similarly complex circumstance, the Crimea was part of Russia until 1954, when it was transferred to Ukraine as a “gift.” Not surprisingly, Ukrainian independence prompts strong Crimean sentiment for secession into Russia. Throughout the Tropical South, loyalty to Georgian, Ukrainian, or Moldovan states comes only third after local ethnic identities and pro-Russian sentiment (largely the product of the desire to preserve the fragile prosperity that depend on the North). These coastal beachheads are precarious though. For example, like Crimea’s previous attempt to become independent in 1917, a new effort can be easily foiled by a Ukrainian blockade of the peninsula (which receives three-quarters of its food and fresh water from mainland Ukraine).

The devolution of the USSR demonstrated how shaky is the very existence of the Tropical South. The region failed to become a true Sunbelt, while Russia became one more empire that failed to keep the Black Sea ring. Ancient Russians called the sea “Black” for its frequent and violent storms, and the conflict-torn region still seems to be perched on the edge of deep and turbulent waters.

practical purposes, Cuba was an American possession until the Castro regime took over in 1959. At the time of the annexation of Spanish Florida, the justification was that it was a “blunt dagger” pointed at the United States; but the dagger really points southward.

In terms of economy, the Caribbean has long been an American lake as well. The Gulf ports and New Orleans in particular have served as the principal gateways for the receipt of tropical produce and other exports from Central America, Mexico, the Antilles, Venezuela, and Colombia, while money has flowed freely back and forth. The economies of Jamaica, the Bahamas, Virgin Islands, Puerto Rico, and many of the Lesser Antilles might well collapse without North American tourism. In some ways, Miami has become the capital of the Caribbean.

There is a certain delicious irony in the fact that so many hundreds of thousands of Spanish speaking immigrants have been flocking to a former corner of an empire the Spanish Crown so systematically ignored back in the time of Columbus. The Tropical South is fast becoming the hot spot of America in many ways: in the growth and ethnic mixture of its population, in the economic explosion associated with pleasure enterprises from Miami resorts to baseball spring training camps to Disney World, and in the geopolitical tempest of its connections to the Caribbean Sea.