

FIRE & ICE

The closest thing in Atlanta to Miami's South Beach party scene may well be the downtown entertainment complex of Utopia, Shangri La and Ice. Located in Midtown West near Georgia Tech, this modern day Xanadu is owned and managed by La and Donny Mui, an Asian-American husband-and-wife team. Freethinker La, an interior decorator, has taken a nondescript building, divided it into three complementary areas, and injected each with a huge dose of fantasy.

La knows the value of a strong concept. "A congenial multi-cultural meeting place" is how she describes Utopia, a combination restaurant and lounge. Shangri La, a more intimate downstairs lounge, she dubs a "universal living room." Ice, an arctic-themed nightclub, is a place where people "become transparent" and "break the ice." Ideally, she says, patrons will experience all three in one evening.

Arrive at Utopia early and claim a comfortable, half-moon-shaped VIP booth. From here, you can admire the restaurant's décor, which is full of warm colors and sexy curves. Like a game of word association, one element plays off another: The wave-shaped wine rack over the burnished copper bar is echoed in the anemone-like arms of the ceiling lamps and a

unique sculpture of twisted copper tubing in the middle of the dance floor. Utopia's martini menu is as creative as the décor. By all means, try the signature Utopian Dream. The glowing ring of purple cyalume at the base is a clue that the green concoction is as mind-altering as the name implies. For dinner, order the Haiku (tuna and salmon sashimi) or a Volcano (a selection of thinly sliced beef, tuna and shrimp to grill at the table).

Downstairs is Shangri La, which, despite the Asian reference, is all Austin Powers. Chartreuse walls contrast with plush red upholstery and dark wood floors. Sixties crooner Dean Martin would have felt right at home sidling up to the classy chrome-and-black bar. In the opposite corner, a bathroom with a one-way mirror allows you to keep an eye on your date.

Later, it's time to check out Ice, a cool club with a hot clientele. Water is the theme. It swirls under the see-through dance floor, spouts from a fountain in the middle of the room and cascades over a wall behind the bar. On a stage overlooking the crowd is the VIP area, where, framed by billowing sky-blue curtains, you can chill out on white leather couches. Across the room, a translucent swing hangs from shiny chains. Once, La says, a dancer with white angel wings claimed this spot. Who will use it next? La's answer is not a surprise. "Leave it to your imagination."



By Mary Love | Photo by Bryant Upchurch

Utopia, Shangri La and Ice are located at 840 Marietta Street in Atlanta. Valet parking available. Call 404-898-8788 or visit www.utopiaatlanta.com