



Texas

THE MAGAZINE FOR AAA MEMBERS

JOURNEY

Island Strong

Five years after Hurricane Ike socked Galveston, the destination is better than ever

Behind the scenes of DreamWorks' *Turbo*

A family adventure in China

LocalColor: RV envy

JULY/AUGUST 2013

Our Treasured ISLAND

Galveston is one heck of a comeback kid BY JOHN MORTHLAND ■ PHOTOGRAPHS BY ROBERT MIHOVIL

Late summer, 2008. Stately oak trees provide a lush canopy over Galveston Island's wide residential streets, offering welcome shade on a toasty afternoon. Elegant Victorian homes, obviously rich with stories from centuries past, reflect the sun on their windowpanes, and a breeze makes porch wind chimes play a tune. It's a peaceful scene, one that had been drawing strong tourism to the island since the early 1900s. But things changed that September. On the 13th, at 2:10 a.m., Hurricane Ike hit land on the northern Texas Gulf Coast.

The storm wreaked havoc on the Gulf side of this small barrier island, but it was the bay side, facing the mainland, that suffered longer. There, post-storm tidal surges submerged the low-lying streets, uprooting many of those beloved oak trees and poisoning the root systems of others with seawater. The water—12 feet high in some places—



flooded or otherwise harmed many buildings, especially in the dining and entertainment districts downtown; \$16 billion in damages left the beach city a shell of its former self.

As shocking as the scene was—sailboats intermingled with SUVs on what used to be roadway, homes

that ended up with little more than support beams and debris—Texans knew Galveston would come back. The island had endured unthinkable hardship before. The Hurricane of 1900 claimed more than 6,000 lives. Those who survived it were determined to carry on. They brought in sand dredged from the harbor to raise the city on a graduated slope, as high as 16 feet on the Gulf side, where they also built a 10.3-mile-long seawall for protection from future storms. It worked—until Ike. Galveston rebuilt itself in 1900, and in 2008 it vowed to do it again.

By 2011, the island was showing much progress. A couple of key attractions, hotels, and shops had been repaired and were again open for business. Ironically, the storm gave cause for new projects as well, such as at Moody Gardens, which essentially started from scratch to re-create and enhance its 10-story rainforest attraction.

Today, five years since the disaster, we celebrate Galveston's vitality with a look at a few of the island's highlights, some new and a few tried-and-true that weathered the storm.



New Life for Old Trees

Those regal trees throughout town, strong as they were, were no match for the saltwater surges, which choked the roots. The Texas A&M Forest Service estimated that up to 40,000 trees in Galveston—almost half of the island's tree canopy—were either dead or declining. Thirty-five thousand were sentenced to the chain saw.

Faced with the bitter lemon that was Hurricane Ike, Galveston made lemonade. Environmentalists and everyday citizens worked to recycle wood from the destroyed trees into art projects.

Homeowners commissioned wood-carvers to create sculptures out of trunks of dead trees. They come in all sizes and shapes, and you see them scattered in yards all over town, but especially in the East End Historical District. There's a cluster of dolphins and mermaids at one house, a geisha at another, an angel here and a bunny there, and an angel holding a bunny elsewhere; birds, fish, alligators, lions, and other wildlife are all over the neighborhood—even Tin Man and Toto, holding court at the house where *Wizard of Oz* co-director King Vidor was born. At last count, there are 36.

"In the winter of 2009, these oak carvings were the only thing on this island we could smile about," recalls Donna Leibbert, who got the ball rolling on the sculptures by persuading City Hall to agree to a pair: a Dalmatian and a fire hydrant for the local

fire station. "They also brought a lot of people to the island. These tree sculptures brought a lot of healing."

Visitors can view sculptures in the East End by doing a self-guided driving tour or taking the Galveston Historical Foundation's electric shuttle bus tour. And Leibbert is correct—it's nearly impossible not to smile when you see them. These oak carvings stand as a playful symbol of the island's resurrection. *Self-guided: galveston.com/tree-sculpturetour. Bus tour: Galveston Historical Foundation, (409) 765-7834; galvestonhistory.org.*

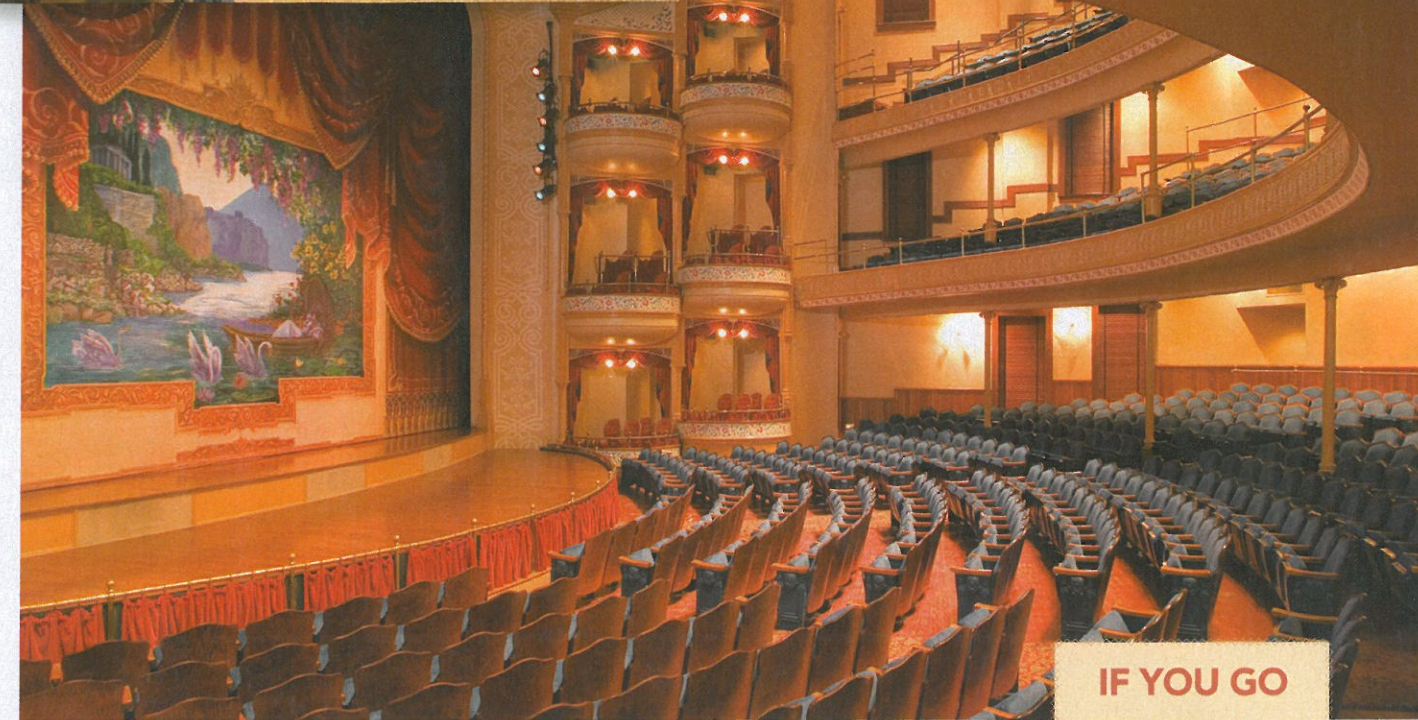


(From left) *Tin Man from The Wizard of Oz*, by Jim Phillips, is at 1702 Winnie Street. *Great Dane*, by Dayle Lewis, is at 1228 Sealy Street.



RE-GREENING GALVESTON

In 2010, the Galveston Island Tree Conservancy developed its Re-Planting Plan, aiming to plant 25,000 trees around the island. To date, nearly 11,000 trees have been planted with the help of more than 5,000 volunteer hours. If you'd like to get involved, contact the conservancy about upcoming volunteer events. (409) 599-6357; galvestonislandtreeconservancy.org. —Elisabeth Abrahamson



The Grand 1894 Opera House (below) displays an Ike waterline marker (left) in the lobby. Today, the venue continues its eclectic programming, alternating Lone Star heroes such as Willie Nelson and Jerry Jeff Walker with classical performances and touring acts.

Downtown Diversions

Vacationers are bound to spend a good amount of their time downtown perusing The Strand Historic District, Pier 21, and Postoffice Street, which collectively make up the primary shopping and dining neighborhood. Watch for bronze plaques on building facades (sometimes inside) that show how high the Ike-related waters rose. At the Stork Club, a corner pub on Postoffice, the marker is over 7 feet high. Owner Guy Taylor Jr. posted his plaque on a pillar at the front entrance to the club, a visual reminder to patrons who are once again bellying up to the bar to enjoy cocktails and conversation, and reportedly the best chicken-fried steak in town.

There's another inside The Grand 1894 Opera House, one of Galveston's most architecturally exquisite structures, marking the waterline at 9 feet. "We were underwater up to Row L and suffered millions in damage," says Maureen Patton, the Grand's executive director.

After the 1900 storm, this Victorian theater required a year to be rebuilt; after Ike, it was back in business after only 112 days. "We decided we were going to be part of the healing in this community, an inspiration," Patton says. "Other downtown businesses said we raised the bar for rebuilding."

Rudy & Paco, a go-to fine-dining establishment next door, was so badly damaged that reopening at all seemed

unlikely—but it came back in nine months with a playful new black-and-white look. Chefs are again serving up seafood and steaks with the joint's signature Central and South American spin. For seemingly each eatery unable to reopen, a new one such as Little Daddy's Gumbo Bar came along to pick up the slack.

Pier 21 offers another group of restaurants and attractions. At the Pier 21 Theater, three short historical documentaries are screened, including one that recalls the 1900 hurricane. The Jet Boat Thrill Ride off Pier 21 is not to be missed. Graham, the boat's skipper, cackles while executing 360-degree spins that spray water into the air and soak everyone aboard. An hour-long Harbor Tour and Dolphin Watch excursion surveys the same area—at a much slower pace.

IF YOU GO

LITTLE DADDY'S GUMBO BAR
(409) 744-8626;
littledaddysgumbobar.com

THE GRAND 1894 OPERA HOUSE
(409) 765-1894;
thegrand.com

HARBOR TOUR AND DOLPHIN WATCH
(409) 763-1877;
galvestonhistory.org

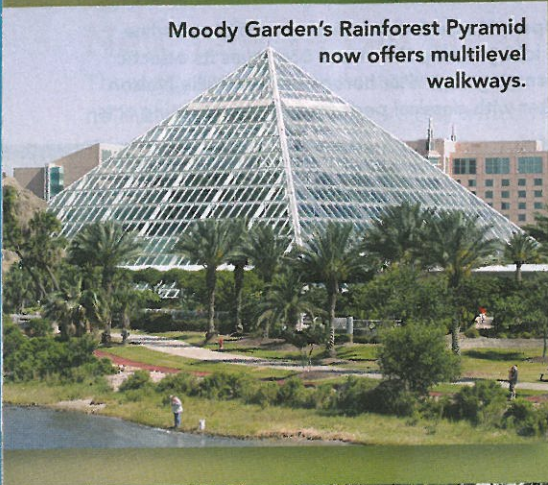
JET BOAT THRILL RIDE
(409) 276-6116;
suntimewatersports.com

PIER 21
pier21galveston.com

RUDY & PACO
(409) 762-3696;
rudyandpaco.com

STORK CLUB
(409) 750-9136

Moody Garden's Rainforest Pyramid now offers multilevel walkways.



A REBUILT RAINFOREST

Moody Gardens, a sprawling educational destination that encompasses a 428-room hotel and multiple attractions, benefitted from \$25 million of post-like improvements to its 10-story glass Rainforest Pyramid.

Walkways, both elevated above the tree canopy and on the ground level, weave through the various rainforests of the world, introducing visitors to some 1,000 species of plant and animal life. For example, one section re-creates an Asian rainforest with colorful orchids, a carnivorous pitcher plant, and two Chinese alligators; whereas the Central and South America section has a replica Mayan temple, a giant green anaconda, and piranhas. Elsewhere, bats, birds, and more contribute to a cacophony of squeaks and squawks, as well as a kaleidoscope of colors. (800) 582-4673; moodygardens.org.

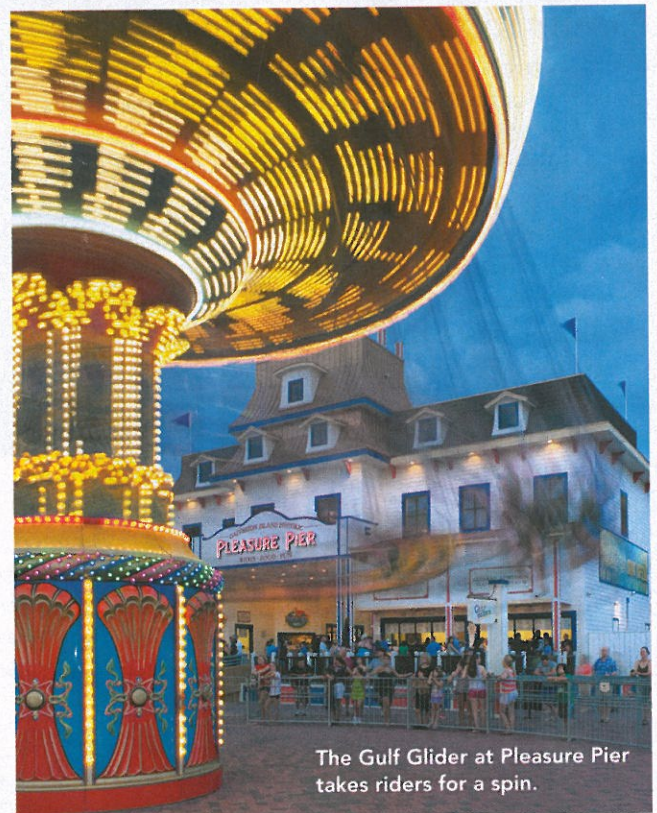
A New Way to Play

The Galveston Island Historic Pleasure Pier opened last summer on the eastern end of Seawall Boulevard, reclaiming the site of an amusement park of the same name that operated from 1943 to 1961. Developers seized the opportunity to start fresh, albeit ironically, by bringing back the old-timey entertainment zone.

Compared to some of the Greater Houston Area's massive amusement parks, the Pleasure Pier, with just 16 rides that are open daily only in summer (and weekends year-round), may disappoint some. But there's only so much that you can pack onto a 1,130-foot pier. The Pleasure Pier attempts to make up for that by capitalizing on its environment: The Texas Star Flyer climbs 200 feet above the pier and swings 30 feet out over the Gulf to offer a 360-degree view of the surrounding surf. The Gulf Glider is a classic swing carousel that stays a bit closer to earth. Add in a meal at the resident Bubba Gump Shrimp Co. and some people-watching and you're set for an enjoyable summer day. (855) 789-7437; pleasurepier.com.

John Morthland is a regular contributor to Texas Journey.

Your AAA travel agent can provide trip-planning information. Visit your local branch, call (888) 651-0172, or go to AAA.com/travelinfo.



The Gulf Glider at Pleasure Pier takes riders for a spin.