



Tough as Nails

It takes more than a little wind to keep Galveston, Texas, down.

By Karen Eakins



The Tremont House hotel's The Rooftop Bar offers open views of the Galveston skyline.

Mitchell Properties

Standing alongside the Gulf of Mexico, I watched the thundering waves, pondering what the average Galveston resident in 1900 must have thought while watching what turned out to be the deadliest hurricane in U.S. history come ashore. He or she wouldn't have known what to expect—neither did most meteorologists at the time. Hurricanes weren't even named then.

Then, while strolling the Historic Downtown Strand, chockablock with restaurants, bars, surf shops, souvenir saloons and boutiques—many in Victorian-era buildings—I found blazed along the side of an unremarkable redbrick building three simple words: Ike Water Line. It was a marker for the 2008 hurricane that devastated Cuba before striking Galveston

hard—again.

Many people in 1900 probably thought it was crazy to rebuild Galveston Island—32 miles long and two-and-a-half miles wide—and some no doubt thought the same thing in 2008, but the word that sprang to my mind as I explored this cozy coastal city a short hop from Houston? Resilient.

Be Our Guest

Once known as the Wall Street of the Southwest, Galveston sports a 32-block downtown area with many restored or repurposed historical buildings. One of those repurposed properties is The Tremont House hotel, a 1985 re-creation of a Galveston original. A four-story atrium lobby provides quiet respite and the opportunity for a drink at the 1888 Toujouse Bar before retiring to a room featuring 14-foot ceilings, bronze light fixtures, hardwood floors and all the best modern amenities.

The Tremont also sports The Rooftop Bar—a cozy place to kick off a weekend—and out front is a street-wide arch that shines forth every evening, a reminder that this is the site of the country's third-biggest Mardi Gras celebration. Nearby is the Grand 1894 Opera House, an intimate venue seating 1,000 that features internationally known performers, velvet seats, opera balconies and acoustics to beat the band. Showgoers can stop next door at Rudy & Paco for upscale dining, where such dishes as plantain-crusted red snapper with lump crab meat and tres leche cake are unveiled to a dining party simultaneously—and with a flourish—by white-jacketed waiters.

Those looking for more low-key eats should head a couple of blocks north to The Strand's Pier 21 and Olympia the Grill, a comfortable restaurant with a "billion-dollar view" over Galveston Harbor. The family-owned spot has never owned a freezer because fresh-from-the-water seafood comes daily from the fishing boats moored next door. Owners/brothers Tike and Larry Kriticos credit the eatery's Louisiana cook for the added Cajun flair, and the Gulf's red snapper, oysters and flounder have never tasted better. The oyster-platter appetizer sports Greek, Diablo,

Bourguignon, spinach and corn-meal fried versions—all mouthwatering.

Adjacent is the Texas Seaport Museum & the 1877 Tall Ship *Elissa*, a restored, iron-hulled Scottish barque with three masts and 19 sails, open for self-guided tours. *Elissa* also does day sails in October. Other options are harbor-tour boats that show off Galveston Bay's bounty, usually escorted by some of the area's 1,500 resident bottlenose dolphins, and the Pier 21 Theater, which features a depiction of the harrowing 1900 hurricane through the 27-minute documentary *The Great Storm*.

Furthering the variety of boat traffic a few short blocks west are the cruise ports. This is the homeport for *Carnival Magic*, *Carnival Triumph* and Royal Caribbean's *Mariner of the Seas*, and *Disney Magic* and *Crown Princess* joined the throng in fall 2012.

Those who prefer their watercraft less powerful—although maybe no less crowded—can catch a free ferry run to Bolivar Peninsula for birding, bicycling, kayaking and a hike to the lighthouse. Ferries run every 20 minutes 6 a.m. to 11 p.m., then once an hour to complete the 24-hour cycle. Birders will want to catch the 5 a.m. in order to capture great images with the 6 a.m. sunrise—and in spring and fall, three-quarters of North America's birds migrate through here, so it's worth rising early.

By the Beautiful Sea

On the island's flip side is The Tremont House's sister property: the Hotel Galvez, dubbed the Queen of the Gulf. This iconic, AAA Four Diamond-rated establishment along the southern shore marked its 100th anniversary in 2011. Its turn-of-the-20th-century lobby, complete with the original terrazzo floors, marble columns, coffered mahogany ceiling and expansive loggias brimming with wicker loungers, speaks of a grand time in the country's early years. The lobby bar is the 1876 original from the Old Galveston Club, purportedly the original Tremont House's last speakeasy.

The Galvez has hosted such dignitaries and celebrities as presidents Franklin D. Roosevelt, Dwight Eisenhower, Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon, comics Jack Benny and Lewis and Martin, and Frank Sinatra and his Rat Pack. Today's guests flock here not just for the genteel decor and such amenities as free bicycles, croquet on the massive front lawn and the luxurious spa but for the popular Champagne Sunday Brunch in Bernardo's restaurant. Non-registered guests can indulge, too.

The Galvez opened 11 short years after the Great Storm hit, and the Hall of History tucked in the basement is the repository of original artifacts such as china patterns, porcelain door numbers and silver-service pieces, as well as a black-and-white photograph gallery detailing the area's history. It includes the story of the infamous, pier-perched Balinese Room, where illegal gamblers slipped out of law enforcement's grasp by ducking under the pier during raids. They were finally caught by resourceful Texas Rangers who came from the Gulf.

A new family-friendly venue—the 1,130-foot Galveston Island Historic Pleasure Pier—reincarnated from an Ike-destroyed pier, opened last May. Inspired by Chicago's Navy Pier, it's the home of an amusement park and includes 16 rides, everything from the kid-friendly Gulf Glider merry-go-round at the entrance to the state's tallest swing ride, the Texas Star Flyer. It also features the state's only Bubba Gump Shrimp Co. eatery and the country's only Gump on the Run, a takeout offshoot.

It joins the city's other popular family-friendly venue, Schlitterbahn Galveston Island Waterpark, named the country's best four years running by waterpark aficionados and the World's #1 Indoor Waterpark in 2012 by Amusement Today. Its 26 acres of water rides, lazy rivers, beaches and more is divided into areas cheekily named Blastenoff, Surfenburg and Wasserfest.

Another coastline icon is Gaido's Famous Seafood Restaurant, also established in 1911. Operated by the fourth-generation descendants of an Italian immigrant who was orphaned shortly after



Waterpark aficionados have named Schlitterbahn Galveston Island Waterpark the country's best for four years.

Galveston CVB

arriving here, Gaido's success is clear. Its list of presidents, athletes and entertainers served is lengthy. People line up early and long to eat here, and San Giacino Gaido's words live on: "If you're not proud of it, don't serve it." The seafood is superlative, and its pecan pie has been repeatedly named the state's best by Texas Monthly. The wait is worth it.



World War II planes are celebrated at the Lone Star Flight Museum.

Galveston CVB

Inland Treats

To get a taste of two other popular venues, go a few blocks north of the 10-mile seawall's west end to the Lone Star Flight Museum and Moody Gardens, located adjacent to Schlitterbahn. Moody Gardens is easily identifiable because of its three pyramids. The 10-story, clear-glass Rainforest Pyramid is filled with tropical plants, a free-flying butterfly enclosure, and animals such as cotton-top tamarins, saki monkeys and hyacinth macaws.

The blue-glass Aquarium Pyramid is complete with touch tanks, more than 10,000 marine creatures and the opportunity to encounter one of 90 penguins. My group got to meet Babe, a King penguin who was more than ready

for his photo op. The pink Discovery Pyramid is science-exhibit central, with 3-D, 4-D and Ridefilm theaters.

Next door is the Lone Star Flight Museum, a monument to World War II planes. Visitors will see such lovingly restored and maintained planes as the P-51 Mustang Galveston Gal, the B-17 Flying Fortress Thunderbird and the only remaining flying model of a Doolittle Raiders' plane bearing the squad's colors. A special, oftentimes symbolic and highly popular Warbird Ride is available in 12 models, such as a B-25 Mitchell, a T-6 Texan and a PT-17 Stearman.

For another look at Galveston history, swing by the four-story, 1892-built Bishop's Palace. The 18,000-square-foot, 52-room home filled with stained glass and hard-carved moldings was built by railroad magnate Walter Gresham for his wife and nine children and later served as the home of Catholic Bishop Christopher E. Byrne.

Nearby, a one-and-a-half-hour Tree Sculpture Tour drives visitors through the city's East End Historic District to show not only the eclectic architecture but the sculptures created out of tree stumps left by Hurricane Ike's ferocity. So, along with the Sodenfield House's most-ornate porch and the Morris House's two widow's walks, visitors will see *Great Dane*, *Geisha & Sister Angels*, and *Tin Man & Toto*, which fronts the house where *Wizard of Oz* director King Wallis Vidor was born. All the other trees destroyed by Ike have been recycled for various uses. It once again shows that Galvestonians are made of stern stuff. Yep, resilient.

Planning Your Trip

For more information on Galveston and its attractions, go to www.galveston.com. To read about Galveston's devastating 1900 hurricane—which killed more than 6,000 people—check out Erik Larson's book *Isaac's Storm*. For TripTiks, *TourBook* guides and other travel-planning assistance, visit your local AAA Travel agent or AAA.com/travel.

View Eakins' Galveston [slide show](#).

Make [Gaido's famous pecan pie recipe](#).

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