

Galveston's Next Wave

The "Playground of the South" is back

Text by **Ramona Flume**

Photographs by **Jake Meharg**



Reopened in May 2012, Galveston's Historic Pleasure Pier offers rides, restaurants, a midway, and shops—much as the island's Pleasure Pier did in the 1940s. To order a print of this photograph, call 866/962-1191, or visit www.texashighwaysprints.com.



I've always loved Galveston,

and now I have a local connection. My boyfriend's grandmother, Alba Collins, grew up in a tiny house underneath the island's first wooden rollercoaster in the 1930s. And we visit her every so often, spending sunny, summer weekends soaking our toes in the Gulf waters as we listen to her stories about Galveston in earlier days.

To me, the history of Galveston Island is as alluring as the area's scenic beauty. I love learning about places like the Balinese Room, which attracted celebrities such as Bob Hope and Frank Sinatra in the 1940s; the first International Pageant of Pulchritude of 1926, which drew 150,000 people to the island to witness a bathing-beauty revue; and the nation's longest Pleasure Pier, where sightseers boarded a glittering Ferris wheel to witness panoramic views of the harbor. Galveston, known as the "Playground of the South," had everything: bathhouses, water parks, vaudeville shows, carnivals, and seaside resorts and casinos attracting hundreds of thousands of visitors every year.



Above left, at 22nd and Strand, Old Galveston Square houses shops and an ice-cream parlor. Across the street, at Saengerfest Park, you'll find an oversized, alfresco chess set. At Pleasure Pier, riders on the exhilarating Gulf Glider enjoy panoramic views of the Gulf of Mexico.

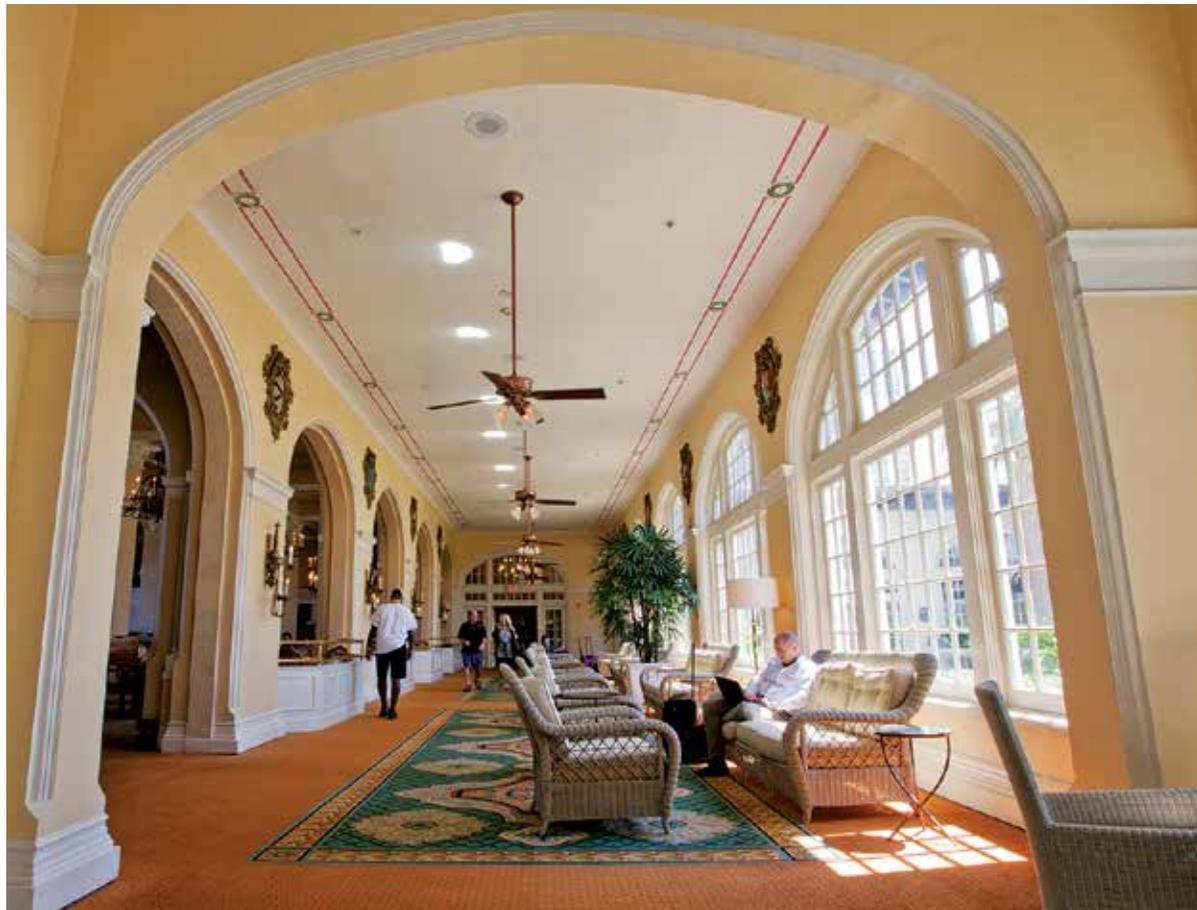
And now, the spotlight is shining on Galveston once again, what with a \$65 million reconstruction of the Seawall's historic Pleasure Pier; a booming cruise ship port attracting 1.5 million visitors annually; thriving restaurants, art galleries, and boutiques; world-renowned botanical gardens; and theaters and other entertainment venues housed in some of the city's most historic structures.

I recently revisited Galveston to spend a weekend

celebrating the city's iconic institutions. Fittingly, I started by driving up a palm-lined driveway to check in to the historic Hotel Galvez, which opened in 1911 as a symbol of the island's survival after the disastrous 1900 hurricane. The hotel celebrated its 100-year anniversary two years ago with an \$11 million renovation. The eight-story stucco exterior looks much the same as it did a century ago, but the interiors, including the guest rooms, the spa, lobby bar, dining area, and

sun-dappled sitting areas, have been redesigned with modern relaxation in mind. For instance, the first floor's window-lined loggias feature original marble columns with restored bronze capitals and commodious wicker lounge chairs—perfect for sunset viewing. Another highlight is the tropically landscaped swimming pool, complete with a swim-up bar, Jacuzzi, and lounge chairs nestled beneath shady, vine-covered pergolas.

Downstairs in the basement, I discovered a small but



informative exhibit about the hotel and the city's past. While perusing the information and images (reprinted from the rich archives of the nearby Rosenberg Library), Galvez guest ambassador Bobby Lee Hilton introduced himself and shared memories of Galveston in the 1940s and '50s. Now in his seventies, Hilton started serving coffee at the Galvez when he was a

ABOVE: The Hotel Galvez dates to 1911. BELOW: Learn about Galveston's role in the oil and gas industry at the *Ocean Star* Offshore Drilling Rig & Museum.

teenager, and he clearly knows the island's history, ranging from Galveston's place in the mid-19th-Century as

Texas' financial capital to recent restoration in the aftermath of 2008's Hurricane Ike. Despite devastating natural disasters, Bobby told me, the island and its residents have rebuilt and restarted when other coastal communities have withered away. "The people are different here," said Bobby. "Everyone thought we'd be like Indianola, just down the coast, which was wiped out by hurricanes in the 1800s. But there's staying power here."

Even the dead don't like to leave, apparently. Bobby told me the most requested room by far in the Galvez is Room 501, where, according to legend, a young woman spent her last night before hanging herself on the roof, believing her fiancé's ship was lost at sea. Guests have reported seeing a shadowy figure floating through the room, and others say that a white apparition appears in the negatives of their photos.

In the nearby Pier 21 District, which houses new and old attractions like the Harbor House hotel, the *Ocean Star* Offshore Drilling Rig & Museum, and the Olympia Grill, the Texas Seaport Museum provides an in-depth look into Galveston's role as a major port city. The museum offers self-guided tours of the 1877 Tall Ship *ELISSA*, as well as sightseeing tours aboard the *Seagull II*, which allow guests to spot dolphins and learn more about the waterfront's



AN UNDERWATER TUNNEL
in Moody Gardens' Aquarium Pyramid simulates what life in a giant fishbowl might be like.

GALVESTON ISLAND'S *history is as alluring as the area's scenic beauty.*



Designed in part to protect the beaches from erosion, Galveston's rock jetties also provide anglers with convenient spots to cast a line.

history. I learned that in 1951, the Port of Galveston set the national record for exports of such commodities as copper, cotton, oil, and sulfur; and that in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, it served as a major immigration portal. The Seaport Museum's onsite Immigration Database allows visitors to look through the passenger manifests for relatives.

Nowadays, Galveston doesn't admit citizens into the country, but, as the fifth busiest cruise port in the continental U.S., it still hosts 1.5 million visitors every year.

One of the first sights visitors see when they cross the causeway to Galveston Island from the mainland is Moody Gardens' three shimmering glass pyramids. Moody Gardens opened in the 1990s, but following flood damage from Hurricane Ike in 2008, the gardens enhanced their popular Rainforest Pyramid as part of a \$25 million restoration effort. Unveiled in May 2011,

the 10-story ecological preserve now showcases more than 1,000 species of plants and animals, including fruit bats, cotton-top tamarins, and saki monkeys. It's an endless wonder to wander along an ipe-wood walkway through the canopy as animals scamper amid the baobab, rubber, and palm trees.

Perhaps the best place to

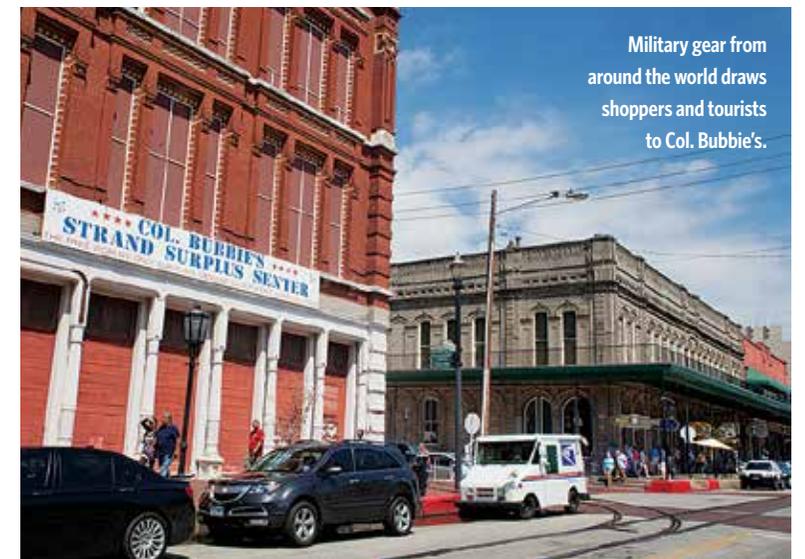
observe the local "wildlife" is the Strand Historic District, the island's epicenter of shopping and people-watching. Most of the buildings here—elegant Victorian, Greek Revival, and Italianate brownstones, some dating to the 1870s—now house shops, galleries, restaurants, and bars. Many boast historical markers, and it's interesting to look for "hurricane markers" indicating the waterlines of past storms. There are walking tours

throughout the area, but on this visit I explored the Strand's many boutiques and souvenir shops, including the famous Col. Bubbie's military surplus store, Somewhere in Time (where I was tempted by vintage hats and opera glasses), and LaFitte's Beat (which offers Galveston souvenirs, island-wear for pets, and pirate-themed tchotchkes like eye patches and skull flags).

Shops like La King's Confectionery—which makes saltwater taffy, chocolate, and other candies—and casual eateries, like the Black Pearl Oyster Bar & Grille (try the oyster sampler), make it easy to refuel. Despite having explored the Strand many times in the past, I'd never dined at Rudy and Paco, a popular South American-style restaurant on Post Office Street, so I met my boyfriend there for dinner. When we arrived for our 7:30 reservation, the dining room bustled with



More on Galveston's art scene at www.texashighways.com/webextra.



Military gear from around the world draws shoppers and tourists to Col. Bubbie's.

men and women dressed to the nines—cowboy hats and denim mixing with sequins and stilettos—hurrying to finish their cocktails and pay their bills. What was the rush on a Monday night? Turns out that next door at The Grand 1894 Opera House, there was a star-studded show featuring Lyle Lovett and Robert Earl Keen. "Just another lively night on the island," our waiter said.

After a lovely dinner of ceviche and Chilean sea bass, we took a stroll on the beach, stopping to feel the periwinkle clams wriggle beneath our feet as the tide rolled out. The wind was starting to whip up from the water, and we noticed small clusters of sea gulls huddling near the jetties for protection. As the sky darkened, we could see twinkling lights in the distance—the Pleasure Pier, with brilliant LED lights shining out from the 100-foot Ferris wheel and dizzying aerial swings. The mist from the tide blended the bright lights into an ethereal glow, and we kicked off our shoes and raced toward it in the hopes it wasn't a mirage. **TH**

Look for writer **RAMONA FLUME's** story on Galveston Island's historic Pleasure Pier, including memories from longtime resident *Alba Collins*, in the July issue. Photographer **JAKE MEHARG** grew up in La Porte. He currently freelances from his home in Austin.

TH ESSENTIALS

Galveston

FOR INFORMATION about accommodations, restaurants, and attractions on Galveston Island, call the **Galveston Island Convention and Visitors Bureau** at 888/GAL-ISLE; www.galveston.com.

Sites in the story include:

Galveston Island Historic Pleasure Pier. Call 855/789-7437; www.pleasurepier.com.

Hotel Galvez. Call 409/765-7721; www.wyndham.com.

Rosenberg Library. Call 409/763-8854; www.rosenberg-library.org.

Pier 21 attractions, including the Harbor House hotel, the Ocean Star Offshore Drilling Rig & Museum, the Olympia Grill, and Texas Seaport Museum. See www.pier21galveston.com.

Moody Gardens. Call 800/582-4673; www.moodygardens.com.

Rudy & Paco Restaurant & Bar. Call 409/762-3696; www.rudyandpaco.com.