



Galveston Island: A New Golden Era

Texas' favorite little island reclaims its position as "The Playground of the South"

ENJOYING THE COOL BREEZES and crashing waves of the Galveston Island shore is one of those summer pastimes that makes you forget you're even in Texas. But these days, the beach is just the beginning of what this charming little island has to offer.

Located on the Texas coast all the way south on I-45, Galveston is a thriving vacation destination because of its diversity – from its large collection of Victorian architecture and historical sites to its family attractions, culinary experiences and cruise port. Just recently, Galveston became home to The Bryan Museum, housing the world's largest collection of Southwestern artifacts. It also opened a luxury resort, The Villas, and created a brand new beach along the western part of the seawall.

But there's a deeper story behind Galveston's resurgence to bustling beaches and growing buzz. It's a story of tragedy, resil-

ience and ingenuity. A story that exemplifies the epitome of the Galveston way: turn your lemons into lemonade – and then sip your lemonade while taking in a breathtaking, water view.

Tragedy and Triumph

Almost eight years ago, Galveston was in a very different place. On September 13, 2008, Hurricane Ike forced its way through the Gulf Coast, killing 103 people and causing \$25 billion in damages. It was the third costliest hurricane in U.S. history at the time, and Galveston was right in the center of it.

Storm surges on the island stretched as high as 20 feet. Debris piles along parts of the seawall stood two stories high, marking all that was left of many beachfront businesses – from the legendary Balinese Room to Murdoch's Bathhouse.

"It was tragic," said Melody Smith, who weathered the storm

from Galveston's emergency management center. "People lost their homes, their businesses and their lives."

Smith is the marketing director for the Galveston Island Convention & Visitors Bureau.

For her, watching devastation come to some of the island's iconic tourist attractions was particularly painful.

But on an island where tourism is the dominant industry and sustains a third of all jobs, the bureau – or Galveston for that matter – couldn't afford to sulk.

"Tourism was the first industry to bounce back after the hurricane," Smith said. "The city needed revenue so we immediately went into gear, rebuilding beaches and getting the word out that Galveston was open for business. Our community is so resilient and the tourism community took this as an opportunity to make Galveston better."

In the first three years fol-



Galveston's Historic Downtown Strand Seaport District is a charming destination for shopping, dining, perusing art galleries and exploring attractions. It was recently named an official cultural arts district by the Texas Commission on the Arts.

lowing the hurricane, tourism entities on the island spent more than \$125 million building completely new attractions. By 2011, tourism on the island had surpassed pre-Ike levels. And, in May 2012, Landry's Inc. helped push the trend further by opening the Galveston Island Historic Pleasure Pier. The amusement park pier towers over the Gulf of Mexico, where the former Flagship Hotel stood for many years and where a similar pier stood during the 1940s. The attraction has become an iconic image of the Texas coast.

"Galveston didn't just come back – it came back better," said Paul Schultz, vice president of hospitality for Landry's Inc. "It really was amazing how quickly it all happened and how dedicated the Galveston community was to make sure the island thrived again."

A New Golden Era

In its Golden Era during the late 1800s, Galveston was known as the "Playground of the South." It was a diverse town juxtaposed with Victorian charm and modern allure.

The resemblance today is strikingly similar.

In the newly designated historic Downtown Cultural Arts District, shoppers walk The Strand and stop for treats at La King's Confectionery. On Postoffice Street, art-lovers peruse

the district's 20-plus galleries before having dinner at Rudy & Paco. Next door, The Grand 1894 Opera House offers world-class performances.

Across Harborside Drive, the Galveston Cruise Terminal serves as homeport for year-round itineraries with Carnival and Royal Caribbean, and seasonal itineraries with Disney. Next door, Pier 21 receives frequent visitation to the Texas Seaport Museum and 1877 Tall Ship ELISSA.

On the East End, luxurious homes line the coast while kayakers and birders explore the East End Lagoon Nature Preserve. East Beach and Stewart Beach draw sun-seekers for sandcastle building, live concerts, horseback riding and helicopter rides.

On the West End, families find adventure at Moody Gardens, home to three pyramid-shaped buildings that feature a live rain-forest attraction, aquarium and interactive museum.

Within walking distance of Moody Gardens, history buffs stand in awe at the Lone Star Flight Museum and dare devils find heaven at Schlitterbahn Galveston Island Waterpark, which happens to be opening the world's tallest water coaster this year.

Back at the Galveston tourism bureau, an expanded staff has grown to meet the demands – and potential – of the island's constantly growing appeal.



The Galveston Island Historic Pleasure Pier lights up the night along the Galveston coast. The amusement park pier is home to thrill rides, games, and entertainment.

"Galveston has become everything it once was and everything we always knew it could be," said Smith, who reported Galveston has experienced record tourism numbers each year since 2011. "The island really has reached a new golden era."

Laura Flores, owner of Murdoch's Bathhouse, knows this to be true. After rebuilding the popular seawall gift shop in 2009 for the fourth time since it originally opened in the 1800s, she says business is better than ever.

Indeed, it is a lemons-into-lemonade type story. And the Murdoch's patio just happens to be the perfect place to have a drink with a breathtaking, water view.

—LEAH CAST



Photos: Galveston Island Convention and Visitors Bureau

Galveston is home to one of the largest collections of well-preserved Victorian architecture in the country. The 1895 Moody Mansion is open for tours daily.