

The Two Sides of St. Pete Beach

Find your own version of fun here, whether you're looking for an easygoing escape or one with plenty of action

WRITTEN BY BETH LUBERECKI

“Look, Mom,” my daughter said excitedly. “It says, ‘Welcome spring breakers.’ How did they know I was coming?”

I glanced over at the sign that was not only offering greetings but also extolling the virtues of some kind of liquor. Clearly, it wasn't aimed at preschoolers like my daughter on vacation for the Easter holidays. And I began to worry—had my husband and I made a getaway gaffe?

It was our first time in St. Pete Beach, where we were spending three nights during our five-year-old daughter's spring break from pre-kindergarten. We'd chosen to stay at the Postcard Inn, a former Travelodge with a retro surfer vibe that had gotten a lot of good press since its renova-

tion and 2009 opening. Its Web site touted it as “the perfect setting for family vacations,” and we noticed lots of other parents with little ones after strolling the grounds for a bit, much to my relief after seeing that sign.

During the course of our stay, we discovered that some people do indeed come to St. Pete Beach to party, living it up like they're extras on *Jersey Shore*. But if your life skews more *Modern Family* these days, there are plenty of places where you can avoid the boozy singles scene in this barrier island city on Florida's central Gulf Coast.

Things got off to a good start during our first couple of days at the Postcard Inn, which oozes with *Endless Summer* style. Rattan furnishings and other mid-century

modern pieces fill the lobby, where a giant chalkboard lists sunrise and sunset times, high and low tides, and the current temperature of the Gulf of Mexico. One wall is lined with books, while light fixtures ranging from Moroccan-style lamps to a chandelier made of ropes hang overhead.

That 1960s seashore design scheme extends into the guestrooms, some of which have patios and views of the pool. In ours, an image of a surfer catching a serious wave covered one entire wall. A surfboard leaned against one corner, near a chair done up in a turquoise and white ikat-style print. Framed vintage photos hearkened back to bygone beach days, which is exactly what the hotel strives to do.

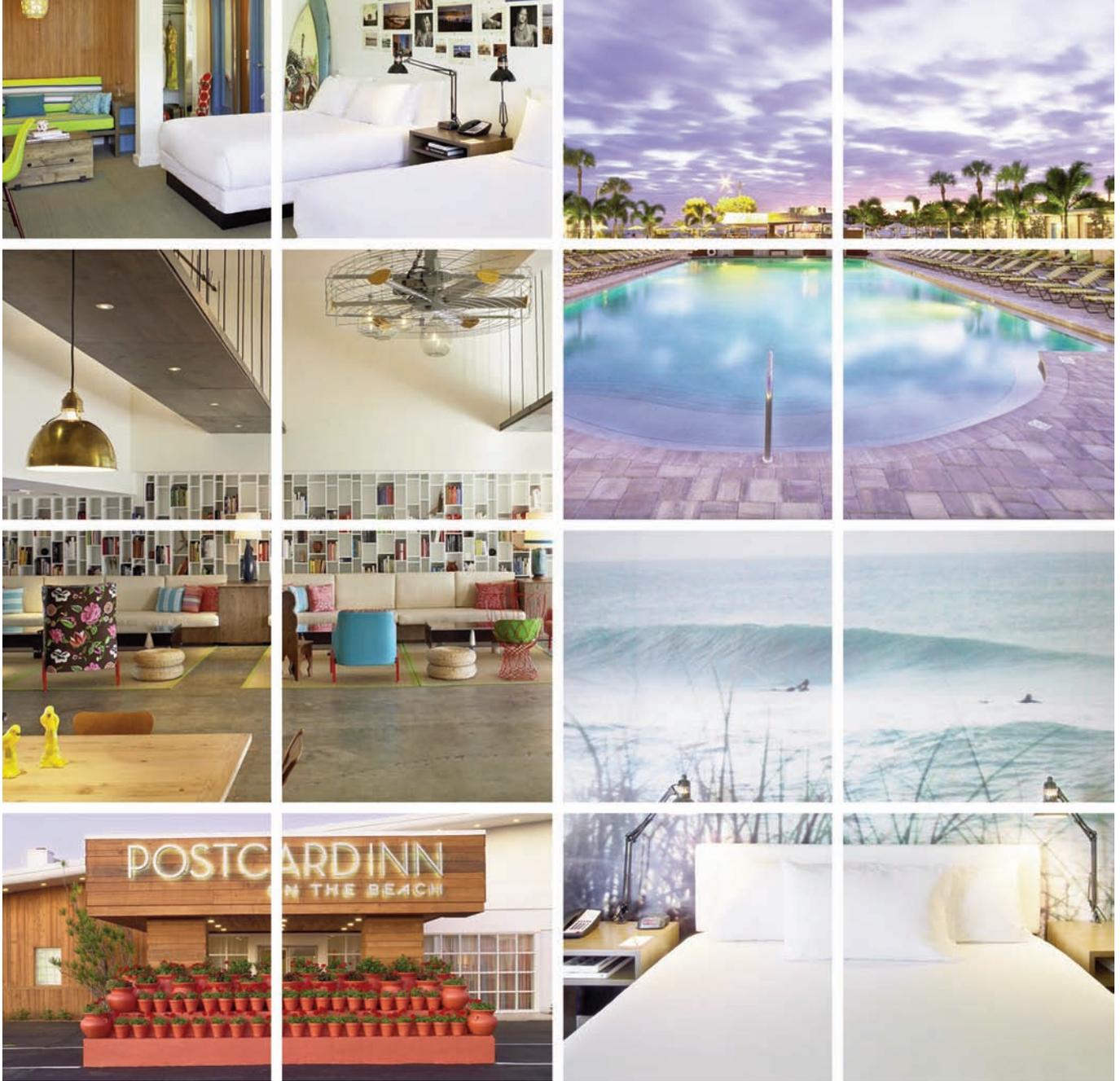
“Remember when you went on vacation as a kid?” asks Brooke Palmer, the director of public relations for the Postcard Inn. “We're trying to create that experience for our guests, that kick back to their youth. Everything has that kind of vintage Florida feel. Our interior designer went to thrift shops all over the state.”

That vintage feel continues in the bathrooms, which weren't outfitted with ultra-modern fixtures or glass shower stalls during the hotel's renovation. They're perfectly adequate but definitely on the old-school side. “We felt that we could clean up the existing bathrooms and keep with the retro vibe,” says Palmer. “We were more concerned with keeping room rates reasonable than putting in Corian countertops.”

The bathrooms didn't bother us as much as the older property's thin walls did, which we noticed more and more as

Slow down and take it easy when visiting the historic district of Pass-a-Grille.





The Postcard Inn's surfer style sets the tone for the hotel's fun-loving attitude.

our stay drifted into the weekend and a passel of party-hearty frat boys moved in next door. "We run the gamut here, from elderly guests to young college kids to families," says Palmer. "And we try to manage our guests as much as we can. But we have a fun hotel with everything that comes along with that. We're not a subdued Four Seasons; that's not the vibe we have. But if you want to escape everyday reality, kick off your flip-flops, and put your toes in the sand, this is the place to do it."

We spent several pleasant afternoons around the Postcard Inn's pool, enjoying the free, fruit-flavored water and the excellent people watching. But when we started

to feel surrounded by the beer-clutching, bikini-and-board-shorts-wearing crowd, we set off in search of spots where the scene was a bit more sedate.

On the hotel's wide swath of beach, we found a quiet place to dig in the sand and play in the surf. From there, we walked south to check out the action at other places located along the beach, chuckling while watching kids zip down the inflatable water-slides at the TradeWinds Island Grand.

We took a drive to the National Historic District of Pass-a-Grille, located at the southern tip of St. Pete Beach. Things move at a much slower pace here, and we lazily strolled along Eighth Avenue, pop-

ping into galleries and shops like A Little Room for Art and Paradiso.

"Pass-a-Grille has a special place in my heart," says Dody Turner, owner of high-end boutique Dody, which carries swimsuits and resort wear from all over the world. "People either know about it and want to come out here, or they find it by accident. It really is a community, and the people are terrific."

To learn more about Pass-a-Grille, we visited the Gulf Beaches Historical Museum, located in a circa-1917 former church. A friendly docent showed our daughter the museum's shell collection, while my husband and I checked out vin-

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Visitors can learn about St. Pete Beach's past at the Gulf Beaches Historical Museum in Pass-a-Grille.

tage photos, artifacts like shards of eighteenth-century pottery unearthed in the area, and old advertisements for beach-front hotels touting things like ice-cube machines and air-conditioning.

In Pass-a-Grille, we hopped on the Shell Key Shuttle for a ten-minute boat ride to a 195-acre island preserve that lived up to its name. Our guides told us that it rivaled Sanibel, and the shelling definitely came close at this secluded spot with no bars or frat boys in sight. "It's a completely undeveloped barrier island," says Nancy Davidek, the shuttle's co-owner. "The only manmade things are the bird-nesting signs put there by the Audubon Society." Some visitors leave with bags filled with specimens like lightning whelks and apple murexes; others spend their time on the island looking for birds and other wildlife.

When it came time to eat, we tended to avoid the spots where we might find too much human wildlife. The smoky aromas drifting from the Postcard Inn's Beachwood BBQ & Burger lured us in on our first night, and the laid-back spot proved the perfect setting for a thick and juicy cheeseburger.

With its cobalt-blue glasses and metal fish sculptures, Snapper's Sea Grill exuded

GETAWAYS



a casually elegant but still family-friendly vibe. Its menu, not surprisingly, focuses on fresh-caught seafood, featuring choices like Stuffed Gulf Grouper and Jumbo Coconut Fried Shrimp.

New Age-y lounge music served as the soundtrack for our meal at Cafe Luna, a sophisticated but totally approachable bistro a few blocks from the beach. Our daughter tucked into the best-looking kids' portion of lasagna we've ever seen, and my husband and I sipped glasses of

and tables at this eatery that dates back to 1938 and still draws a steady stream of customers.

We finished our visit to St. Pete Beach with lunch at the historic Loews Don CeSar Hotel, whose refinement provided an interesting contrast to the Postcard Inn's flip-flopping, free-wheeling fun. We'd learned that it once served as a rehab center for World War II-era flyers, nursing patients like Joe DiMaggio back to health. Today the "Pink Palace" is a posh place for a seaside getaway, with crystal chande-

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—NANCY DAVIDEK, CO-OWNER OF THE SHELL KEY SHUTTLE

wine while enjoying a dinner that definitely didn't involve a deep fryer.

Of course, not every meal was a rarefied event. We ate in bathing suits and cover-ups on the rooftop dining area of Crabby Bill's, where the Gulf view served as an ideal backdrop for our lunch of fried shrimp. Another lunch at the Sea Horse Restaurant in Pass-a-Grille was a decidedly throwback affair. Old photos, newspaper articles, and postcards cover the walls

liers hanging in the lobby and guestrooms sporting a contemporary coastal look.

Maybe next year we'll experience spring break with a side of swanky sophistication; our little princess has already placed the Don CeSar on her "must stay" list. 🐚

An editor for TOTI Media, Beth Luberecki is a Venice, Florida-based freelance writer and the author of the blog Kiddo on the Go (kiddoonthego.blogspot.com).



Choose your adventure: the solitude of Shell Key (left and inset) or the sophistication of the Loews Don CeSar Hotel (right).

IF YOU GO

A Little Room for Art

727-360-8572, alittleroomforart.com

Cafe Luna

727-360-7500, cafelunabistro.com

Crabby Bill's

727-360-8858, crabbybills.com

Dody

727-360-4589, dodyboutique.net

Gulf Beaches Historical Museum

727-552-1610, pinellascounty.org

Loews Don Cesar Hotel

727-360-1881, loewshotels.com

Paradiso

727-363-8831

Postcard Inn

800-237-8918, postcardinn.com

Sea Horse Restaurant

727-360-1734

Shell Key Shuttle

727-360-1348, shellkeyshuttle.com

Snapper's Sea Grill

727-367-3550, snappersseagrill.com