

TRAVEL

The Miami Herald  SUNDAY, APRIL 11, 2010 | EDITOR: MARJIE LAMBERT mlambert@MiamiHerald.com 305-376-4939

ND.

Exploring Vacation Capital USA - in your own backyard

Florida

end to end

CLEARWATER BEACH

Some things never change
— they just get a little polish

BY CHELLE KOSTER WALTON
Special to The Miami Herald

Bikini-clad 20-somethings fought it out in a volleyball tournament in the sand. Tanned, bare-chested frat brothers popped tops off cans of cold beer. A young magician gathered a crowd around him on a sidewalk leading to the fishing pier. Kids squealed as they slid out of the jaws of an inflatable oversized-shark slide.

Just another spring day in Clearwater Beach. After so much has changed following a five-year, \$30-million face lift, the important things have not. New wrinkles have deepened the

Clearwater Beach experience without erasing its character.

New upscale hotels and the pedestrian-friendly Beach Walk promenade have made Clearwater Beach look better, but thankfully they haven't priced out the fun-lovers and families who have for decades found their vacation getaway along this fluffed stretch of white beach.

At the end run of Clearwater Beach's "Billion Dollar Beach" renovation, the 17-floor Hyatt Regency Clearwater Beach resort and residen-

*TURN TO CLEARWATER, 7J



BETSY CLEMENT/CITY OF CLEARWATER

NEW LOOK: The Beach Walk promenade has attracted upscale hotels and restaurants, but it hasn't priced out budget-minded families.



COMING SUNDAY IN TRAVEL: TASMANIA DAILY: THE LATEST TRAVEL DEALS AT www.MiamiHerald.com/travel

CLEARWATER BEACH

Not so much change as a good polish

* CLEARWATER, FROM 1J

tial complex opened in February, a crowning element in the midst of Beach Walk's half-mile winding entertainment corridor.

A paver path skirts along dunes, flat-sand beach, sculptures, playgrounds, dining, shops, a wedding gazebo in-the-making, and the classic Pier 60, where everyone celebrates sunset nightly, as they have for years. The pier and beachfront park around it fill with artisans, jugglers, musicians, families, lovers, and party folk as the sun dips.

GRAND PLAYGROUND

It's the same lively sunset scenario I remember from eight years ago, when we celebrated the day's end with our son and his friend, then 11. They entertained themselves on the playground while we perused the craft stands. Today, the playground has grown grander, with bungee jumps and inflatables.

On our most recent visit, we celebrated sunset with a completely different ritual I could get to love. My husband and I strolled along Beach Walk and main strip Mandalay Avenue to our dinner reservations at Sandpearl Resort, another gem that beach revitalization attracted a couple of years prior.

Built upon the site of the former Clearwater Beach Hotel, Sandpearl was the beach's first new hotel in 25 years when it opened in August 2007.

In March, it opened its own art gallery down the street, another sign of Clearwater Beach's upscale swing.



CHELSE KOSTER WALTON/FOR THE MIAMI HERALD

WHAT'S NEW: The Hyatt Regency offers a view of Clearwater's 'Billion Dollar Beach,' above. At right, outdoor showers are topped with cartoonish sea turtles.



BETSY CLEMENT/CITY OF CLEARWATER

Sandpearl's Caretta on the Gulf restaurant clearly takes things that same direction. Our table for two faced sunset through a wall of windows in the elevated, plush dining room. We groaned in pleasure over New World fusion masterpieces: shrimp bisque topped

with frothed, curry-flavored coconut milk; pan-seared snapper atop sweet potatoes with plum sauce and vegetarian empanadas with avocado salsa verde. Between courses we snuggled on the long, cushioned booth in the afterglow of the sun.

Like Sandpearl, the

newer, peach-toned Hyatt Regency steps up the luxury and romance factor on Clearwater Beach, where traditional lodging had been defined in the past by mom-and-pop motels lining the bay. The mompops have stayed for the most part, making it a one-destination-fits-all kind of place that actually works.

delay for the discriminating.

Frenchy's still reigns first for seafood, whether you want to enjoy it barefoot on the beach or at its original street-corner location.

A short drive off the beach along the Route 60 causeway toward the

mainland, Island Way Grill has been around for a good while serving Pacific Rim-style grilled meats and seafood in a busy, ultra-modern designer setting.

The restaurant is close to one of Clearwater Beach's top attractions, the Clearwater Marine Aquarium, a longstanding rehab facility that lends the destination a valuable eco-focus, with its boat tours and dolphin and sea turtle programs.

On the mainland, Clearwater is big city, but the past year's efforts to brighten its downtown core have made it, too, more inviting.

Specialty shops and a nice variety of restaurants draw visitors to its Cleveland Street District, host to a Wednesday farmer's market and Fourth Friday evenings of music, food and activities.

SOME ROUND-TRIP AIRFARES

Fares may vary. This map is a guide only. It reflects airfares available within the 101 week. Fares are based on round-trip travel and are subject to availability and restrictions. Please note that because airfares change their fares frequently, these fares may not be available when you receive your newspaper or on the dates you want to travel.

Prices quoted may not include surcharges and taxes, which vary widely and can add as much as \$300 to international fares. Less

expensive fares may be available on the Internet or through consolidators - travel agencies that book nonrefundable airfares only.

Fare information supplied by www.travelocity.com. For other fares, see www.southwest.com. Valid as of April 6.



U.S. DESTINATIONS

Atlanta
MIA \$178 (DL)
FLL \$178 (DL)

Boston
MIA \$178 (AA)
FLL \$178 (US)

Charlotte
MIA \$202 (AA)
FLL \$178 (US)

Chicago
MIA \$180 (US)
FLL \$152 (UA)

Dallas
MIA \$208 (CO)
FLL \$218 (CO)

Denver
MIA \$228 (AA)
FLL \$198 (UA)

Honolulu
MIA \$562 (DL)
FLL \$546 (DL)

Houston
MIA \$228 (CO)
FLL \$150 (AA)

Jacksonville
MIA \$248 (AA)
FLL \$266 (FL)

Las Vegas
MIA \$258 (AA)
FLL \$198 (DL)

Los Angeles
MIA \$238 (AA)
FLL \$238 (DL)

New Orleans
MIA \$198 (US)
FLL \$158 (US)

New York
MIA \$158 (US)
FLL \$148 (FL)

Oriando
MIA \$158 (AA)
FLL \$78 (NK)

Philadelphia
MIA \$168 (AA)
FLL \$194 (US)

San Francisco
MIA \$238 (AA)
FLL \$178 (DL)

Seattle
MIA \$228 (CO)
FLL \$208 (CO)

Tallahassee
MIA \$360 (DL)
FLL \$378 (DL)

Tampa
MIA \$118 (AA)
FLL \$78 (NK)

Washington D.C.
MIA \$170 (FL)
FLL \$124 (FL)

MEXICO/CARIBBEAN

Cancun
MIA \$340 (MX)
FLL \$305 (B6)

Mexico City
MIA \$287 (MX)
FLL \$430 (US)

Barbados
MIA \$500 (AA)
FLL \$567 (B6)

Grand Cayman
MIA \$269 (XX)
FLL \$490 (XX)

Montego Bay
MIA \$256 (AA)
FLL \$260 (JM)

Nassau
MIA \$191 (JP)
FLL \$181 (B6)

St. Maarten
MIA \$599 (AA)
FLL \$577 (TH)

San Juan
MIA \$198 (AA)
FLL \$234 (B6)

Santo Domingo
MIA \$295 (AA)
FLL \$302 (B6)

CANADA

Montreal
MIA \$236 (AA)
FLL \$276 (AC)

Toronto
MIA \$221 (AA)
FLL \$232 (AA)

OTHER ROUND-TRIP FARES (From Miami)

Bangkok \$1,373 (AY)
Bogota \$278 (LP)
Buenos Aires \$956 (LP)
Caracas \$518 (LR)
Frankfurt \$839 (AA)
Hong Kong \$1,342 (US)
Lima \$403 (AV)
London \$832 (US)
Madrid \$720 (DL)
Managua \$249 (AA)
Panama City \$224 (TA)
Paris \$919 (AA)
Rio de Janeiro \$725 (CM)
San Jose \$290 (AA)
Santiago \$874 (AV)
Sydney \$1,157 (QF)

Tel Aviv \$1,221 (IB)
Tokyo \$724 (AC)

AIRLINE CODES

AA American
AC Air Canada
AF Air France
AM Aeromexico
AR Aero Argentinias
AS Alaska Airlines
AV Avianca
AY Finnair
AZ Alitalia
BA British Airways
B6 JetBlue
CM Copa
CO Continental
DL Delta
FL AirTran
F9 Frontier
IB Iberia
JL Japan Airlines
JJ TAM
JM Air Jamaica
KL KLM
KX Cayman Air
LA Lan Chile
LH Lufthansa
LP Lan Peru
LR LACSA
LX Swiss
LY El Al
MP Martinair
MX Mexicana
NH All-Nippon Air
NK Spirit
NW Northwest
OF Qantas
SA South African
S3 Santa Barbara Air
TA Taca
UA United
UP Bahamasair
US USAirways
UX Air Europa
VS Virgin Atlantic
XC Caribbean Air
XL Lan Ecuador
VX Virgin America
4M LAN Argentina



Or so it seemed on our recent weekend, when vacationers filled practically every one of the Hyatt's 250 generously spaced, West Indies-style suites, outfitted with full kitchens and sea-view balconies.

The Hyatt's spa and SHOR restaurant, overlooking the beach and serving creative grilled seafood (try the ricotta pancakes for breakfast), complete Clearwater Beach's new profile.

ON THE BEACH

Clearwater Beach has traditionally maintained a reputation for its barefoot frivolity: volleyball competitions, a bustling marina filled with water-sports of every sort and an award-winning, action-filled beach.

Beach gentrification has actually improved upon the best qualities. The brick-paved Beach Walk makes a day at the beach easier and more pleasant for everyone, from cyclists to the disabled. Outdoor showers topped with cartoonish sea turtles add whimsy, while artistic seashell accents and a giant sundial define a new distinction.

The Beach Walk links to sidewalks along other resort areas streets to make foot navigation the best way to explore local shops selling everything from beach toys and togs to art by Florida artist Christopher Still, who created two striking sea-themed paintings for Sandpearl's lobby.

DINING STANDOUTS

On up-end Mandalay Avenue, Bob Heileman's Beachcomber restaurant had served since 1948 as the community's top fine dining choice and continues to dish up its wide variety of specialties, from fried chicken to veal piccata for the dress-and-go-out crowd.

With the addition of Hyatt and Sandpearl signature restaurants, dining upscale choices have expanded. Bobby's Bistro & Wine Bar, of the same family as the Beachcomber, is another new popular choice along Man-

Going to Clearwater

Getting there: Clearwater is a 285-mile drive from downtown Miami along I-75, I-275 and the Sunshine Skyway Bridge across Tampa Bay. For those who prefer to fly, American and Continental fly nonstop to Tampa; Spirit, Southwest and Continental fly nonstop from Fort Lauderdale, a flight of about an hour. Tampa International Airport is about 20 miles from Clearwater Beach. Roundtrip airfare starts at \$139 from Fort Lauderdale, \$231 from Miami for a weekend in June.

WHERE TO STAY

Hyatt Regency Clearwater Beach, 301 S. Gulfview Blvd., 727-373-3672; <http://clearwaterbeach.hyatt.com>. Full-service resort across the street from the beach with fine amenities, including spa, fitness center, restaurants and full kitchens in all suites. In-season rates start at \$265, off-season at \$175.

Sandpearl Resort, 500 Mandalay Ave., 877-726-3111; www.sandpearl.com. Devoted to the environment, art and history, it's on the beach. Rooms start at \$179 in the off-season, \$269 in season.

WHERE TO EAT

Bob Heileman's Beachcomber, 447 Mandalay Ave., 727-442-4144, <http://heilmanbeachcomber.com>. Lunch and dinner. Dinner entrees \$12-\$30.

Caretta on the Gulf, Sandpearl Resort, 877-726-3111; www.sandpearl.com. Serves breakfast, lunch and dinner in a tropical fusion vein. Dinner entrees \$21-\$42.

Frenchy's Rockaway Grill, 7 Rockaway St., 727-446-4844; www.frenchyonline.com. Beach shack atmosphere with grilled seafood and sandwiches. Lunch and dinner. Entrees \$8-\$17.

Island Way Grill, 20 Island Way, 727-461-6617; www.islandwaygrill.com. Dinner and Sunday brunch. Entrees \$10.95-\$39.95.

The Original Frenchy's Café, 41 Baymont St., 727-446-3607; www.frenchyonline.com. Casual with indoor and outdoor seating. Lunch and dinner. Sandwiches and seafood platters \$7-\$15.

SHOR at Hyatt Regency, 727-373-1234; <http://clearwaterbeach.hyatt.com>. Fine American grill cuisine for breakfast, lunch and dinner. Dinner entrees \$18-\$26.

INFORMATION

St. Petersburg/Clearwater Convention & Visitors Bureau, 877-352-3224; www.FloridasBeach.com.

Clearwater Beach Chamber of Commerce, 888-799-3199; www.beachchamber.com.



Whitened splinters. One just as rates feature the elegance of the West Indies, inspired with the charm of Old Town Key West. Deep soaking tubs and private balconies complete your well appointed escape.

For information, call 800.258.9815 or oceankey.com or visit your local professional.

OCEAN KEY
RESORT & SPA
Nestled in the heart of Key West

Junior Suite with partial ocean view \$279^{per night}

©2004 Ocean Key Resort & Spa. All rights reserved.