

Bohemian Beach Hotels

TRUE TO ITS SURFER-COOL, 1950'S-MOTEL ROOTS, THE NEW POSTCARD INN, IN ST. PETE BEACH, FLORIDA, IS HIP, AFFORDABLE, AND RESOLUTELY CASUAL. **BY CHARLES GANDEE**

UNLIKE MIAMI BEACH AND FORT LAUDERDALE Beach, two of the hotter hot spots on the southeast coast of Florida, St. Pete Beach—on the central west coast of the Sunshine State—is lazy and low-key, quiet and calm, unpretentious and unassuming. More old Florida than new, it has no throngs of party-down revelers looking for a noisy good time in anything-goes clubs with velvet-roped VIP rooms. You will see fewer Porsches and Escalades here cruising Gulf Boulevard, the main thoroughfare dividing the east side of St. Pete Beach from the west side; fewer cigar-smoking “players” in Gucci shirts and Prada loafers noisily ordering magnums of Cristal. Instead, you will see a vast array of casual restaurants, plus a full complement of Laundromats, souvenir shops, convenience stores, gas stations, bicycle shops, and surf shacks. Also visible along Gulf Boulevard is the fact that if St. Pete Beach has a dress code, it is cutoffs and flip-flops, bathing suits and bare feet.

Here, on this particular stretch of the west coast of Florida, between tiny Pass-A-Grille Beach to the south and Treasure Island to the north, the landscape comprises mostly nondescript two- and three-story motels with colorful neon signs erected in the late 1950's and 60's and then, by the look of things, pretty much left to entropy. One of them, however, has just been renovated and renamed: Postcard Inn on the Beach, an easygoing beach hotel with a bohemian edge. Built in 1957 as the Colonial Gateway Inn, a 204-room, two-story, U-shaped motel with a large pool and a grove of mature royal palms at its core, it became a Travelodge in 1999. Now, in its latest incarnation, the

property joins a new wave of stylish, affordable beach hotels, including the Surf Lodge in Montauk, New York, and the Canary Hotel in Santa Barbara, California.

The Postcard Inn story begins in 2005, when Barry Sternlicht, the high-profile chairman and CEO of Starwood Capital Group, led his company to acquire the Travelodge, with plans to raze the motel and build a condo-hotel. But the neighbors banded together and objected to the proposed development, and the plan languished until the economy finally undermined the viability of Sternlicht's project. So he came up with an alternative: renovate the Travelodge to transform what was a down-at-the-heels motel into a chic inn. For that he turned to his friend and business partner Stephen Hanson, founder of B.R. Guest Restaurants, co-owned by Starwood Capital Group.

Despite the trend over the past two decades, what Hanson had in mind for St. Pete Beach was not a boutique hotel. The Postcard Inn is, in fact, a world away from, say, South Beach's Delano and Shore Club. It has neither the aesthetic panache, the too-cool-for-school attitude, nor the room rates of such well-known hotels. Hanson had a dramatically different agenda for the Postcard Inn on the Beach. “Howard Johnson meets JetBlue is probably where we want to be,” he says. In practical terms what that means is he was determined to renovate the aging motel into accessible, affordable accommodations—\$99 out of season (July through December), \$189 in season (January to June)—but with a bit of user-friendly flair, including the addition of Wildwood Barbeque & Burger, an outpost of one of »

his busy New York restaurants. “We’re looking to build a successful brand with unique character that will cater to all types of travelers—singles, couples, families with children—looking for more than just the trendiest new hotel,” Hanson says.

Collaborating with Hanson on programming, planning, and design was Tara Oxley, head of B.R. Guest Restaurants’ in-house design team; Chris Sheffield, principal of Philadelphia-based S.L. Design; and marketing maven Donna Rodriguez, who has worked with Hanson for 16 years. Landscape architect Christy Ten Eyck, based in Phoenix and Austin, Texas, assumed responsibility for everything green.

To focus the team’s vision for the hotel, Oxley assembled a bulging scrapbook of images and thoughts that served as inspiration and guide. On the first page of the book are the words *vintage*, *American*, *hot*, *beachy*, and *getaway*; on the second is a passage from, as fate would have it, Jack Kerouac, about the glory of living life to the fullest. Taped to the following pages is a range of colorful fabric swatches and alluring vignettes, plus evocative snapshots meant to capture the general mood: from seagulls on the beach in the morning and octogenarians taking in the sun on a bench in the afternoon to picture-perfect waves crashing against the Gulf shore.

Though not as popular as Cocoa Beach, on the east coast of Florida, St. Pete Beach boasts a healthy subculture of surfers, who tend to congregate at the nearby Sunset and Upham beaches or, a bit farther north, at the Redington Beach pier. “As an inspirational anchor for Postcard Inn, there is no more authentically American beach tradition than surfing,” Rodriguez says. “We really wanted to create a hotel that feels comfortable for the time and natural in its surroundings.”

“Lively, easy, up-spirited,” adds Hanson, who came to the project with three intractable mandates: “It had to be fun, it had to be affordable, and it had to have the

spirit of the locality.” To amplify the last point, he adds, “I think St. Pete Beach is a little treasure, it’s an affordable, fun town, and it’s two and a half hours from New York. We wanted to be part of the community, part of the local scene.”

Toward that end, the guest rooms were to be “reminiscent of surfers’ digs,” according to the design team. Driving the thematic idea home, 165 of the rooms come complete with a bona fide surfboard—prudently anchored to the wall—standing upright in the corner.

Because they were committed to the \$99/\$189 room rate, such niceties as gutting the period bathrooms were not in the budget. They did, however, do away with all of the kitchenettes, which had been located in several of the rooms, replacing them with upholstered, built-in banquettes backed by bamboo paneling and cordoned off with hanging, wood-and-glass-beaded curtains. Which adds a slightly bohemian vibe to the rooms.

Though no two are exactly alike, the rooms all have vintage table lamps on new pickled and stained birch desks, flat-screen TV’s, Wi-Fi, and, flanking the beds, classic black-metal drafting lamps with articulated arms. The objective was to jettison the dark, dated, oppressive feel of the Travelodge guest rooms, so out went the musty wall-to-wall deep-pile carpeting, ink-blue patterned bedspreads, matching curtains and valances, and heavy, ornate wooden headboards. To lighten and brighten the rooms, they opted for white wood venetian blinds for the windows and a sand-colored, sisal-like flooring that is actually woven vinyl. Down-filled duvets with crisp white covers have replaced the bedspreads. Further reminding guests that they are not in just another generic motel, on the wall behind the beds is either a floor-to-ceiling, wall-to-wall photo mural of a lone surfer on a longboard in the curl of a tsunami-scale wave, a photographic collage of all things surfing-oriented, or a

FOUR MORE BEACHFRONT ESCAPES

New York
ALLEGRIA HOTEL & SPA A brand-new property just 25 minutes outside of Manhattan, with 143 rooms, a new Joseph Christopher spa, and chef Todd Jacobs’s Atlantica restaurant.

80 W. Broadway, Long Beach; 888/662-3224; allegriahotel.com; doubles from \$259.

SURF LODGE Helmed by three New York City club owners, the Montauk, Long Island, property has relaxed room interiors—rattan basket chairs; ocean-inspired artwork—as well as a Tracy Feith shop and *Top Chef* star

Sam Talbot’s restaurant. *183 Edgemere St., Montauk; 631/668-1962; thesurflodge.com; doubles from \$275.*

California
CANARY HOTEL Just off Santa Barbara’s State Street, this recently opened boutique hotel has Moroccan textiles on the walls and décor inspired by the Canary Islands. *31 W. Carrillo*

St., Santa Barbara; 805/884-0300; canarysantabarbara.com; doubles from \$254.

MALIBU BEACH INN One of the only hotels on Malibu, this newly reopened property offers ocean views and beach service. *22878 Pacific Coast Hwy., Malibu; 310/456-6444; malibubeachinn.com; doubles from \$385.*

colorful, typographically lively series of quotes from legendary surfers as well as Thoreau, the Beach Boys, Warhol, Jay-Z, and others.

Between the pool and the beach is the freestanding PCI Beach Bar, formerly called Swigwam, and an adjacent Snack Shack where you can treat yourself to a hamburger for \$5.75. (Yet another reminder that this is not a boutique hotel.) On certain nights of the week, there is live music to add a festive element to the watering hole, which has been popular with locals since the 1970's. For those for whom a towel in the sand or a chaise by the pool are not enticing enough, there's bocce, shuffleboard, horseshoes, volleyball, and Ping Pong, as well as tire swings and a basketball hoop. There are also two beachside gyms in two 2-story pavilions: one for cardio, one for weights.

Though there is no room service, there is a free hot-and-cold continental breakfast served in a tented "canteen" off the lobby, where such amenities as a vintage photo booth, a video-game arcade, and a library of art books are also housed.

In a stylistic reprieve from Postcard Inn on the Beach's surfing/beach motif, the hotel's restaurant, adjacent to the lobby, is a 200-seat offshoot of Hanson's bustling Wildwood Barbeque on Park Avenue South in Manhattan. To help get things going at Postcard Inn on the Beach, Hanson brought down Wildwood Barbeque's pit master, "Big Lou" Elrose, who documented his trip

from New York City to St. Pete Beach on his Harley with regular postings on Facebook and Twitter.

Out along Gulf Boulevard, Postcard Inn on the Beach's exterior signals the refurbished motel within by manipulating the motel's A-line façade, breaking down the monolithic masonry mass with cypress-wood panels that extend some 40 feet from the corners of the 1957 building toward its center. Cypress panels were also applied to the porte-cochère that marks the main entrance to the hotel's lobby, and planters were filled with vines and flowers. "In general," Sheffield says, "we wanted to soften the existing building and introduce a sense of tropical greenery that is indicative of the planting materials and green spaces within the courtyard."

Going forward, Hanson is convinced that he is on the right track with Postcard Inn on the Beach. "Always affordable," he says, when asked about potential projects. And then he adds, "Instead of trying to build three- or four- or five-star hotels for your ego, stay exactly where the market wants to be." The Postcard Inn is right on target. ✚

Postcard Inn on the Beach, 6300 Gulf Blvd., St. Pete Beach, Fla.; 800/237-8918; postcardinn.com; doubles from \$189.

Charles Gandee contributed to the monograph Thad Hayes: The Tailored Interior.



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