

Panama City Beach looks beyond spring break

With towering condos, new retail and an airport on the way, the Florida town is reshaping itself.

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PANAMA CITY BEACH, Fla. — A 15-story condo building called Marina Landing is rising here alongside a pile of rubble under a sign that reads "Holiday Lodge."

It's a sign of the times in Panama City, where the sky is filled with cranes (construction, not whooping) as high-rises take shape amid a sea of T-shirt shops, seafood restaurants, miniature golf courses and the occasional attraction boasting: "Live alligators."



Resort Collection of Panama City

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PANAMA CITY BEACH CONVENTION & VISITOR CENTER

The skyline of Panama City Beach is evolving as condominium towers and resorts rise above the older establishments that have been popular for years with students on spring break. Famous for its clear waters and gleaming white sand, this section of the Florida Panhandle's Emerald Coast is in the midst of a transformation as city planners seek to foster a more family-friendly image.

This little strip of the Florida Panhandle's Emerald Coast, famous for its gleaming white sand and blue-green waters, is working hard to transform itself from beach town to coastal resort — and to steer its image from party-permeated to family-friendly.

"We've replaced 3,000 hotel and motel rooms that catered to people 18 and older with 15,000 condo units that only rent to people 25 and older," says Paul Wohlford, vice president of sales and marketing for the Resort Collection of Panama City, a collection of six big condo developments. "That lends itself to more groups, meetings and families."

The city wants to be ready when, in 2009, its new \$330 million airport opens. Many in Panama City are counting on that airport to bring in planeloads of new tourists.

So along with adding condos, the city is refurbishing the beaches, improving roads, adding landscaping and planning a trolley system. All are expected to be done by the time the new airport opens.

Then there's the new open-air mall, Pier Park, on U.S. 98, with a 16-theater movie complex, Target store and two restaurants already open. Eventually it will embrace 900,000 square feet, with such stores as Dillard's, J.C. Penney, Ann Taylor Loft and Old Navy.

"We're going to be more upscale than we are, but not as upscale as Destin," Wohlford said, referring to the tonier destination about 50 miles to the west.

Among those watching all this — especially the addition of all those high-rise rooms — is Jerry Peek, 53, co-owner (with his brother) of Peek's Motel, a sprawling low-rise property his family founded in 1953.

Peek is concerned about the effect all the new rooms might have on his own.

"I didn't sleep good last winter worrying about it, but actually, our business is better than last year," Peek says. "Gas prices have helped us. Everybody within a tank full of gas is coming" to Panama City Beach.

Peek's Motel is increasingly being dwarfed by its massive neighbors. Typical is the Edgewater Beach Resort, where I spent a night. It has 550 suites of various sizes — some in high-rise towers, some in golf-course townhouses — and offers golf, tennis and spa treatments. It's open year-round.

Peek's Motel, which closes after Labor Day until March 1, attracts spring breakers in March and families in the summer. Peek likes both elements and wishes the city would look more kindly on spring breakers.

"They're trying to change Panama City Beach into a year-round family market, and I'm all for that, but without the spring breakers, I don't see how it can be year-round. Personally, I think it should've been left alone."

Peek, like many others who own older businesses on the shoreline, is fighting to stay put as property taxes skyrocket.

"I'd like to rebuild, and my brother would like to sell," he says.

One thing that'll always be here for sure is the soft, fine, snow-white sand. It, after all, is why people drive past all those flattened armadillos to get to the Florida Panhandle. It's what makes this stretch of coast different from any other place to play in the waves, eat seafood, hear beachside bands and play the odd game of mini-golf. (And in my husband's case, eat boiled peanuts.)

What distinguishes Panama City Beach specifically is its laid-back attitude. It feels beachy. It's a frayed shorts, T-shirt, \$3 flip-flop kind of place. I get the idea that the city wants to hang onto this part of its reputation and, for that reason, is unlikely to wholesale bulldoze the mom 'n' pop places, though those are getting fewer and farther between.

"Some parts of Panama City . . . like Schooners (which bills itself as the "Last Local Beach Club") and Captain Anderson's (a highly popular seafood spot) are part of our tradition, and they'll be part of our future," Wohlford says.

Peek, whose motel is across the street from Fun Land Arcade, says he's sure the arcade, a longtime tourist favorite, will stay put.

"It's been there since the '50s, and it seems to thrive," he says.

Similarly, the area's mini-golf and go-cart tracks seem to haul 'em in. So do beachside clubs such as Schooners, Spinnaker and Sharky's.

But at the same time, new restaurants are going up that might just have dress codes. You never know.

Panama City Beach is evolving, but those who grew up there say it won't lose its identity.

"In my mind, we've got a lot going for us," Peek says. "Panama City Beach does have its own personality. It always has and it always will."

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If you go ...

Where to stay: Peeks Motel, 14513 Front Beach Road, (850) 249-9999, www.peaksmotel.com. Rooms start at \$69.

Edgewater Beach Resort, (800) 874-8686, [\[beachresort.com\]\(http://beachresort.com\). Rooms start at \\$81, and there's a daily cleaning fee of \\$20 to \\$30, depending on room size.](http://www.edgewater</p></div><div data-bbox=)

Where to eat seafood: Captain Anderson's, 5551 N. Lagoon Drive. (850) 234-2225; Montego Bay Seafood House, 473 Beckrich Road. (850) 233-6033.

Where to play: Beachside bars — Sharkys Beach Club & Seafood, 15201 Front Beach Road. (850) 235-2420; Schooners, 5121 Gulf Drive. (850) 235-3555; Spinnaker Beach Club & Grill, 8795 Thomas Drive. (850) 234-7882; Club La Vela (huge dance club), 8813 Thomas Drive. (850) 234-3866.

Fun Land Arcade & Snack Bar is at 14510 Front Beach Road. (850) 234-3693.

Want to see live alligators? Try Alvin's Island Tropical Department Store, 10570 Front Beach Road. (850) 234-3048.

For more information on Panama City, call 1 (800) PCBEACH, visit www.thebeachloversbeach.com or call a travel agent.