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Daytona Beach: Town in transition

By Iris Sanderson Jones
contributing travel editor

You've never seen a beach like this one, not unless you have been to spring break at Daytona Beach. Even if you attended The Big Party in earlier years, you haven't seen a beach quite like this, because the Daytona Beach Marriott opened in a glamorous spread of pink and green above the boardwalk recently.

The world's most famous beach may never be the same again.

The Marriott is just one step in the upgrade Daytona Beach's image from a slightly seedy beach party and motorcycle image compounded by a honky-tonk entertainment strip and an endless number of souvenir and T-shirt shops.

Supporters of the renaissance say it will be good for everybody to update the beach strip and replace old bumper car parlors with modern theme park-style entertainment centers.

Other people worry that all this new fancied good taste may spoil the wonderfully honky-tonk atmosphere, especially when somebody even hints at the idea of banning cars from the beach. Beach wheels go back to horse and buggy days, although those turn-of-the-century tourists would never recognize the spectacle you see today.

If you only see Daytona Beach on television during spring break, you might think of it as wall-to-wall bodies instead of shining sea and wide sand beach separated by a board-

walk from the beach town.

Here is the scene on a typical weekend afternoon when the beach is not overrun by 100,000 college students:

THE SEA rolls in to a thin white line of surf; a few bathers splash at the edge. Seagulls sit in wet sand that the tide is leaving behind, sharing this pristine part of the 500-foot-wide beach with a few sunbathers.

Above the tide line, two rows of motor vehicles move constantly back and forth in slow motion — cars, vans, beach bikes, motorcycles, three-wheelers, open trucks full of golden-haired beach boys, an ice cream truck, an occasional semi-trailer driving to its designated spot as a hot dog or bike rental stand.

The "road" is just a strip of the beach, smoothed every morning by machines, marked here and there by road signs that read "Speed Limit 10 mph."

Between the moving cars and the boardwalk — it's made of concrete now, but they still call it the boardwalk — is a single row of cars parked down to dusk on the beach, with sunbathers stretched out on towels front and back, and sometimes on the car roof.

A couple diligently digs a sand grave in which to bury a friend to the neck. A man spreads a bag of cheese chips for the seagulls, who make a riot of noise near steps leading to the boardwalk.

Music blares from speakers placed on car roofs. Girls in string bikinis go by, flesh flashing. Three

surfers carry their boards to the sea.

That scene has been played on the beach for years, but it is changing fast. Cars were allowed to drive up and down the beach all night until the county took over and converted the beach to a Volusia County park in 1988.

NOW YOU must pay \$3 to drive past one of the seven toll booths for a day on the beach, and your wheels are only allowed to be there from dawn to dusk.

You can imagine the furor that caused among local people, even though they pay only \$10 for an annual pass. To understand the controversy, you must go back a hundred years, because cars have been part of this barrier island, separated from the mainland by the Halifax River, for a long time.

If you jog the beach at dawn, it looks as if it must have looked to the Indians who lived here or to the Spanish who built sugar plantations near the coast in the 18th century.

The beach itself probably looks the same as it did when the old Ponce Inlet Lighthouse was built in 1837 at the south tip of the 23-mile-long sand strip or when Henry Flagler built his famous railway into Ormond Beach, at the north end of the beach, at the turn of the century.

Flagler brought John D. Rockefeller and other wealthy Americans to his hotel at Ormond Beach, and it wasn't long before somebody noticed that the fine sand was packed hard because of the constant roll of waves over a nearly flat beach. Bicycles didn't even leave tire marks, neither

did cars.

Ransome Olds, the Chevrolet brothers and race car drivers like Sir Malcolm Campbell held speed trials on the beach until they moved the trials to the Utah salt flats in the 1930s. Those pros left a lot of car enthusiasts behind them, and they were all racing at the southern end of the island, near the lighthouse, after World War II.

The souped-up road cars would race south down the two-lane highway to the lighthouse and north up the beach to the finish line. That's how the National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing (NASCAR) was born.

IN 1959, they built the Daytona International Speedway and took the races off the beach, which were really only firm enough to support race cars during the long high tides of winter.

Daytona Beach was a popular family vacation site until a new "world" opened up nearby — Walt Disneyworld in Orlando. According to Mayor Larry Kelly, Disney graduated business for a while, but "Daytona Beach didn't keep up." There was a dry spell for 10 years until the Holiday Inn was built in 1988.

Kelly opened the spectacular Ocean Center for conventions, entertainment and sports in 1985. He opened the glamorous Daytona Beach Marriott across the street from Ocean Center this year and has lots of other beach renaissance on the books.

Kelly's dream is an Ocean Walk, stretching for several blocks along

the Atlantic from the landmark fishing pier, past upscale amusement centers and new hotels like the Marriott to Seabreeze Avenue. He hopes to open an Omni Hotel on one side of the Marriott and a new suite hotel on the other, with office/condo complexes nearby and performing arts in the stone bandshell built in a city park beside the beach.

The bandshell and a restored stone clock tower are in the "front yard" of the Daytona Beach Marriott now. The \$47-million, 402-room luxury hotel hopes to connect the redevelopment of the city with the happy-go-lucky life of the world's most famous beach.

Go to any social gathering and this is what you'll hear: "Beaches are for people, not cars." "You're crazy! If they took the cars off the beach, it would be just another beach!"

THE CITY administration leans toward the "beaches are for people" argument, but they don't intend to do anything to stir up that hornet's nest right now.

It's against Florida state law to drive on the beach, so Daytona had to pass a special ordinance allowing it. Can you ever people and people live to see, so the insurance problem was horrific; that's why the city gave the beach to the county.

Optimists hope that there will be a creative way to keep the car crowd and the spring breakers and still go on with the renaissance. Stay tuned.

Meantime, go have look at the world's most famous beach. You've never seen a beach quite like this one, and someday it may be history.

Day at 'beach': It's more than just sand, surf

By Iris Sanderson Jones
contributing travel editor

If you love race cars, the Daytona International Speedway, a 455-acre tract with a 100-acre infield, has 91,000 seats and is the largest in the state. It annually hosts 25 types of racing events.

I attended the 24-hour Sunbank race in February and learned what race-goers have long known — some of the best activity is off the track! People buy parking space for campers and other vehicles in the infield and party all night.

The speed weeks were in February, and motorcycle week took over the town in March. The Pepsi 400 runs July 1 weekend. The Daytona Pro-Am Motorcycle Races are in October, the Karting Olympics in December.

But even if you don't go for special events you can enjoy the facilities every day, except race days and days when the track is rented for testing. The \$1 tour (kids 11 and under free) gives you a mini-van ride around the speedway and along pit road. Call 253-6711.

The Birthplace of Speed Museum is in Ormond Beach and gives you a glimpse of the role that the area has played in the development of the automobile and in car racing. Check out the Stanley Steamer. Call 62-5657.

CAR RACING is not the only ac-

tivity in town. There is a marvelous state park in the northern corner of Volusia County where you can hike, canoe, fish and otherwise play amid natural forests. While you're up there, go to the Bulow Creek historic site for a walk through the ruins of an old sugar mill, but mostly to see the alligators swim through the palmetto swamps.

There is also a sugar mill ruin south of Daytona Beach. Sugar Mill Gardens was briefly a theme park, so you'll find a few plaster dinosaurs there, too! You can keep going south on the mainland through 26 miles of Canaveral National Seashore to the launch pads of the Kennedy Space Center.

If you like sightseeing, go to the Caraments, John D. Rockefeller's winter home in Ormond Beach, and to the wonderful Museum of Arts and Sciences in Daytona Beach. The museum has a collection of Cuban art donated by Juan Batista, who settled in Daytona after Castro threw him out of Cuba.

By next year, a brand new harbor project, full of marinas, restaurants and other attractions, will be operating in Daytona Beach.

For information on Daytona Beach, contact Destination Daytona, P.O. Box 3775, 138 E. Orange Ave., Daytona Beach, Fla. 32118, or telephone toll-free (800) 854-1234.



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Accommodations, eateries plentiful along the 'beach'

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There are more than 16,000 rooms in the Daytona Beach Resort Area, so call Destination Daytona toll-free at (800) 854-1234 and explore the hotels and motels ranging for miles north and south along the beach. Check to be sure the hotel is actually on the beach, if that's what you want.

If you want to stay at the newest and the best, the Daytona Beach Marriott participates in all of those special weekends and discounts that Marriott advertises nationwide.

The honeymoon package is \$225 plus tax for two nights, champagne breakfast and one dinner for two. Call toll-free (800) 228-0260.

Or ask about one of the hotels with efficiency suites. Check out a condo south of Daytona Beach in the Shores, or one north in Ormond Beach. Rent-a-condo can also be reached toll-free at (800) 374-5324.

You can also rent a house on the beach.

Check out some of these restaurants:

I liked the menu and setting in an historic restored, bed-and-breakfast house rather grandiosely called the St. Regis Hotel on Seabreeze Boulevard. The hotel part was full, so I didn't see the rooms.

THERE ARE two restaurants on the Halifax River, which separates what they call "the peninsula" and beach community from the mainland. Sweetwaters is a big white clapboard place with verandas overlooking the river. Aunt Catfish's is a small informal place nearby (check out the cheese grits). Both are moderately priced and specialize in seafood.

Sinbad's on the river and the Oyster Deck across the road beside the Dunlawton Bridge are both popular. Folks love Blackboard's in Wilbur and three places down near the lighthouse — Fisherman's Wharf, Island Harbor and Grill and the White House Lending.

Ask any spring break veteran and he'll tell you about Peard's in the Clarendon Plaza Hotel a few blocks north of the Marriott, or an open beach place called the Ocean Deck just south of the Marriott. (No, I'm not pushing the Marriott, but overnight it has become the landmark by which you find your way around.)

The Marriott has great eating places. If you just want to look around, have a beer in the lower level bar-deli, a drink to music in the Clock Tower Lounge, a hamburger in Splash, or lunch on the terrace at Paradise Seafood Grill. The class dining room is called Coguinas.

Or you can dine along the boardwalk on pizzas and hot dogs.