

VICTORIA ADVOCATE

'Unpolished' Galveston Hopes To Brighten Tourist Image

Ah, A Stroll Along Brownish-gray Sand, A Dip In Murky Water

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BY JOE STINEBAKER - THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

GALVESTON - One of Texas' best-known but equally disparaged beach towns is trying to figure out how to promote itself to outsiders while acknowledging that the town and its beaches are dirty and largely unappealing.

Galvestonians and tourists alike repeatedly cited "dirty beaches" and the town's "unclean feel" during recent interviews conducted by a marketing company hired to help boost Galveston's image.

"Your beach is most known, but neither visitors or residents think highly of it," says the report, commissioned by Galveston's top tourism promoters. "Flaunt the uniqueness of your island. Your beaches and island are not dirty - they are colored with stories, history and culture."



A PROMOTION BUDGET

That's among the advice contained in the \$76,000 promotion report commissioned by the Galveston Island Park Board of Trustees, which is responsible for overseeing tourism promotion on the island. Officials plan to spend another \$24,000 designing and distributing print ads and billboards promoting Galveston around the state of Texas and to targeted cities around the United States and Canada. The money comes from hotel-occupancy tax revenues in Galveston.

Every summer, droves of Houstonians and other Texans stomp along Galveston's brownish-gray sand to take a summer dip in the tepid, murky Gulf waters that play host to jellyfish and strings of seaweed. Malibu it isn't, they joke, but at least it's close. But selling the town's charms to tourists with other postcard-like options might be a tough sell.

Galveston was once the crown jewel of the Texas Gulf Coast. It was first used by the pirate Jean Lafitte and others as an out-of-the-way place to dump loot while cruising the Spanish Main. A major metropolis before Houston was on any map, Galveston was largely wiped out by a hurricane in 1900 that killed thousands and ended the city's golden dreams.

Parts of the new tourism campaign by North Star Destination Strategies of Nashville, Tenn., reflect Galveston's promoters' desire to celebrate that history. The Galveston Island Convention & Visitors Bureau already has adopted the recommended slogan: "The Legend Continues."

'Remarkably seedy'

But some parts of the report stung a bit. Criticism of the island's cleanliness runs throughout the presentation, with comments about "not very pretty beaches," "remarkably seedy" neighborhoods and the town's "unpolished" reputation.

Paula Brown, spokeswoman for the island's convention and visitors bureau, said there is little sense in hiding the obvious.

"Our beaches are what they are," Brown said. "A lot of places do have white sand and clean water. Galveston doesn't. I think North Star was just saying it's no surprise that the water is not clean or very pretty, so let's focus on other things Galveston has."

Promoters are eager to exploit the town's magnificent architecture and often tragic history to lure tourists, but they are far less keen about other North Star recommendations.

The firm had recommended taking part "in a big way" in the national "Talk Like A Pirate Day" on Sept. 19, an idea at which locals and tourists alike scoffed.

The idea of having local waitresses, bellhops and police officers greeting tourists with an "Aarggh, matey!" had tourists Dustin and Katrina Thornton of Huntsville laughing out loud.

"I think that would be kind of dumb," Dustin Thornton said.

"Yeah, I think that would scare people away," Katrina Thornton added.

And secretary Sharon Conley said she doubted her boss would go along with her talking like a pirate all day, although she gamely said the idea was "interesting and surely something different."

Brown said that talking like pirates for a day was probably one of those recommendations where town officials would end up smiling and turning the page. Ditto the proposal to build a huge "pirate's sandbox" in Houston filled with Galveston sand, a pirate's ship and planks to walk.

"They kept mentioning pirates," Brown said. "I think they went a little overboard on the pirates."

One recommendation that city officials rejected immediately was to change the city's name. The proposal to rename it the "City of Galveston Island" provoked such hostility that Mayor Lyda Ann Thomas felt the need to reassure residents that no such change was imminent.

But officials with the parks board and visitors bureau are still hoping the North Star report can be "something that the community gradually embraces." Brown said.

Brown and others insist that the study, the first in 15 years, is well worth the money if it helps them learn about the island's 6 million annual visitors.

North Star says that 72 percent of Galveston's visitors come from Houston, just 40 miles up the interstate. Next is Dallas with 6 percent. In fact, of the Top 10 areas from which Galveston's visitors come, Chicago and Lake Charles, La., are the only ones outside Texas.

Brown said the new promotional campaign, which she expects to begin in March, would focus both on Texans and on other potential visitors in cities with direct flights to Houston.

"Tourism is huge here," Brown said. "Galveston depends very heavily on tourism. It's a tourist town."