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A Dozen Ways to Enjoy Two Days in Galveston

By Suzanne Stavinoha

Even a short visit can be long on food, fun, and fascinating history on Galveston Island. Whether a pre-cruise adventure or a weekend away, 48 hours in Galveston is a good time well spent.

A few months ago, we found out some friends from Dallas were going to take a Royal Caribbean cruise out of Galveston, about 45 minutes south of where we live in Houston. We hadn't seen them in a while, so I suggested we meet on the island for 48 hours of fun before their ship sailed. They loved the idea, so we marked the calendar.

FRIDAY

The appointed day dawned and my husband and I headed south, enjoying the early-spring warmth and sunshine. While we usually like to stay in one of the many Victorian-style bed-and-breakfasts in the city, for this trip I chose the elegant Tremont House. A grand hotel with a colorful history, it's not only convenient to everything in the downtown area, it's just a five-minute walk from the cruise terminal.

We met up with our friends just in time for lunch. Fresh breezes off the water had us hungry for seafood, so we headed to the Black Pearl Oyster Bar and ordered a dozen oysters, a heap of Cajun-boiled shrimp, and four bowls of seafood gumbo.

With full bellies, we strolled over to Postoffice (sic) Street to peruse through several of the 19th-century warehouse buildings that have been turned into art galleries and antiques shops. We capped the afternoon with a tour of The Grand 1894 Opera House, where Mae West, the Marx Brothers, and Douglas Fairbanks performed. Thanks to a meticulous restoration that started in 1974, The Grand is once again an opulent performing arts venue.

Back at the hotel, the concierge suggested we grab a quick burger and craft beer at Brews Brothers before meeting our guide for the evening—Dash Beardsley, originator of Ghost Tours of Galveston.

I'm not usually a fan of "spooky," but there were families with children joining the tour, so I couldn't chicken out. Thankfully, it wasn't *that* scary, and it turned out to be a great way to learn about the history of The Strand – Downtown Galveston's main thoroughfare -- and the prominence of the island in the late 1800s, when it was the country's second busiest port, surpassed only by New York City.

We ended the evening on the rooftop patio of The Tremont House. From there, we had a panoramic view of the city, from the boats in the harbor across to Stewart Beach, where we could see the colorfully lit Ferris wheel on the Historic Pleasure Pier.

SATURDAY

Ready for a busy day, we started it off with brunch at Sunflower Bakery & Cafe. A carafe of mimosas helped us bide the time while waiting for our food. I ordered (as I always do) the Jumbo Lump Crab and Eggs, a sort of Benedict-style concoction made with mounds of fresh crab on an English muffin, topped with poached eggs and hollandaise sauce.

After breakfast, I took out the map I'd downloaded from the East End Historical District Association's website and used it to plot a walking tour of the district's late 19th- and early 20th-century architecture, including the exquisite Bishop's Palace. Completed in 1892, the Palace is listed as one of the 100 most significant buildings in the United States by the American Institute of Architects.

The walk was lovely, but we were ready to relax, and that meant the beach. We drove over to Galveston Island State Park, where the men went kayak fishing in the salt marshes around the bay while we girls took the beach chairs and settled down under the sun.

That night, we walked along the Seawall – built after the 1900 hurricane that nearly destroyed the city – and passed by Gaido's, the “fancy” restaurant my dad used to take us in the 1960s that is still wonderful. Turning up on 39th Street, we ended up at Shrimp 'N Stuff, a casual seafood joint famous with the locals.

SUNDAY

Wanting to fit in as many attractions as possible before our friends had to board their ship, the guys went to the *Ocean Star* Offshore Drilling Rig and Museum while my friend and I took the BayWatch Dolphin Tour. Our captain was able to tell us about the history of the harbor, and as soon as we saw the dolphins, he got us close enough for some great photos.

After our tours, we met at the Texas Seaport Museum and walked the decks of the 1877 Tall Ship *Elissa*, then went for a “bon voyage” lunch. I suggested a favorite of mine, Nonno Tony's World Kitchen, a harborside restaurant that serves Asian/Creole/American fusion dishes with an Italian accent. It sounds crazy, but it's crazy delicious!

My husband and I waved goodbye to our friends and headed for home. On our way out of town along Interstate 45 North, we could see Moody Gardens and the Schlitterbahn Galveston Island Waterpark, both great destinations for kids. We made a note to bring our nieces down for a visit when they came in early summer.

Fun Fact

With its mid-point location between the East and West Coasts, plus its excellent access to the Gulf of Mexico, Galveston has become a favored port for several major cruise lines, including Carnival, Princess, Royal Caribbean, Disney and Norwegian. While the ships from Galveston offer several itineraries that sail throughout the Caribbean, passengers can also board here for month-long trips to Spain, Italy, Greece and more.

#ThingsToDo

Since Galveston has a temperate climate throughout the year, wintertime can be a wonderful season to visit—especially in December. That's when The Historic Strand District becomes a stage for "ghosts of Christmas past" during the Dickens on The Strand Festival. Mingle with dozens of entertainers dressed in Victorian-era costumes – including Ebenezer Scrooge, Tiny Tim, and other Dickensian characters -- as you sing with strolling carolers, sample holiday food and drink from street vendors, marvel at a lantern-lit parade, and cheer on your favorites in the Victorian Bed Race.