Pier Review

Galveston primes to party—on its rejuvenated, retro-savvy Pleasure Pier!

| By Evan Winstead |

Galveston Island’s Pleasure Pier—originally built in 1943, it housed entertainment like outdoor movie screenings and acrobatic daisy shows—was once the largest of its kind. After Hurricane Carla washed away the pier’s amusements in 1961, the famous Flagship Hotel took up residence upon the structure. But 2008’s Hurricane Ike damaged it beyond repair.

Now, just in time for summer, Pleasure Pier is coming to life again. After purchasing the site in 2004, Landry’s restaurant mogul Tilman Fertitta has rechristened it as a retro-cool amusement park, which is set open later this month. “After a hurricane, Galveston always wants to do something big that says, ‘We’re back,’” says Jonathan Greene, project manager for the $60 million Historic Pleasure Pier. It’s estimated the project will bring upwards of 700 jobs to the island.

The pier, which sits on Seawall Boulevard at 25th Street, boasts 16 rides and four concession areas, plus Texas’ first Bobba Gump restaurant. “Santa Monica Pier and Navy Pier in Chicago are comparable,” says Greene, “but the difference is we put all of our bigger rides out over the ocean.”

Pleasure Pier houses familiar colorful carnival rides—think bumper cars and a 100-foot-tall Ferris wheel. Larger rides include the Iron Shark roller coaster, which has a 90-foot vertical lift—passengers backs are parallel with the ground, rocket ship-style—and subsequent drop. The track extends off the side of the pier so riders feel as if they’re being flung into the Gulf. “You kind of lose sight where the ground is on these rides,” says Landry’s Regional Director Mark Kane of the illusion created by the pier’s position 30 feet above the water. “You feel like you’re much higher than you are.”

But the biggest attraction might be the Texas Star Flyer. The state’s tallest swing ride rotates pairs of riders sitting in chair-like swings and provides panoramic views of the Island from 230 feet up. Nearby, there’s a projection TV and a trailer smoker serving turkey legs and barbecue. Lately, the question I get most isn’t about the pier or the rides. It’s ‘How big is the TV?’” laughs Greene. It’s 14 feet by 8 feet, for the record.

But what if another hurricane hits? Greene says he isn’t worried. Each ride has its own foundation and poles that extend 30 feet into the ocean floor, enabling it withstand 135 mph winds in three-second gusts. “We thought, ‘We know what we’re up against,’” he says. “Let’s design this to take a beating.”

Beach Buzz!

Galveston is gearing up for summer! Watch as 50 teams of artists and engineers build sandcastles during the 26th annual sandcastle competition (iaasandcastle.com) on Stewart Beach June 2. The cruise biz is booming: Fam-friendly Disney Magic first arrives in September and will sail around the Western Caribbean, while Princess Cruises’ mammoth Crown Princess ship starts similar service in December. The hotel at Moody Gardens (moodygardens.com) is getting a $20 million remodel! All common areas—fitness center, restaurant, lobby—and the 400 guest rooms will get a complete face-lift. Meanwhile, Moody’s summer concert series at Palisade Beach on weekend evenings think local Zydeco groups and Jimmy Buffet covers.”