



The Don CeSar Hotel separates the crowded, touristy beaches running up to Clearwater from the homey community of Pass-a-Grille.

FLORIDA'S HIDDEN BEACH

Less than an hour from Tampa, Pass-a-Grille has attracted the likes of F. Scott Fitzgerald and Al Capone. Locals claim it has the same end-of-the-line feeling as Key West.

BY MARK INGEBRETSSEN
Photography by Dean Dixon



*Small town,
cosmopolitan
Pass-a-Grille
lies minutes
from Fort
DeSoto Park's
secluded
beaches.*

Built during the late Jazz Age to look like an *Arabian Nights* fantasy, the Don CeSar was an outrageously pink wedding cake of a palace with ice-cream cone turrets, Moorish archways and legions of dotting minions to serve drinks by the hotel's pool. The Don CeSar loomed like a mirage over the dunes and tall sea grasses of Florida's Gulf Coast. Even today, well-traveled people know about the Don, the way they know about Paris' George V or Singapore's Raffles Hotel. But few realize that just past the grand old Florida hotel lies a tiny enclave of wealthy eccentrics, artists, jaded beachcombers and retirees in a place called Pass-a-Grille.

Set off by itself at the extreme southern tip of Long Key, a barrier island off St. Petersburg, Pass-a-Grille is an anomaly in Florida—a small

town preserving its unique identity in the shadow of world-famous beach communities. "It's like Key West was 10 years ago," says Nancy Markoe, a potter who came to Pass-a-Grille to open a crafts gallery.

Just 35 blocks long and—depending on where you are—one to three blocks wide, Pass-a-Grille is heavy on restored cottages and sea shanties complete with kitschy shell collections on the front lawn. Somehow these simple structures coexist perfectly next door to homes in the \$1 million-plus range that look like they belong in Malibu. Maybe that's because the cottages themselves can run \$185,000 and up, and, if they're planted on Pass-a-Grille's southern fringe, they form part of a roughly 20-square-block National Historic District.

Like other tiny hamlets across America, Pass-a-Grille boasts a block-long downtown with a



couple of eating spots and stores and a church nearby. The most happening place usually is the post office, where vacationers buy stamps.

Alleyways intersperse with Pass-a-Grille's streets, forming delightful walkways beneath tall rustling palms. An ornamental concrete seawall, resembling something you'd see in a Mexican port city, marks the island's eastern rim where it overlooks a wide lagoon and the Mediterranean-flavored mansions on neighbor island Tierra Verde. Near the end of the day, the setting sun gives a warm glow to the homes' pastel stucco walls. This is the time when fishing enthusiasts gather at the seawall, joined by pelicans in search of a handout.

Up the beach from Pass-a-Grille the scenery changes radically. Long Key and the other barrier islands form an unbroken chain that

Top left: Fort DeSoto Park boasts some of Florida's most glorious and most under-used beaches. This island paradise lies about 15 minutes south of Pass-a-Grille.

Below: Nancy Markoe experimented with living in Woodstock, New York and other artistic communities before finding a home in Pass-a-Grille.



extends 20 miles—give or take—north to Clearwater. High-rise hotels line much of the beach, and traffic surges up and down busy Gulf Boulevard. This is the all-American Florida west coast, a powerful draw for families and snowbirds, where restaurants advertise early-bird and senior dinner specials and goofy golf courses could be considered an art form.

But at Pass-a-Grille only one hotel rises more than nine stories—the pink-walled Don CeSar. Locals believe it stands guard over the community's northern perimeter. "When you pass the Don CeSar, you know you're in an entirely different world," says Frank Hurley, a real estate broker and local amateur historian who's lived in Pass-a-Grille for 50 years. "It's a very end-of-the-line feeling," he says, "like in Key West."

Left: Pelicans provide part of the entertainment on the seawall along Pass-a-Grille Way. They often compete with anglers for fish and protest if the humans hook one of the bird's prey. Locals and visitors especially like to promenade along this main strolling street at twilight.



A WORLDLY WEEKEND RETREAT

Being an end-of-the-line kind of place has made Pass-a-Grille a gathering spot for an incongruous mix of personalities ranging from artisans and writers to European vacationers.

"At 35 blocks long and one block wide, everyone here lives on the edge," says Markoe.

The ambience also has drawn the very wealthy. In the '20s, Thomas Watson, who worked with Alexander Graham Bell creating the phone ("Watson, come quickly"), spent his retirement in Pass-a-Grille painting.

Sir Charles Ross, a roguish English baronet who helped invent the submachine gun, went native in Pass-a-Grille, parading around in pajamas, quaffing, fighting and generally making a nuisance of himself.

The more discreet Busch (as in beer) family have spent their winters in a sun-bleached waterfront compound, now on the market for \$1.5 million.

Over the years, the rich and those rich in character

have formed an amiable alliance, the kind you'd find in Colorado ski towns like Telluride or in Key West. "What links us together is this love for the Grille," explains Markoe, who lived in Woodstock, New York while it was a counter-culture center. "The place draws 'triangle' people," she says, "as opposed to squares. People who choose to live an unpretentious lifestyle."

Maybe that's because, unlike Telluride and Key West, Pass-a-Grille has so far remained benignly anonymous, which suits both visitors and residents. There are several galleries along main drag Pass-a-Grille Way and some fancy boutiques inside the Don CeSar, but as yet not nearly enough trendiness to turn the place into a Gulf Coast Sausalito. At last look not a single espresso bar could be found.

THE HURRICANE AT SUNSET

What you do have is a lot of attitude about this beach village. "This is paradise," says Markoe. "There are so few places like this. You know,

the kind of places where you drive around and immediately feel at home."

"Don't tell too many people about Pass-a-Grille," begged Rick Powell, insisting that the beach is one of the prettiest he's seen anywhere in the world. Record producer Powell and his wife, like a lot of people from Tampa, make the drive across the causeway bridge and use Pass-a-Grille as their weekend retreat.

They are joined by business executives visiting the Tampa Bay area who decide to keep the rental car a couple extra days. Add to these Pass-a-Grille aficionados, winter snowbirds and Europeans, who pack the B&Bs and claim the shore enclave reminds them of places along the Med.

Wherever you're from, it's easy to settle in and gear down in sync with the local lifestyle—and to feel you're part of what's going on. Take breakfast on the outside veranda of the Sea Horse Café, and the waitress is likely to tell you about some onerous new parking ordinance.

When anglers, contractors and other locals mingle with vacationers at the dockside Wharf lounge to watch a game on TV, the hot topic of conversation is liable to be the color that family from Cleveland painted their new beach house. The retired members of the shuffleboard club play at the city park while on the beach sun-starved Canadian, British and German tourists stretch out by the gently swaying sea grasses.

Just before sunset, people migrate toward the terrace at the Hurricane, a four-story restaurant overlooking the Gulf at the fringe of the block-long downtown. If all goes well, a crown of glowing clouds rings the sun as it descends into the fiery bright sea. It's OK to say ah.

SOME ENCHANTED ISLAND

Not that you have to be totally laid-back. For an artistic excursion befitting Pass-a-Grille's high-brow demeanor, try the Salvadore Dali Museum, a half-hour away in St. Pete proper, with a large collection of Dali paintings tucked in beside a marina and the municipal airport. Dali would be pleased by the irony.

Something more active? Parasailing and jet

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"The rich and those rich in character have formed an amiable alliance. What links us is this love for the Grille."

When people need a break from relaxing on their beach chairs at Pass-a-Grille, they normally opt for strolling or power walking along the sand. Beyond the Don CeSar, which guards the entrance to the little-known community, lie high-rises and other typical testaments to Florida development.

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ski rental places line the beach. Bike riding's popular. If you're adventurous, sail a catamaran or paddle a kayak to nearby deserted Shell Key. Then there's power walking along the beach. Nearly everyone does it. Amid the continual rushing sound of the waves, you hear snatches of conversation in French, German,



Part of Pass-a-Grille's charm comes from the contrast of its cottage homes and mansions with mature gardens situated a Frisbee's throw from the packed beaches of St. Petersburg.

Spanish, Japanese and clipped Queen's English.

Now think beach with a capital B, the endless deserted kind of shoreline framed by palm trees, with near-transparent tide pools, lulling, gentle waves and baby blue swells—a beach you'd normally only see in Caribbean brochures. You'll find this island paradise an easy 15-minute drive southeast of Pass-a-Grille at Fort DeSoto Park.

Oddly, the area never seems crowded, despite its beauty. This wildlife refuge hangs out in the bay like a fragile anchor and contains a ruddy old fort built during the Spanish-American War. But Fort DeSoto's real attractions are its mangrove forests. The trees rise from the shallow lagoon waters on the island's leeward side, gnarled and mysterious. The watery forests protect shy, elusive manatees.

GRILLING FISH

Centuries back, all of Pass-a-Grille and its environs looked just as natural, but in that period before city pest control, it was a place ravaged by mosquitoes, rattlesnakes and alligators, the

desolate domain of the Timucuan Indians.

Slave ships, smugglers and pirates called on the islands during the 1700s. Earning an honest living, Spaniards came from Havana and built fishing camps on the beach—which inadvertently gave Pass-a-Grille its name. As the story goes, an early Cajun settler called the place *passe aux grilleurs*, which translates as passage-way of the grillers, referring to the Spaniards who spent their nights on the mosquito-infested beach smoking fish and no doubt dreaming of being back in Havana. The patois pronunciation eventually was anglicized.

The first tourist boom, of sorts, took place in 1857 when a local character named John Gomez ferried visitors from Tampa on his schooner so they could sample what was possibly Ponce de Leon's Fountain of Youth. Gomez, who claimed he was 122, entertained his guests en route with stories of the infamous pirate José Gaspar, better known as Gasparilla. By all accounts, Gasparilla was a figment of Gomez's imagination. But the chambers of commerce in both St. Pete and Tampa hold Gasparilla Days each February, which depict the scurrilous pirate's alleged capture of the cities.

INEFFABLY INTRIGUING

By 1907 Pass-a-Grille possessed three hotels, launching its golden age. Excursion

boats ferried visitors in from Tampa. Then, in 1928, the Don CeSar opened its doors, and a with-it crowd of flappers began migrating down to party next to the white sands.

The Don began business during the Jazz Age's last hurrah, a latecomer to an era of big money, gushing champagne bottles and endless dancing. While rum runners were topping off their tanks at nearby Pass-a-Grille docks, the Don CeSar ballroom drew New York social scions: the Gimbels and Bloomingdales and their peers, plus the likes of Clarence Darrow and Al Capone. F. Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald camped out at the Don for several weeks.

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Pass-a-Grille was named for Spanish fishermen who grilled their catch of the day on the beach.

