

Fountain of youth

Hip places outnumber hip replacements in St. Pete's

ANDREA SACHS, The Washington Post

If God sticks around St. Petersburg, he's going to be waiting a while. The Florida town once known as the last exit before the pearly gates is looking more youthful these days, thanks to an influx of younger people taking their place alongside the more senior residents. Indeed, in certain circles, white-blond is the new gray; "hip" has nothing to do with replacement surgery; and "social" now refers to partying, not a security check.

"It's been a huge change," said Tim Ganley, the energetic 40-year-old who runs a gym in town. "It's not like you're seeing only old people walking around anymore." (The 1985 movie "Cocoon," about seniors reinvigorated by alien pods, was filmed in St. Petersburg.)

What you will notice around the Gulf Coast town, depending on the hour and the area, are sinewy cyclists, in-line skaters and runners; punk rockers and avant-garde artists; and post-grads on permanent spring break. And while the elders haven't outright disappeared -- just go to the supermarket to witness a parade of Caddies -- the younger generations are certainly staking a claim on St. Petersburg.

As he took me on a quick tour of the city by car -- before picking up a mountain bike for a ride along Tampa Bay -- Ganley said that a few years ago, "we'd be doing 20 miles per hour, because we'd be behind someone going under the speed limit."

The speedometer showed he was doing 30.





St. Petersburg's shift from elderly to young gained ground in the 1990s, when large corporations such as Raytheon moved to town, bringing newly minted engineers, computer hotshots and financial whizzes.

Low real-estate prices drew babies of the '70s and '80s who renovated and expanded bungalows once inhabited by retirees. Coinciding with this boom was a citywide cleanup that pulled down crack dens, patched up sidewalks and improved the quality of life for those who still get carded at bars. While some seedy sections along Central Avenue remain in dire need of a paint job and respectable tenants, an inviting downtown is buzzing with art galleries, outdoor cafes and shops.

"The focus was on 'What do young people need?' " Mayor Rick Baker, 50, said in a phone interview. "We are building the largest bike path system in the Southeast, and we built two skateboard parks and a lot of dog parks where people can exercise and socialize."

Between 1970 and 1990, St. Pete's average age dropped more than 10 years, from over 50 to under

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40, according to city statistics. Today, the average age of the city's quarter-million residents is 39, only two years older than the eternally youthful Miami. (As seniors leave, their numbers are not being replenished because of new retirement migration patterns across Florida and the Southeast.)

Shuffling its image

"On Friday nights," says Christine Page, 36, a volunteer at the St. Petersburg Shuffleboard Club, "I'm one of the older people."

Page, apple-cheeked and dressed in jeans and a fleece, was working the late shift at the club, a 65-court lighted venue that is the world's largest. Banish the image of shuffleboard with wrinkled players pushing disks across a cruise ship deck or retirement rec center.

About a year and a half ago, the 83-year-old club started the St. Pete Shuffle -- free play to rockin' music every Friday night until 11 -- in an effort to inject young blood into the sport. No self-styled ironist can resist a retro activity set to a soundtrack of such indie darlings as Death Cab for Cutie and the Decemberists. Typically, 150 people show up for the event, but because of a cold spell (in Florida, 50 degrees equals Arctic freeze), only two couples and Page were playing. The next day, though, the courts were jamming.

Each year, the club holds an "I Love St. Pete" fete, which celebrates homegrown talent with an art exhibit, band performances on the Main Court and a community cocktail party. I was playing doubles with Page, 35-year-old Chris Fellerhoff and a 26-year-old from Washington. A bench used by fatigued shufflers by day now held our beers. At my left was the band Auditorium.

I don't know about the little-old-lady version of the game, but the new generation plays with the ferocity of dirty croquet competitors. More than once, my opponents blasted my puck out of the score zone and skittering close to the lead singer's leg.

Perhaps I could blame my abominable shooting on the band, whose garage sound was sometimes startling. Or maybe I should admit that this game requires a set of skills that I don't possess.

Cocktails and tattoos

Where can you get a cocktail around here? So many places -- unlike a few years ago, when residents say you had to drive over the bridge to Tampa for night life. Today you can find a drink for every mood. Bella Brava concocts a tangy raspberry mojito in a pint glass. BayWalk, an outdoor mall a few blocks from the water, handles the sports bar, hip-hop and post-shopping crowd. There are posh wine bars, \$1 sangria nights at the Salvador Dali Museum and punk dives so dark you need night vision glasses to avoid getting poked in the eye by a mohawk.

These worlds collide at the Globe Coffee Lounge, a corner hangout filled with board games, local artwork (and artists) and spruced-up Dumpster furnishings. The clientele on a Friday night had tattoos on their arms and iPod buds in their ears.

For those without body art, Darla Nunnery was there to decorate. The long-haired 28-year-old artist was at a round table, her henna paraphernalia laid out with a surgeon's care. For \$5 to \$25, she'd paint a design on your hand, leg, even pregnant belly. I choose a spot on my forearm. As she painted the mix of Pakistani powder and grapefruit juice from her mother's garden onto my skin, she explained her technique.

"I just sit here and go with the flow," she said, taking a quick call from her mother between paintbrush dabs. "I'll pull a design out."

What materialized was an intricate paisley shape that bloomed like an exotic flower, its tendrils stretching toward my palm. Nunnery doused my arm with lemon juice, then bandaged it up to prevent smudging. She explained that the henna would flake off and the design would darken with time.

Yoga on the beach

Though the city's beaches tempt with their soft white sand, I figured I could veg out when I'm too old to do anything but. Moreover, I was curious about trying KaYoga.

Tim Ganley created this activity as a way to combine exercise and nature: For \$40, participants kayak

to a remote island off St. Pete, do yoga on the beach, then hop in the kayak for a strong finish.

Our party of four put in at Tierra Verde, a busy waterfront community a few miles south of St. Petersburg. We entered an idyllic sanctuary of bays and barrier islands. The paddling was easy.

We grounded our boats at Shell Island, a finger of state parkland quiet except for the faint twitter of birds. I laid out my towel-cum-yoga-mat near the shoreline.

Ganley started us off with some simple stretches.

"Look left," he instructed. A pair of pelicans.

"Look right." The cityscape of St. Pete Beach.

"Look up." Blue sky, with a scattering of puffy clouds.

"Look down." Hey, I found an unbroken sand dollar.

After an hour of torquing, twisting and posing, Ganley told us to get into the corpse position. Lying on my back, with the setting sun casting waning rays on my face, I saw there is a fine line between this yoga move and sunbathing.

We stayed silent until I got the feeling that the group had crept off and paddled away, leaving me stranded on the beach. I sneaked a peek through half-shut eyes and saw Ganley perfectly still. He snapped alert, ready to lead us back to St. Petersburg.

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