

Climate, friendly businesses make Delaware beaches a year-round destination

by Ryan Marshall, The (Wilmington, Del.) News Journal

Published 7:18 p.m. ET March 6, 2017 | Updated 5:07 p.m. ET March 8, 2017



(Photo: Staff photo by Megan Raymond)

REHOBOTH BEACH, Del. — It's 62 degrees (/story/news/local/delaware/2017/03/04/delaware-beaches-tourist-seasons/98495150/) and the sun is shining bright. Parking spots are impossible to find on Rehoboth Avenue or side streets.

Restaurants are slammed. Beachgoers crowd the boardwalk benches, many licking ice cream cones.

And it's Feb. 20, Presidents Day.

Innovative business owners, a warming climate and an aggressive marketing plan are quickly making Delaware beaches a year-round destination.

"I can't believe how much more popular it's become in the (past) five years," said Peter Devlin, a school teacher like his spouse Janet. They own a home near the Rehoboth Beach shopping outlets. Janet noted that the couple from Staten Island made their first trip to Delaware 12 years ago — driving past their usual haunt at Wildwood, along the Jersey Shore.

They haven't been back to Jersey, Janet said, partly because food there "stinks."

[Cyclists on a collision course with Rehoboth Beach](http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation-now/2016/06/26/cyclists-collision-course-rehoboth-beach/86415666/)
(<http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation-now/2016/06/26/cyclists-collision-course-rehoboth-beach/86415666/>)

[By the numbers, Delaware beach towns are bustling](http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation-now/2016/07/03/numbers-delaware-beach-towns-bustling/86660706/)
(<http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation-now/2016/07/03/numbers-delaware-beach-towns-bustling/86660706/>)

Delaware's quest for this year-round acclimation began in 1989, when the Rehoboth Beach-Dewey Beach Chamber of Commerce hired Carol Everhart to create an event to extend the beach season into late fall. Everhart came up with the Sea Witch Festival, which brought 5,000 people to the shore that first Halloween.

Everhart deemed the inaugural event a failure. But Sea Witch now brings 200,000 visitors to Delaware's beaches each fall, and it's augmented with festivals focused on chocolate, sandcastles and gumbo. Then there are six events annually featuring dogs.

Restaurants are now jammed on weekday nights in January, with diners being a mix of locals and out-of-towners. Hotels are teeming with families angling for weekend-themed events. And shops are increasingly keeping their doors open, rather than boarding up for winter.

Matt's Fish Camp in Bethany Beach had 40 employees on payroll this February.

"Five years ago that would have been ludicrous," said Scott Kammerer, president of SoDel Concepts, which operates 10 coastal restaurants, a food truck and a catering company. The company's sales rose 40 percent in February, following the busiest January ever, Kammerer said. Last June, SoDel opened a new Matt's Fish Camp in Lewes.

"It's not 25 years of renaissance," said Chip Hearn, owner of The Ice Cream Store on Rehoboth Avenue since 1970. "It's 25 years straight of renaissance.

"You've got every kind of food imaginable done extraordinarily well right here in Rehoboth, Dewey, Lewes and the Bethany area," Hearn said. "I'll put it against anybody, and I go all over the country doing shows."



Inside of the Dogfish Head Brewings and Eats located in Rehoboth Beach, De. (Photo: Staff Photo by Megan Raymond)

When Dogfish Head opened on Rehoboth Beach in 1996, 80 percent of the businesses closed after the season. Now, 80 percent are open year-round in some type of variation like Thursday to Sunday a few weeks out of the year, Everhart said.

Twenty-one years ago, Dogfish Head founder Sam Calagione notes, his business "was the smallest commercial brewery in America, and people thought we were insane when we announced that we were going to be open year-round."

Today, Dogfish Head is one of the nation's 25 largest craft brewers out of more than 6,000. The company operates a production brewery in Milton, a seafood restaurant-brewpub in Rehoboth Beach, which it is renovating and expanding, and a beer-themed inn in Lewes. Dogfish employs more than 250 workers and produces more than 260,000 barrels of beer per year.

Calagione agrees that the dining scene at the Delaware beaches is a big draw. But he points to one thing that has not changed since Sea Witch was conceived — the natural beauty of the coastline and Rehoboth's iconic boardwalk.

"It's made coastal Delaware not just a tourist destination," he said, "but a relocation destination."

Warming weather

Like the planet as a whole, Delaware is getting warmer. Over the last half century in Lewes, the average winter temperature has gone up 3 degrees, the growing season is longer and the number of days below freezing has declined by almost half, according to a study by the Office of the Delaware State Climatologist completed in 2010.

"Lewes has quite a few more mild winter nights now than it used to back in the mid-20th century," said Kevin Brinson, associate state climatologist and director of the Delaware Environmental Observing System.

And experts predict Delaware's weather will only get warmer.

Delaware officials hired Katharine Hayhoe, an atmospheric scientist and director of the Climate Science Center at Texas Tech University, to project future climate trends. Hayhoe, working with state Climatologist Daniel Leathers, projected temperatures will increase another 1.5 to 2 degrees. By mid-century, temperatures will rise 2.5 to 4.5 degrees. And by century's end temperatures are expected to rise somewhere between 3.5 and 9.5 degrees.



Rehoboth Beach, De. boardwalk Monday, Feb. 20, 2017. (Photo: Staff Photo by Megan Raymond)

That would put a typical winter day at Rehoboth Beach in the mid-50s during January and February, rather than the mid-40s of today.

Warmer temperatures have a downside, though. For low-lying states like Delaware, the implications are significant. Delaware has already spent millions of dollars to pump sand from the shoals offshore back onto beaches — sand that's lost with each passing storm. The federal government has contributed millions more with major, ongoing sand restoration and repair projects from Broadkill Beach along Delaware Bay south to Wallops Island in Virginia.

Rehoboth loses a foot or two of sand each year — and Rehoboth is slightly higher than the rest of Delaware's coast, positioned as it is on a headland. But along the billion-dollar boardwalk, with the giant, neon orange sign advertising Dolle's popcorn and saltwater taffy, the risk is real.

The other problem is that as the ocean off the Mid-Atlantic coast warms, storms could get stronger. The biggest hurricanes Delawareans typically experience are category 1, with winds of 74 to 95 miles per hour and a storm surge of 4 to 5 feet. That means storm surge as we know it would be even higher as sea level rises and if storms become more powerful.

With every big storm, Delaware's governor and congressional delegation push for new federal funding for so-called beach renourishment projects. But the administration of President Donald Trump has yet to weigh in on whether it will support ongoing efforts to dredge sand offshore of America's beaches, then pump it onshore and smooth it to perfection.

When the sun's shining and the beaches are manicured, visitors come.

"Unless we have a bad weather situation, they (tourists) are here," Everhart said.

In 2010, the chamber estimated 6,998,700 visitors came to the Coastal Highway, Rehoboth downtown and Dewey Beach area. By 2015, the number jumped to nearly 8 million. As 2016 calculations roll in, Everhart expects even more growth ahead.



Taylor and Colin Zreet of, Dallas, Texas, talk about planning their vacation to the area on Friday, Feb. 17, 2017. (Photo: Staff photo by Megan Raymond)

When they arrived at Lewes in mid-February from Dallas, where their hometown has been heating up year-round, Colin and Taylor Zreet were hoping for cooler weather. The millennials planned their one-year anniversary trip around their shared love of craft beer, and Dogfish Head was a big draw, they said, as they sat next to a crackling fire at the Dogfish Inn on another 60-degree day in late February.

It was the couple's first time visiting the Delaware coast, and in just a few days the quiet beaches, outdoor activities and dining made an impression.

"We don't really get good seafood in north Texas," Taylor Zreet said. "We're determined to eat seafood for every dinner while we're here."

A community united

If a first-rate dining scene, a warm climate with clean beaches and events like Sea Witch brought tourists from all backgrounds to the Delaware beaches, it was CAMP Rehoboth that unified them in the late 1990s.

Creating A More Positive Rehoboth started in 1991 as an organization that lobbied for the commonality of people whether they are gay, lesbian or straight, according to Executive Director and co-founder Steve Elkins.

CAMP Rehoboth became the resource for outreach in Rehoboth to unite the community and fight for equal rights. After sexual orientation incidents in the early 1990s clouded the city's future toward welcoming the gay and lesbian community, city police and officials told Elkins they were not going to let discrimination stand anymore.

"It became a little more acceptable for two men or two women to walk down the boardwalk holding hands, knowing the police were going to protect them as opposed to harass them," Elkins said.



Rehoboth Beach and the boardwalk was filled during President's Day Weekend thanks to sunshine and warm temperatures. (Photo: Staff Photo by Megan Raymond)

The communities continued to bond together and in 1997, then-Gov. Tom Carper signed hate crimes legislation adding sexual orientation into Delaware law at a ceremony in front of Rehoboth Beach's City Hall.

Businesses in Rehoboth that didn't feel comfortable expressing themselves before the legislation was signed into law were suddenly empowered, Elkins said. Now, Rehoboth Beach is consistently touted as a top LGBT destination whether it is for nightlife, beaches or dining.

"That was really a turning point when the city said, 'We value the LGBT — of course then it was just gay and lesbian — community contributions to our city. It was amazing how many gay and lesbian business owners finally stood up and said, 'You've been coming to my shop forever, and I'm gay or I'm a lesbian. We're friends.'"

Sam Cooper, who is entering his 27th year as Rehoboth Beach mayor, basks in the warm affection his community enjoys. But Cooper has been steadfast in working to keep the city's most important traits the same as they were when he started.

"As somebody who lives here, it's been my home my whole life; I'm keen on keeping it a nice place to live," Cooper said. "I think it can be a good tourist destination, but sometimes those are at odds. You have to be aware of the quality of life for the people that live here, too."

The bustling crowd over Presidents Day Weekend caused Cooper to raise an eyebrow, but he, too, enjoyed the 70-degree day on Feb. 23. He joked with the police chief heading into a meeting, remembering 6 to 8 inches of snow on the ground in previous years.

As Rehoboth grows in popularity and sophistication, Cooper doesn't want Delaware's most famous beach town to become like a quip Yogi Berra once used to describe a favorite restaurant: "Nobody goes there anymore. It's too crowded."

Adds Cooper: "Preserve the small-town charm of the city — that's the key to me."

Calagione believes coastal Delaware towns have found a happy balance between commerce and quality of life.

"I think we're a far way away from saturation in terms of what our community can accommodate," Calagione said. "I live in downtown Lewes with my wife and kids, and we love every season of coastal Delaware. We appreciate that it's a little more chill and less frenetic in the winter.

"I think it will always stay proportional."

Contributing: Molly Murray.

Read or Share this story: <http://usat.ly/2n8oyXo>