FORT LAUDERDALE magazine

DECEMBER 2013

O LITTLE TOWN

LAUDERDALE-BY-THE-SEA GETS A MAKEOVER

HOLIDAY EVENTS

(Lights! Skating! Boat Parade!)

Winter Cruising

GIANT SHIPS ON THE WATER

The Celestial Voices of *SERAPHIC FIRE*

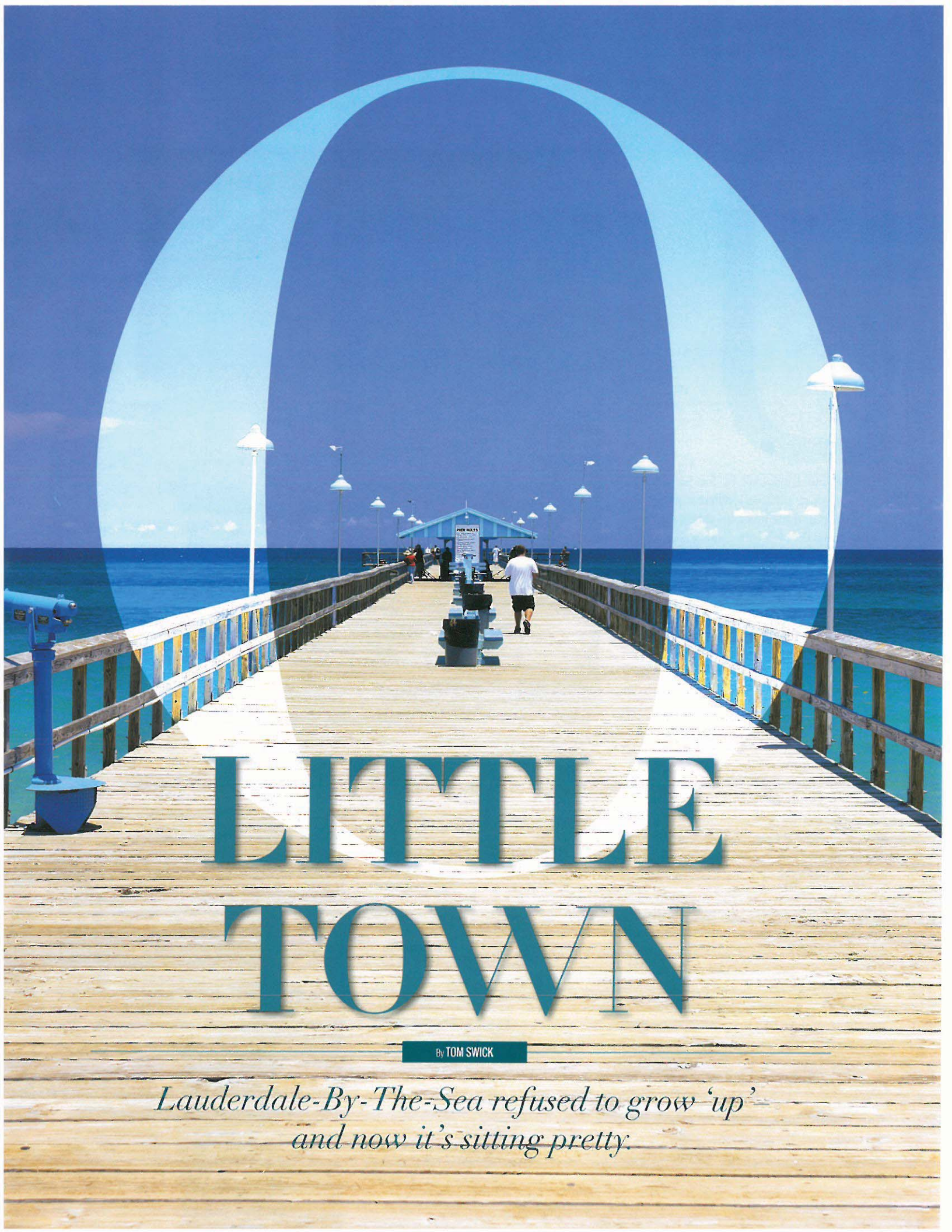
STILL I RISE

Stories of Endurance & Redemption

12

7 93573 20545 2

$3.95 U.S.



LITTLE TOWN

By TOM SWICK

Lauderdale-By-The-Sea refused to grow 'up' and now it's sitting pretty.

D

Driving into Lauderdale-By-The-Sea on A1A you know you're entering a different place: The road narrows and the buildings shrink. But even coming across the bridge on Commercial you get a sense of separation, a feeling of leaving the familiar, workaday world and landing in the salt air and sea light and languid rhythms of a breezy, unreconstructed beach town.

The ocean is right there – in the name. You can see divers shedding their wet suits on A1A. Seniors ride bicycles along El Mar Drive and bare-legged families carry candy-colored Noodles. Souvenir shops brim with sunblock, sunglasses, postcards and T-shirts.

Lauderdale-By-The-Sea is a kind of Rorschach test of seaside towns: Many visitors find in it elements that remind them of past vacation idylls. There's no boardwalk, but Philadelphians can't help but think of the Jersey shore (especially when they eat a hoagie at LaSpada's). Though the water doesn't numb them, New Englanders are nevertheless transported to Cape Cod (particularly when they see the Red Sox flags).

But what distinguishes Lauderdale-By-The-Sea from towns on those coasts – apart from its subtropical climate of course – is that it is no longer part of a pack. Once just another in a long chain of beach towns (albeit one with a pier), it is now an anomaly, as most of its neighbors have grown up to become cities, or at least have taken on urban characteristics (condo towers, luxury hotels, traffic jams). The high-rises on the outskirts are like exclamation marks on the town's gone-fishing feel.

When the building boom came to the Gold Coast in the 1960s, Lauderdale-By-The-Sea chose not to take part. Though in 1965, against some local opposition, the bridge was built connecting it to the mainland. Eight years later the town passed

The high-rises on the outskirts are like exclamation marks on the town's gone-fishing feel.

Top: A fisherman and his sons stop to watch a televised football game while, across Commercial Boulevard, two men take an afternoon stroll. **Bottom:** Surfers walk along El Mar Drive. Photos by Tom Swick.

a referendum limiting buildings to a height of 44 feet. (It inherited high rises in 1999, when it annexed the three Sea Ranch Lakes condos, and got several more two years later when it annexed the Intracoastal Beach Area south of Pompano Beach. These acquisitions extended the town's length from one mile to nearly two and a half, while its half-mile width remained the same.)

Current public information officer Steve d'Oliveira covered the town for the *Sun-Sentinel* in the '80s and remembers how candidates, when asked what they planned to change if voted into office, replied emphatically, one after the other: "Nothing!" The words "status quo" could have been imprinted on the town seal.

This resistance to change, this seeming disdain for progress, was what in the end allowed the town to become the lovable throwback it is today. You can still be called "hun" while eating your sunny side ups at Country Ham N' Eggs, and afterwards you can stroll down Basin Drive and pick up a bag of ginger snaps at The Cookie Shop, where the décor will take you back to your grandmother's kitchen.

Which is not to say the place is frozen in time.

"Guests used to rent TVs from Griffin's TV Rental," Paul Novak recalls.

Novak is sitting in the breezeway of his High Noon Beach Resort, in front of a mural by local artist Donna Whiteside Sallee. Originally from Connecticut (like Sallee), Novak came to Florida in 1961 and took over the then four-year-old hotel. The rooms, in addition to having no TVs, had no air-conditioners.

"The season was Christmas to Easter," Novak says. "The majority of the tourists arrived by car." If they flew, the men would arrive at the airport in suits.

"Rooms were $7 a night in summer," he remembers, "$20-$25 in season – for an efficiency."

The prices have gone up but not the roofs.

"You can come out your door and get right to the beach," says Novak's son Bruce, who with his brother is now involved in the business, "without taking an elevator."

Lauderdale-By-The-Sea is a town of small innkeepers. El Mar Drive, which parallels the beach, is lined with motels ranging from the hacienda-like Blue Seas Courtyard to the midcentury-modern Tides Inn. The Driftwood Beach Club, "a timeshare resort" just down the street, is managed by Ellen Zavell, president of the town's lodging association. The organization was started last year, she says, so that hotel owners "could help each other."

Indeed, in a twenty-minute conversation, Zavell speaks as much about her fellow innkeepers as she does about herself. Cristie Furth at Blue Seas Courtyard, she says, wants to turn El Mar Drive into "the Champs-Élysées of Florida," with cafés and a beautified median. David Gadsby at the Beachside Village Resort is doing more than restoring his midcentury-modern buildings; he is the man, Zavell believes, who "made this town happen." His "Jazz on the Circle every Friday night got people to come down and listen to music. After that," she says, "the town just popped."

Gadsby (great name) put up a huge screen on the square so residents and tourists could watch the Super Bowl in an open-air living room; on New Year's Eve he dropped a ball atop the roof of the Village Grille. The ideas were not new, but they had never been done here, where for so long the ocean and the weather were thought to be enough.

There were a few naysayers; spend a little time in Lauderdale-By-The-Sea and you discover that it can be a divisive place. Though practically everyone has high praise for town manager Connie Hoffmann, who – among other initiatives – invited architecture students from the University of Miami to visit the town and offer ideas for improvement. "Somebody complained that the commission meetings are really boring now," says longtime resident Sunny Eckhardt. "Well," she adds laughing, "they're supposed to be boring."

Civic pride is a glue that binds the residents. "I don't like it when people call it 'Fort-Lauderdale-By-The-Sea,'" says Cindy Geesey, who grew up here. While Eckhardt's only complaint with the town seems to be the length of its name. "Try putting 'Lauderdale-By-The-Sea' on your Christmas cards when you're sending them out."

And there's more to be proud of than just continuity. "Lauderdale-By-The-Sea is very good at fundraising," says Eckhardt. "We get behind people; we're very good about that."

Clockwise from top: The courtyard of the Beachside Village Resort. The Ocean Reverie Apartments decorated for the season. A nautical window at the Driftwood Beach Club.

Geesey started the "Rest, Relaxation & Romance" program, through which military personnel returning from deployments are brought in with their spouses for a three-night stay, all expenses paid. Over the last six years, 36 couples have participated. "You can't do this," Geesey says, "without the generosity of the town."

The couple that came in October stayed at the Beachside Village Resort. From the outside it looks like an undistinguished, if crisply restored, 20th century motel; inside the gate, the muted colors and the tasteful furnishings are reminiscent of South Beach.

Gadsby arrived in Florida from Boston 28 years ago and worked as a bartender and a restaurant owner. A few years ago he bought the closed-up lodging that is now the BVR. He did the redesign himself, planting over 70 palms and getting Sallee to paint his signs. The motel aesthetic – a mix of midcentury modern and New England genteel (imagine the Delano and The Betsy having a baby) – could bring a younger, hipper, wealthier clientele to the island.

Gadsby tells of the New Year's Eve when, due

to a malfunction, the ball at the Village Grille dropped earlier than it should have. "Lauderdale-By-The-Sea," he says, still tickled by the idea, "was four seconds ahead of the world."

Well, at least ahead of the rest of the East Coast – and that included New York and Miami.

Crowds gather for the ball drop on Anglin's Square (aka Pelican Square) and the Water Plaza. This extension of Commercial Boulevard in front of the beach pavilion has been, like the rest of the street in town, part of a major renovation project that began in July and – at this writing – is scheduled to be completed the first week of December. The drainage system has been improved and power lines have been placed underground, a move that qualifies as both practical (in a hurricane region) and cosmetic. Colorful sculptures of marine life will grace the plazas and one of a coral reef will greet people driving in off of the Commercial Boulevard bridge.

"There are going to be wider sidewalks, more outside dining" says Anthony D'Elia, general manager of 101 Ocean, one of the restaurants that has had a months-long, front-row view of the construction. "We're going to have 42 to 50 additional seats outside."

All of the businesses in this area have muddled through a summer and fall of dust and barriers. "People are still coming," says Guy Contrada, senior manager of Aruba Beach Café. "They find a way to get here."

Across the way, Spiro Marchelos sits on the deck of Anglin's Beach Café, the restaurant he owns at the west end of the pier. He is happy with the improvements and would like to see more.

"My concern," he says, "is that there are no public bathrooms. And no lifeguards. People come here from all over the world; many of them don't understand riptides. We get people with jellyfish stings, cuts from the rocks and the coral. We help them. But there should be lifeguards to help them. There are countries in Europe that are struggling financially, but they have lifeguards and public bathrooms."

"It's our Yellowstone geyser," John Boutin says.

He is standing on a balcony of the Windjammer Resort and Beach Club and looking out at the Atlantic Ocean.

Clockwise from top: Looking north on El Mar Drive. A sunday afternoon at Aruba Beach Cafe. A souvenir shop window along Commercial Boulevard.

"Anybody can say they have an Olympic-sized swimming pool. Or tennis courts. I have a live coral reef."

It seems fitting, considering the town's low-key nature, that its stellar attraction lies underwater. Though it's still easier to find than The Cookie Shop.

Lauderdale-By-The-Sea is called the "Shore Dive Capital of Florida" because you can enter the ocean from the beach and swim to a reef. The nearest one is closer to shore than the end of the pier. There is a snorkel trail that was dedicated by Jean-Michel Cousteau in 2002. The reefs are a draw not just for tourists but locals; a number of residents moved to town in part for the diving (also the spear fishing). And, unlike in Fort Lauderdale, there are no lifeguards to discourage them.

Boutin points to two buoys out on the water, just south of the pier. They look different from normal buoys because they're capped by solar panels. Their purpose, Boutin explains, is to send an electric current down to two steel-frame artificial reef structures.

Called Biorock, this method to increase the rate of coral growth is being used around the world by coral reef specialist Dr. Thomas Goreau. He chose Lauderdale-By-The-Sea, Boutin says, because of the relative cleanliness of the water (another benefit of restricted growth).

"We can use this natural resource that we have to attract eco-tours, divers, snorkelers," Boutin says, then adds that on weekends you can already see "hundreds of divers and snorkelers" out in the ocean. He catches them on his beach cam.

Boutin's parents bought the Windjammer in 1978, and he still remembers his first impressions of the town, "the cleanliness, the cars, the bikinis. For a young man from Canada," he says, "it was paradise."

> "It's our Yellowstone geyser," John Boutin says of the coral reef.

Thirty-five years later, he's still enchanted. "We are a little barrier island that is a perfect enclave of residences and businesses – all in an area that's walkable. It's like being in the islands – no big rush, no big pressure." He loves the fact that he can do errands and run into people he knows. He points with pride to the palm trees he planted back in the late '70s between the Windjammer and the beach. He talks passionately about the town, not just its charms but the direction he believes residents like him should take it in.

"My parents did it for me. I want to do it for my children. You don't want to destroy paradise," he says.

Then he heads off to a fundraiser for a seven-year-old girl who suffers from a rare chromosomal disorder.