

St. Pete gaining global fame as hip destination



CHRIS URSO/STAFF

Lorenza Navarro, from left, Caitlin Greene and Nino Araujo enjoy dinner Wednesday along 1st Avenue North. St. Petersburg is shedding its image as a retirement community and becoming a hip destination.

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ST. PETERSBURG —The vibe has changed in this city once mocked as “God’s waiting room,” and the world is taking notice.

“Miami has a rival for the finer things,” read the headline in a travel review last week by the British newspaper, *The Independent*.

St. Petersburg, Fla. — not Russia — made *The New York Times* list of 52 destinations in the world to see in 2014, ranking the city among exotic and famed urban centers such as Dubai and Athens.

A hip craft beer scene, trendy steakhouse in a renovated 1920s-era YWCA and, of course, a world-class collection of Spanish surrealist painter Salvador Dalí’s works were among the top reasons for a visit.

“The Sunshine City” has reinvented its reputation, according to the Times.

Sarah and Raphael Perrier saw it coming. Back in 2008, months after they opened Kahwa Coffee beneath a new condominium, Raphael told The New York Times that Miami and Paris were “done,” but “St. Pete is wide open.”

In the past six years, the couple has witnessed a transformation in a city that once virtually closed by dusk.

Once-empty sidewalks on Beach Drive are filled with foreign tourists dining at outdoor tables and formerly vacant storefronts on Central Avenue house art galleries and vintage home-furnishings dealers.

“To see the change in the whole area, the whole downtown like that, it was really fast,” said Raphael Perrier, who has expanded Kahwa to six locations across the Tampa Bay area.

“I think that it’s going to be pretty amazing in the next 10 years. We’re far from being done.”

Developers agree. In the next year, 1,100 new apartment units will be finished downtown, nearly half of the total 2,900 that have gone up since 2000.

Downtown’s momentum reflects a shift across the United States. Young, college-educated adults are departing the suburbs for once-abandoned urban cores.

Between 2000 and 2009, the number of college-educated adults age 25 to 34 living within three miles of a central business district increased by 26 percent in the nation’s 51 largest metropolitan areas, double the growth rate in outlying areas, according to a 2013 report by the Brookings Institute.

They’re looking for restaurants, shops, cultural and educational institutions and a vibrant street life. They prefer historic urban neighborhoods. They want to walk everywhere they can.

St. Petersburg’s founders laid out many of these favorable amenities a century ago: the wide sidewalks on grid streets, artful Mediterranean revival office buildings and hotels, brick-street neighborhoods skirting downtown, and miles of publicly-owned green parks along the water, free of towering condos.

A migration of younger professionals and entrepreneurs in the past decade, joined with the existing condo-dwelling retirees, has brought back the restaurants and street life.

“We are just reflective of what’s happened in the country where people want to be in a livable downtown,” said St. Petersburg Area Chamber of Commerce President Chris Steinocher.

In the 1920s, droves of people came down from the north to enjoy the warmth and vitality of this buzzing downtown by the water, dubbed in ads as “The Sunshine City.”

The chamber this year is reviving that original sales pitch, looking to bring in more of the same sort of people who first came here.

The warm, sunny weather, active downtown and healthy quality of life make it an easy sell, Steinocher says.

“People who had the money and were successful tended to come down here because they wanted their health,” he said of the first city residents.

“It’s just a continuation of who we really are.”

There’s a reason major media outlets are suddenly paying more attention.

For several years, the county tourism agency Visit St. Pete/Clearwater has been driving home the message to travel writers, broadcasters and TV personalities that the city has shaken off its rep as a haven for the old.

Emeril Lagasse aired a cooking show last winter highlighting the city’s culinary scene, travel journalist Peter Greenberg showed up at The Dalí last summer to film his PBS show, “The Travel Detective.”

When they come, they find the artsy, walkable downtown being advertised actually matches reality, Visit St. Pete/Clearwater director D.T. Minich said.

Blocks that had been empty gaps between the waterfront and the city’s cultural attractions are now filled with boutique shops, restaurants and life.

“We’ve had all these pockets of things but now we’ve got them all tied together,” said Minich.

“Now it’s a single experience.”

Of course, it’s better to have The New York Times saying that, he said.

“It adds credibility to what we’re already saying out there in the marketplace,” Minich said.

One prominent leader in the U.S. travel industry was so impressed by the St. Petersburg experience that he recently relocated here after a thorough look at the rest of coastal Florida.

“There’s a vibrancy going on in St. Pete” said Roger Dow, president of the U.S. Travel Association.

“It seems like there’s something going on every month, whether it be a concert, a festival, the Grand Prix, volleyball.”

Nationally televised events such as the annual Indy Car street race in March have created an increasing awareness of downtown to a larger and larger audience.

What hasn’t been planned by tourism boosters is the blend of locally-owned businesses that populate downtown, offering visitors an experience they can’t get at a TGI Fridays in Orlando.

Visitors and residents both love the Saturday Morning Market with its “glut of cheese, chocolate and organic food stalls,” as The Independent noted.

High on The New York Times’ to-do list was grabbing an Endo ale at Cycle Brewing or enjoying Green Bench Brewing Co.’s sunny beer garden.

While St. Petersburg has always had cultural attractions and natural beauty, it was small business owners who led the way in the downtown revival, said Kimberly Bailey, economic development analyst for the city.

The expected influx of even more people living in the city center this year, with a median income of \$53,000, will surely draw even more retail and activity downtown, possibly offering more services for permanent residents, like dry cleaners or small grocers.

“Downtown continues to evolve,” said Bailey. “We have very creative entrepreneurs that know what that pulse is and they keep it very much alive.”

What makes St. Petersburg stand out the most to those who live here, or those just passing through, is the sense of pride people have in their revived city, Perrier said.

“They’re very proud to be in St. Pete, they’re very proud to create things here,” Perrier said.

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