

The Destin Log

Beautiful views come with the meal It's part of the Beach Walk experience

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Diners are led into the fine-dining experience of Beach Walk Crystal Beach by a downward spiral staircase. The tables are draped in long, beige linens. Cloth napkins are folded decoratively at each setting. The twostory, all-glass back wall opens to a view of the green-blue Gulf of Mexico.

Inside, men and women attired in business suits dine over their \$20 lunch of Chef Tim Creehan's signature tuna or grouper vince.

Then, enter the beachgoers.

Treading down the staircase in bikinis and flip-flops comes the true "beach walk." Children with floaties, parents with coolers and women with scents of tanning oil walk down the stairs through the restaurant. They head out the back door toward the water.

"It's all part of the experience at Beach Walk Crystal Beach," said Creehan, awardwinning chef who's received top honors from critics across the country. "It's what makes us unique and special."

It's a sight that also causes some diners to glance up from their meal and take a second look, especially if the beach walker is a young, bikini-clad woman.

"They definitely take notice," Creehan said. "I've seen communication suddenly stop at a table when one walks by. Or sometimes, the conversation will change direction altogether."

Being a condominium restaurant set up by the only direct entrance to the pool and beach area, it's a situation that can't be avoided.

To avoid the restaurant, guests of The Inn at Crystal Beach on Scenic Hwy. 98 would have to walk out the front door and around the building.

Therefore, this restaurant has a beachytwist like no other in Destin.

And the customers and the "beach walk- ers" don't seem to mind.

"You would think people would be all snooty about it, but they're great," said 18-year-old Afton Peck of Franklin, Ohio, who walked down the stairs at noon the other day dressed in a green bikini carrying her towel and beach mat. "They're like, 'Hey, that's cool. You're on the beach and we're dining.' I definitely can't do this at home."

To return to their room or to take an intermission to the restroom, those in swimsuits tread back through the restaurant and up the steps, leaving wet footprints behind.

"It really doesn't bother us because we'll never see these people again," said Naomi Peck of Middletown, Ohio, who made her way to and from the pool.

Michael and Joan Baldree of Destin, who have enjoyed Creehan's gourmet dishes since 1989, are regular diners at Beach Walk Crystal Beach.

With its quality food and impeccable view of the beach, you won't find a restaurant anywhere that will beat Beach Walk, they said. And the passersby in swimsuits are just part of the ambiance.

“It’s part of Florida,” Joan Baldree said. “It’s part of the casual atmosphere you have here where people don’t wear ties.”

“It gives you a tropical feel,” Michael Baldree added.

The customers actually took to the idea better than Creehan did at first. In 1997, when he was shown the area where he was to start his restaurant, the location wasn’t his ideal.

“I said, ‘This is the only place for people to get to the beach. What are they supposed to do, come through my restaurant in swimsuits carrying umbrellas and rafts?’”

Well, yeah, Creehan was told.

With that in mind, the restaurant started with a more casual atmosphere with glass tabletops and straw caddies on each table. Yet, those customers who were familiar with Creehan’s gourmet dishes from his chef days at the Marina Cafe knew Creehan could do much more.

Therefore, at their requests, the components of a fine-dining restaurant were mixed into the establishment.

In a 16-month period, staff uniforms went from tropical shirts to dressy attire, dinner prices went from \$32 per person to \$55 a person, and the setting became more formal.

Since the transition, it’s not uncommon for a group of men in business suits to dine on the patio next to a table of women who have just returned from sunbathing. Other than at night when sleeved shirts and shoes are required, a dress code is nonexistent.

During the summer season, the restaurant has “beach girls” dressed in luau skirts and bikini tops who serve food and drinks to people on the beach.

“We have people come to this part of the beach just for our beach girls,” said Shannon Smith, the restaurant’s marketing director.

The restaurant also offers “toes in the sand,” a service in which diners are offered a secluded table on the beach near the water’s edge. It’s popular for anniversary or proposal dinners. It’s yet another way Creehan mixes his fine-dining restaurant with the casual atmosphere of the beach.



CHEF CREEHAN: Tim Creehan, chef at Beach Walk Crystal Beach, is an award-winning chef who’s received top honors from critics across the country.



Log photos by KATHY HARRISON DINING WITH A VIEW: Michael and Joan Baldree dine at Beach Walk Crystal Beach with a view of swimsuit-clad condo residents at the pool and beach.



BEACH WALKING: Afton Peck (back left) guides Avery Jacob down the stairs as Bethany Spivey and Rex Jacobs prepare to walk through the restaurant's dining room.