

# Flourescent Wristbands

## *Galveston nine months after Hurricane Ike*

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**T**he weekend before the Memorial Day weekend, my wife and I made our annual pilgrimage to Galveston. This trip has become a sort of family tradition, functioning as an early celebration of my birthday, a way to enjoy the island before the summer crowds arrive, and before the sun is too high in the sky. That last point is important because for some strange reason, I seem to lack the intelligence to get out of the sun before frying myself — another family tradition.

More importantly, this was our first visit to the island since Hurricane Ike. I have to admit there was a bit of the voyeur in me as we made our journey from Houston.

There were many rumors of large boats leaning against houses and debris piles the size of cruise ships still littering neighborhoods. Thankfully, I saw neither of these, and I learned a few things.



For starters, I learned, or should say, re-learned that the power of a hurricane is unspeakable.<sup>1</sup> Twenty-four hours before Hurricane Ike made landfall, Galveston Island<sup>2</sup> began to experience a storm surge that covered escape routes and threatened to isolate many residents who thought they had

<sup>1</sup> We experienced the power of the hurricane in Houston, but not to the severity that was felt on the coast; we were spared from the destructive storm surge.

<sup>2</sup> Galveston Island is roughly 27 miles long and 3 miles at its widest point.

plenty of time to leave. This early flooding turned out to be a harbinger of the trouble that lie ahead; the sea was piling up in front of the storms center,<sup>3</sup> and as Ike made landfall, a ten-to-twelve foot storm surge submerged much of the island and the Bolivar peninsula (just to the north-east of Galveston). On Galveston, structures in front of the massive, 17 foot high seawall were pulverized. On Bolivar, with no seawall for protection, most of the beach houses simply vanished.



A storm damaged beach house on Galveston's West End



A fishing pier on Seawall Blvd smashed by Ike

Nine months after the storm, evidence of the destruction still exists; small piles of debris from remodeling projects and shredded houses with interiors exposed to the world. One beach house on the west end of the island was missing most of its roof and the exterior wall facing the major street. Inside this ghostly structure was the life of a family exposed for all to see, just as it was that fateful day – televisions on tables, beds with linens still intact. After nine months, no one had disturbed or stolen a thing; amidst the despair of this

<sup>3</sup> Ike made landfall as a Category 2 hurricane, with a storm surge of a Category 4.

scene, that just wouldn't be right.

Construction crews were everywhere, rebuilding homes and commercial buildings (as of June 14, 18,882 building permits have been issued since the hurricane), but sadly, there were many buildings simply boarded up and abandoned. One structure we passed displayed a sign that announced, "If you can move it, you can have it." Another building on the Seawall Boulevard was renamed as the 'Hunker Down' spot; a term that Harris County Judge Ed Emmett often used during the recovery process. It too was boarded up.

The good news is that the rumors I'd heard of Galveston being a 'dying town' simply aren't true. People are rebuilding, the medical and arts infrastructure is coming back, and tourism is thriving. This leads me to a few other things I learned on this trip.

Arriving on the island, I learned that the dichotomy that existed between the 'haves' and the 'have-nots' before the storm, appears to be magnified in the months after the storm. For those

folks with resources – and insurance – homes and businesses were either back to normal or in the process of rebuilding. For others who lived in homes less grand and uninsured, or in some cases, barely standing before the storm, found themselves homeless in the aftermath of Ike. Like New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, Galveston’s permanent population has decreased after Ike.

### AT THE HOTEL

We stay at the same hotel every time we go to Galveston. The rooms are nice, we can sit on our balcony and watch the ocean, there are several restaurants in walking distance, and it has a great pool bar. Sitting at the pool bar while waiting for our room to become available, I noticed a couple standing by the pool, partly because she was lathering his shaved head with sun tan lotion, and partly because his rather muscular body was covered in tattoos – his neck included. Don’t get me wrong, I like tattoos and have two of my own, though none appear on my neck and one is located in a place that only my wife can see. His tattoos, however, were neither artistic nor colorful, but more tribal-like and judging by the ink color and his poolside demeanor, each tattoo could possibly have been acquired in prison. He also had the ability to consume mass quantities of alcohol, drinking four drinks to our one; but hey, we were sitting in the shade and he was in the sun and therefore quite thirsty. Or so I thought.

This is where I learned that just because you can afford the price of a

hotel room, it doesn’t necessarily mean that you have any class. While in our room later that evening my wife heard noises in the hallway and peeked through the peep hole to check things out. There, stumbling down the hallway was tattoo-man announcing as loud as he could, “I’m so f—n drunk!”

His room, it turns out, was right next to ours. Lucky us! As we left our room the next morning we were greeted by a pile of clothing and various pieces of hotel-room flotsam set between our doors, and the unexpected pleasure of having to avoid a remarkable amount of vomit. But, as I said earlier, the rooms are nice and we can sit on the balcony and stare at the waves.

In previous stays at this hotel, pool towels were ubiquitous; grab one or two, soak it with sweat and sun tan lotion for a few hours, and then just



Surrounded with lush plantings and happy people, the pool bar is a very popular destination

leave it on the chaise lounge when you're done. This time, however, things were very different. For starters, we had to sign for the towels, giving our names and room number. The towels themselves were also different, having changed from the standard blazing white color to a peculiar shade of yellow – not quite legal pad yellow, yet not quite lemon yellow. The form we signed stated in large, bold text that if we did not return the towels to this station, a forty dollar charge, per towel, would be added to our bill. Suddenly, I was looking forward to lying on this towel; at forty dollars apiece, this must be one comfortable towel. Or so I thought.

While relaxing by the pool, people watching, and applying bodacious amounts of sun tan lotion in an attempt not to barbeque myself, a group of teenagers settled onto chaise lounges a few rows in front of us. Within moments, a female staffer, speaking into a walkie-talkie approached this group, "Are you staying at the hotel?," she asked sternly. The boys hesitated, and then mumbled something inaudible, to which she shot back, "What's the room number?" Lacking a proper response from the boys, she was on the walkie-talkie again, and within moments a large male staffer appeared behind the boys and quickly whisked them away.

This is when I learned about the power of the strangely-yellow towel. Each of the boys had the kind of towel you would have at home, one was white, the others an odd assortment of colors and graphics. No one had a yellow towel. The yellow towel was your right of passage;

it allowed you a place around this pool, and by a mere glance a staffer knew whether or not someone belonged. Suddenly, despite the irritating threat of a \$40 penalty, I was smugly satisfied with my yellow towel, confident in knowing that we were safe from being harassed by the "Pool Nazi's." Or so I thought.

A half hour later, a shadow fell across my face. I looked up to see another female staffer, who earlier distributed free glasses of water to folks at the pool, was now standing alongside me with a walkie-talkie and several pieces of paper in her hand. I sat up immediately, "Uh-oh, Pool Nazi's." I thought to myself. "Are you guests at the hotel?" she asked, sternly. I looked down at my yellow towel momentarily and then at the staffer, "Yes," I proudly announced while perched on my towel. I also explained that our waitress, who moments before had brought us drinks with little umbrellas in them, had all that information.

But something was wrong; suddenly the yellow towel wasn't enough to give me the right to barbeque myself by the pool. "Room number and last name?" she asked. Feeling as nervous as that unfortunate teenager, I almost forgot our room number, but managed to finally blurt it out before the walkie-talkie was put to use. After a few tense moments of flipping through her papers, our hotel citizenship was verified and another staffer appeared with a bag of fluorescent turquoise wristbands, whereupon we were instructed to be sure to ALWAYS wear these while at the pool. Okay then, we were set: a little plastic card gave us access to our room, and a yellow towel and a fluorescent wristband gave us the

right to sit by the pool. Staying at the hotel was suddenly getting complicated.<sup>4</sup>

As I looked down at my fluorescent wristband that now dramatically contrasted against my ever-reddening arm, I once again felt smugly satisfied. “I love this thing,” I told my wife, “I’m never going to take it off.” She was neither impressed nor amused, by me or the wristband. I learned on the other hand, that I was easily impressed and amused, and settled in for some more personal barbecuing, confident that I was protected against the Pool Nazi’s once and for all. Or so I thought. When I felt the touch of a hand on my arm – the arm wearing the fluorescent wristband – I sat up immediately. No one, and I mean no one, touches my wristband. But it wasn’t the Pool Nazi’s this time, it was my wife, wisely telling me it was time to find some shade as the mid afternoon sun sat directly above us.

Moving to a shaded area with yellow towels in tow and the wristbands proudly on display, we settled in for some Olympic-style people watching. Beyond the obvious physical differences of the guests gathered around the pool, what struck me was the cultural diversity. Listening to passers-by, I heard at least five different languages from both adults and children alike. In the span of 15 minutes I could be addressed as, “sir,” “mon,” “bro,” “dude,” “big daddy,” or “señor.” Galveston a dying town? I don’t think so. And

<sup>4</sup> I began to wonder if there was a black market on the island where a person could purchase one of these yellow towels, which had been smuggled out of the hotel. No doubt it would cost a good deal more than the \$40 fee I mentioned earlier.

despite all of our differences, we pool-siders all had one thing in common: the Pool Nazi’s. From the safety of our wristband-fortified, yellow-toweled shady spot, my wife and I watched as over the next hour, wave after wave of staffers swept through the pool area, interrogating, banding, and occasionally, ejecting bathers.

Turns out that these draconian measures became necessary this summer to address a problem that always existed with this hotel, which by anyone’s standards, has the best pool and pool bar on the island. Non-guests would enter the pool area through stairways from the street and settle in to enjoy the facilities. Seating around the pool is limited and paying guests often complained they couldn’t find a place at the pool. Apparently this problem has been exaggerated since Hurricane Ike (though no one at the hotel could explain exactly why); so therefore the appearance of the Pool Nazi’s, and the wristbands.<sup>5</sup>

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## BACK ON THE ISLAND

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Of course, what you experience at one hotel doesn’t define the state-of-the-island as a whole. Later that afternoon, after applying a thick layer of sunscreen on my tender skin, and still wearing my wristband, we ventured out to check some of the other business/tourist areas on the island.

<sup>5</sup> I later learned that the color of these wristbands is changed on a regular (but secret) basis. Don’t try to be clever and use last weeks color.

The Strand, located in Galveston's downtown historic district, is made up of several blocks of shops, restaurants and business', established in refurbished historic buildings. The city has gone to great lengths to keep the facades of these buildings preserved in the original architecture of the period. Two blocks east of the Strand is where the cruise ships dock, allowing both the crews and guests onboard easy access to the Strand establishments. Very popular with tourists most of the year, its streets and sidewalks are always crowded. However, things were different on this particular day.

By my count, only about a third of the businesses were open; a few were in the midst of remodeling, and the rest boarded up with plywood. The empty streets paid testament to the destruction from Ike, which filled the area with up to ten feet of water. Some building facades still bore the water mark from the flood. The Strand will come back; it will just take time. The situation was similar for the shops and restaurants along Post Office Street: some shops and restaurants were open, some were under construction, and some covered with plywood. Here too, the storm surge inundated the lower floor of the buildings, ruining the interiors and the inventory inside.

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## THE TREES

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On our way back to Seawall Boulevard, the scene along Broadway was almost Kafka-esque; the leafless oak trees that line the street and fill the esplanade wore a ghostly winter-like pallor. The 100-year old trees are

dying, killed by the saltwater that submerged them after the storm surge. Once the root system absorbs saltwater, it's impossible for the tree to absorb fresh water. In a poignant twist of fate, these very same trees (and many others) were planted as part of the recovery efforts from the 1900 Hurricane; a storm that remains our country's greatest natural disaster of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>6,7</sup>

As with other aspects of the recovery effort from Hurricane Ike, dealing with these trees will be a monumental and expensive task. A Texas Forest service assessment of storm damaged trees indicates that anywhere from sixty to eighty percent of Galveston's trees will have to be removed, including 10,840 of the 21,874 trees located in the city's right-of-way, and more than 31,000 trees on private land.<sup>8</sup> The cost of removing these trees is estimated at roughly three quarters of a million dollars. Fortunately for this cash-strapped city, new legislation is about to be passed to allow FEMA to pay for the majority of this cost.

<sup>6</sup> Hours before the 1900 Hurricane made landfall, all of Galveston Island was underwater. As Island meteorologist Isaac Cline later wrote, "In reality there was no island, just the ocean with houses standing out in the waves."

<sup>7</sup> Known simply as the "Great Storm" to the locals (hurricanes weren't assigned names until decades later), the 1900 hurricane pushed a 15 ½ foot storm surge across the island from the bay to the intercoastal waterway. As the surge advanced, it built up a two-story wall of debris that acted like a bulldozer, leveling everything in its path. Over 6,000 men, women, and children died in that storm, prompting the construction of Galveston's seawall.

<sup>8</sup> Removal is necessary because as these trees begin to rot, the limbs break off easily. Should another storm hit the island, these limbs, powered by 100 mile-an-hour winds, would become deadly missiles.

While new trees will be planted, many Galvestonians are devastated by this loss. Nine months later, the hurricane has stolen yet another of the island's iconic elements. Part of enjoying the Galveston experience was your drive along this tree shaded road, which gave the island a gentile and elegant aura. Many decades will pass before the newly planted trees will bear a resemblance to those gnarled and majestic centenarian oak trees, and in the interim many a visitor will never experience the beauty that this part of the pre-Ike island possessed.

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### AT THE BEACH

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On our first day in Galveston, we walked along the Seawall Blvd to enjoy the sand and the sea, but there was also something less enjoyable on the beach, the stench of rotting seaweed, and there was lots of it, typical for this time of year. The algae grow in thick mats offshore which are slowly broken up by wave action and deposited along the shores of the Gulf states. Fortunately, when we woke the next morning, workers had already cleared the smelly stuff away. In Texas, unlike other Gulf states, laws forbid hauling the seaweed to landfills. Instead, the seaweed is trucked to various beaches around Galveston and tilled into the sand dunes, helping to stabilize the dunes, allowing them to grow larger.

Galveston is what is known amongst geologists as a 'barrier island',<sup>9</sup> one

<sup>9</sup> Geologists estimate that Galveston Island is roughly 3,000 years old, and while the island is believed to be in the declining phase of a barrier island lifetime, it's thought to have a few thousand years left before disintegrating. Other major Texas barrier islands include: Brazos, Matagorda, Mustang, Padre, and San Jose.

of many along the Texas coast. These islands are formed as wave action and currents along the coastline move the silts deposited into the Gulf from rivers up and down the coast. Along Texas, the effluence from these rivers delivers a darker, coarser type of sand that is quite different from the white powdery beaches found in other regions. Since Hurricane Ike, I've learned that this type of sand, while effective for building islands initially, makes it difficult to restore beaches smashed by hurricanes.

The sand is just too heavy; once sucked out to sea by the storm surge backwash, the sand stays deposited offshore and filters back to shore, painfully slowly.

I've learned that not only do man-made structures take a beating from a hurricane; natural structures such as beaches can also be decimated.<sup>10</sup>



It's May in Galveston, yet the trees look as if they are in a winter slumber

<sup>10</sup> On the Bolivar peninsula, so much of the beach was washed away that owners of beach houses destroyed by Ike may not be allowed to rebuild and are in danger of losing their property to public domain. Unlike some coastal states, in Texas there are no privately owned beaches along the Gulf shoreline.

That's the bad news. The good news is the city and state have undertaken a heroic effort to rebuild the Galveston beachfront. During our stay, crews were repairing damaged sections of the seawall, working on the numerous jetties that extend into the water like so many thick granite fingers, and trucking in new sand to widen the beaches.

Walking along the renovated sections of the Seawall Boulevard beaches, everything seemed the same as it had always been. Families were splashing in the waves, children were building sandcastles, and young lovers were once again sitting dangerously close to one another. As we rested on one of the jetties, feeling the sun on our faces and the saltwater splashing around our feet, it was hard to imagine what it was like at that very spot nine months ago when a monster came ashore.<sup>11</sup> But that is the beauty, and the danger, of living along the Gulf shoreline. Years can go by without a single hurricane,

but inevitably one will come ashore and batter the area. What hurricane Ike destroyed in twelve hours is likely to take twelve months to repair, and in some cases it may take even longer.

Islanders understand this Dr. Jekyll / Mr. Hyde nature of life along the Texas coast. When we stopped at our favorite Tex-Mex restaurant on the Seawall, we asked our bartender, Ricardo, who we've known for years, if he stayed on the island during the hurricane. He paused for a moment with a slight look of disbelief on his face and finally said, "Of course I left. Do you think I'm crazy?" He was wise to leave. The seawall protected the restaurant, but most of the Galveston's flooding was caused by waters rushing onto the backside of the island from the intercoastal waterway. His place was submerged under several feet of water. Of the buildings and fishing piers in front of the seawall, only one, the Flagship Hotel is still standing — battered and broken — but standing. In a television interview seen the weekend we were on the island, Tillman Fertitta, president of the company that owns the Flagship, assured everyone that the Flagship Hotel would be rebuilt to its original grandeur.

The Balinese Room, located just down the beach from the Flagship Hotel is not as lucky. All that remains of the Balinese are wood pilings in the ocean, many of them standing no more than four or five feet above the waves. The Balinese was Galveston's



The Flagship Hotel, the only hotel on the water, was decimated by Hurricane Ike

<sup>11</sup> News crews who braved the elements during Hurricane Ike sent back images of waves hitting the seawall and shooting 20 to 30 feet into the air right at the spot where we were relaxing. The jetties themselves were completely underwater.



historic nightclub for almost 80 years. Perched over the waves, it withstood the onslaught of many a storm, until Ike swept the building away. It was known for fantastic food and great entertainment and was a favorite watering hole for many high profile folks. During the clubs heyday, on any given weekend you might bump into Frank Sinatra, Howard Hughes, Jack Benny, or Frankie Lane. The Balinese was also known for something else – gambling. The back room which contained gambling tables and slot machines was at the farthest end of this very long building. By the time Texas Rangers would make it down the 600 foot long corridor, all the gambling tables had been flipped over, the slot machines hidden, and poker chips cleverly concealed. Gambling at the Balinese finally ended in 1957; the Balinese Room itself ended last year. It will not be rebuilt. On the positive side, the iconic shell shop, Murdoch's, located to the west of the Balinese Room, is being rebuilt with plans to have an expanded version of its ever popular restaurant overlooking the water. Galveston is indeed slowly coming back.

June 1<sup>st</sup> marked the beginning of the 2009 hurricane season. On this auspicious occasion, Galveston Mayor Lyda Ann Thomas was interviewed by a local television station regarding progress made so far in the rebuilding effort. When asked by a reporter if Galveston could withstand another hurricane like this season, she paused for a moment and then simply said, "I couldn't even speculate." The truth is, that beyond the glitzy, sugar-coated world of resorts, pool bars, and restaurants catering

to well-heeled tourists, Galveston may not be dying, but it remains wounded. City officials face the reality of diminished revenues at a time of increased costs, forcing them to implement triage-like judgments of what can be funded and when.

A major blow was the damage done to the University of Texas Medical Branch (UTMB), Galveston's only full scale hospital, which suffered over \$700 million in damage from the storm. Over 3,000 employees had to be let go, and the island was left without critical medical care. Many elderly residents haven't returned to the island because of this loss of medical care, which would force them to travel to the mainland in emergency conditions. Even the Catholic Diocese, facing a reduction in parishioners, was forced to merge some parishes and schools together as a cost cutting measure. Many city residents have seen their neighborhoods de-populated and dearly miss walking down the street to visit with longtime friends. Others, who have gone to the same local diner for breakfast every morning for decades, now have nowhere to go. It's these seemingly trivial details of everyday life that deeply affect the permanent population of the island, while remaining invisible to tourists.

One glimmer of hope is that the tourism industry, the economic engine of this island town, is back in full strength. Figures released by City officials showed that during the Memorial Day weekend, all of the islands 4,500 hotels rooms were booked. Hopes remain high for a record summer crowd as temperatures and gasoline prices rise,

inspiring Texans and tourists to chill out by the sea. The most important thing I learned on my first post-Ike visit to Galveston is of the resilience and determination of the Galvestonians we met, and the grit and strong will of Mayor Thomas and her associates. We plan on returning to the island for the Forth of July weekend, something we rarely ever do.

In the hours and weeks after Ike made landfall, the often repeated phrase ‘hunker down’ was on everyone’s lips, but there was another, more telling sentiment heard over and over again on the news that didn’t have that same ‘sound-bite’ quality. As survivors were interviewed from all parts of southeast Texas, they shared a common outlook: “This is Texas buddy, we don’t wait for help, we help each other.” The way we see it, the best way we can personally help Galveston right now is to contribute to its economic engine. And when you think about it, what’s so bad about enjoying a little ‘Island Time’?

Back home in Houston, I recalled the night that Hurricane Ike made landfall. Within a few hours we were plunged into darkness, which for city dwellers is disorienting enough. Add the eerie sound of 100 mile per hour winds blowing for hours on end, the sounds of tree limbs snapping, or feel your house shake from the impact tremor of a falling tree, and you have a truly terrifying situation. I can’t begin to imagine what those who stayed on the island experienced that night.

In case you’re wondering: yes, I was wearing my wristband on the drive home. That night, I went to sleep still wearing it, in honor of those souls lost in the storm. After my post-Ike visit, that silly little wristband has taken on a whole new meaning for me.

God bless Galveston.



Cabana's around the pool serve as an interesting counterpoint to the broken structures and lives on Galveston Island.