

The Art Walk: Keeping Gulfport Weird

Dark clouds snake around a full moon. Inside a tiny caravan decorated with blinking Christmas lights, a medium predicts the future. She wears a turban adorned with glittery peacock feathers.

“I see nothing but yellow light surrounding you,” she tells her client.



At the Gulfport Art Walk, the fortune telling caravan is parked beside vendors selling watercolors, crocheted hats, dog treats and ceramics. One store advertises the art walk with a sign that demands, “KEEP GULFPORT WEIRD,” and the festival rises to the challenge. If you’re looking for good food and quirky entertainment, the art walk is a free event from 6-10 p.m. on the first Friday and third Saturday of every month. Bring your dog along – several vendors sell homemade dog treats, and they give free samples to four-legged friends.

The walk stretches along Beach Boulevard, where illuminated pavilions line the street and blue twinkle lights drape across the oak trees. A Beach Boys’ song blares from a shop. The art walk has a kitschy Florida feeling: you’ll see plenty of flamingo mailboxes, flamingo shop signs and flamingo prints (which you can buy for souvenirs). Vendors’ wares are mixed, ranging from \$1 soaps to \$180 cypress tables. Whimsy makes an appearance too: a stand draped with hats straight out of Wonderland beckons passersby to Marie Gagne’s millinery shop. One red mini-top hat is draped with black netting and decorated with antique pins; the tag reads: “wearable art, allowing you to experience your alternate universe.” A tall man wearing a black trench coat and a fedora with a skull and crossbones walks by the hat stand. He’s already tapping into his alternate universe.

Not interested in your alternate universe? The Art Walk lets you explore your creative side. A 12-foot tall metal stallion guards the entrance to a small courtyard, where musicians jam in front of a sea life mural. Here, the Industrial Arts Center offers mini classes in glass blowing: you can create an ornament for \$30 or a bowl for \$65, or just sit and watch the demonstration. A man plunges a lump of melted glass into the white heat of the furnace, beads of sweat

glistening on his face. The glass looks like a chunk of the sun, blazing yellow, until he smashes it into a heart mold. While the glass heart cools, two little girls hop in sync to the Urban Gypsies' bluegrass in the courtyard.

Just outside the courtyard, Misti Bernard paints twirling henna designs on her fingers at the Victory Henna booth.

"I've been in a swirly mood," she says. "I was feeling all Maori or geometric today."

As free-spirited as her winding tattoos, she wears a little black dress and a wide-brimmed hat bedecked in flowers. Bernard's henna tattoos start at \$10 and range in style from dolphins to Viking runes.

Hungry art walk patrons have plenty of restaurant options. The Backfin Blue Café is known for its crab cakes, and Peg's Cantina for its Mexican fare. Pia's Tratorria specializes in Italian pasta dishes like sweet potato gnocchi, which is drizzled in sage butter sauce and served over a bed of arugula. Italian opera crackles from the speakers while guests eat in the outdoor garden, on picnic tables draped in faded Indian prints. The Italian ambience is only slightly diminished by the presence of palm trees and a palmetto-thatched tiki roof.



Emily Dickinson-Cat is a regular at Small Adventures Book Shop.

At about 10 p.m., the crowd thins out, but there's time for one last stop at the Small Adventures Book Shop, a tiny place advertised by lighted pink flamingos and front yard benches adorned with red velvet pillows. Inside, three musty rooms are stacked floor to ceiling with old books and magazines. Away from the noise of the crowd, the back room is quiet, like a grandmother's spare bedroom, with only the rhythmic tick-tock of a wooden clock to break the silence. A black-and-white cat is curled up in a pink armchair next to a bookshelf

stuffed with celebrity biographies. Her name is Emily Dickinson-Cat. Sometimes visitors send her fan mail, says shop owner Jan Dutton.

Dutton says people appreciate the art walk for its atmosphere.

"It's funky. You don't get funky much," she says.

Some vendors are funkier than others. Beneath the cauldron of swirling clouds, the fortune teller's caravan glows with a supernatural light. A middle-aged couple walks past, holding hands.

"We should go in there," the man says.

“No, I can tell your fortune,” the woman says. “I see you making good choices in your love life. Now, take her to the Keys!”

IF YOU GO:

WHEN: 6-10 p.m., the first Friday and third Saturday of every month

WHERE: Beach Boulevard, Gulfport

COST: Free, but bring cash if you want to purchase items from the vendors

PARKING: Free parking along the street

TIPS: Wear comfortable shoes if you plan to see it all