

Relax And Enjoy A Day At The Tarpon Springs Sponge Docks

By Karen McBride

Tarpon Springs is rich with Greek culture. It is well known for being the "Sponge Capital of America" and for the variety of stores and restaurants that draw tourists from all over the country. The history of Tarpon Springs and how the Greek culture became so dominant is an interesting tale.

The first settlers arrived in Tarpon Springs in the mid 1800s. In 1876, Mary Ormond and her father built a cabin near Spring Bayou and soon J.C. Boyer arrived, and he and Mary were married. Mary liked how the fish jumped out of the water in front of her house and they named the area Tarpon Springs. The fish were actually mullet, but luckily Mary didn't know that, because "Tarpon" Springs sounds better than "Mullet" Springs.

In 1880 Hamilton Disston bought four million acres in central Florida and Tarpon Springs was included. Then in 1884 a post office and railroad were built, which led to Tarpon Springs being a well-known vacation spot for wealthy northerners.

Sponges were first found along Key West after storms. The sponge industry began by collecting these sponges and then shipping them to New York. John Cheney realized that money could be made by harvesting the sponges found in Tarpon Springs and began the Cheney Sponge Company. By 1890, the company sold over a million dollars worth of sponges. With the sponge trade becoming saturated in the Aegean, Greek sponge divers left for America to find employment. Divers arrived in Tarpon Springs from Greece with their wetsuits and helmets, that allowed them to stay underwater longer and collect more sponges, and eventually, there were 500 divers on 50 different boats.

With so many sponge divers, there was a need for restaurants

near the boats. Vacationers wanted to see what the sponges looked like and this led to the opening of souvenir stores and The Sponge Exchange was built in 1907.

For the next 30 years, the sponge industry continued to grow



Sit out on the docks, relax and watch the boats come in

and became the largest industry in Florida, exceeding citrus and tourism. Unfortunately, from 1940-1950, the sponge industry was hard hit by blight and then later, red tide algae bloom and almost wiped out. It wasn't until 1980, when new sponge beds were discovered that it began to recover.

The Sponge Exchange has continued through the economic ups and downs and is a central location for tourists and locals. Stores, such as Caribongo, draw people from near and far. Lynn Stanford, and her husband, opened the store in December, 2006. As Tarpon Springs residents, they knew the best place to open the shop was the Sponge Exchange. The shop sells t-shirts with black and white designs that will change color (by UV light, not heat) in the light. Teens love the nail polish that changes from pink to red, white to pink, or blue to purple. Community involvement is important to the Stanford's, and they have included Fundraising

for PTA's on their website. Simply select from the drop down list of organizations or add your school and a portion of the proceeds will go to the organization or school.

The store is open from 10am-6pm Sunday through Saturday. For more

and flamingo statues. Teens love the assortment of jewelry.

If shopping is not your thing, don't worry, because the docks have a lot more to offer. At the end of Dodecanese Boulevard (named after the collection of Greek Islands in the southeast between Crete and Turkey), you will find the Tarpon Springs Aquarium. The 120,000 gallon tank holds colorful fish, nurse sharks, snook, and of course, tarpon. The aquarium is open from 10 am to 5 pm Monday through Saturday and noon until 5 pm on Sundays. During your visit, be sure to watch the shark or alligator feeding shows held throughout the day. Admission is \$7 for seniors, \$7.75 for adults, \$5.75 for children (3-11) and free for children under 3 years of age.

If you want to take to the water, Island Wind Tours offers daily cruises on a 59 foot, two-level catamaran. The 140 passenger vessel cruises from Tarpon Springs Sponge Docks to Anclote Key. The one and one-half hour cruise leaves at 1 pm, 3 pm and 5 pm daily (weather permitting). Dolphins, eagles, pelicans, osprey and other Florida wildlife can be seen along the cruise in the Gulf of Mexico. Fishermen will enjoy a trip on a deep sea fishing boat. Call 727-937-8257 or visit www.twogeorgesdeepsseafishing.com for more information.

When you think of Greek culture, what comes to mind?

information and to shop online, go to www.caribongotarponsprings.com.

Each time you visit the Sponge Docks (the docks) you will find another unique store, like Spiceman's Kitchen with an assortment of spices from all over the world or Sun and Fun Beachwear with colorful suits and cover-ups. Another favorite is The Pelican, owned by Elaine and Bernie Drosos. Tourists visit the store to purchase pelican, dolphin

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Now, that's a boat load of sponges!

Greek food, of course, and the best place to find it is at Hellas. The family owned restaurant has been part of the Sponge Docks since 1970. Tourists and locals enjoy the home-grown recipes. The Greek salad is a favorite, made with all the traditional ingredients, including feta cheese, Greek olives,

and homemade potato salad. Choose any of the Greek specialties, including Gyros (pronounced "yee-roh"), spanakopita (spinach pie), and dolmades (stuffed grape vine leaves). If you didn't leave room for dessert, then be sure to stop by the bakery and bring home some delicious Kataifi (chopped

walnuts rolled in dough, baked and then soaked in honey syrup) or Melomakarona (walnut orange cookie dipped in a honey-orange syrup).

In addition to amazing food, Greeks are known for their music. Mark your calendar for Saturday, September 10, for "Night in the Islands". From 4:00 pm - 6:00 pm, Bouzouki Boys will perform Greek music on Dodecanese Blvd. at Riverwalk, west of Hope Street. Beginning at 6:00 pm, enjoy dancing, dinner, music by Ellada. Ellada features three of the best Greek musicians in Florida: George Soffos on bouzouki, Elias Poulos on vocals, and Dino Theofilos on keyboard.

Be sure to visit the Spongedocks, where you feel as if time stood still as you walk along the brick roads, to enjoy amazing Greek food and pastry, music such as "Zorba the Greek" and dancing. You will feel as if you left America and traveled to the Greek Isles overlooking the Aegean Sea. Opa!

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