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# A Shore Town Reborn

By Susan Harb

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First, get the name right. It's "VaBeach" -- one word to locals and insiders. That's "Va," rhymes with "bah" -- which made sense when Virginia Beach was a second-rate seaside resort full of rowdy sailors, and later unruly college students, who frequented its rundown motel rooms and a narrowing strip of oceanfront sand. Now it's VaBeach, as in "va va vroom."

Negative images have been washed away by a tide of civic pride, major capital improvements and a revitalized boardwalk with enough musical entertainment and street performers to rival Disney World in its promise of family-oriented fun. An appetite for beer joints and waffle shops has been refined by a mouth-watering array of ethnic cuisines.

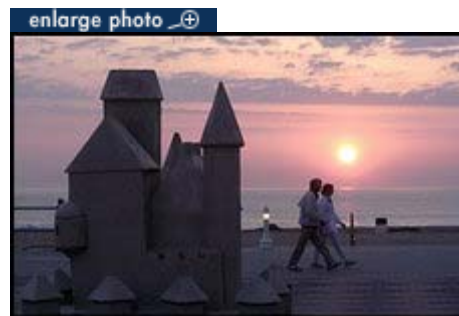
And the beach itself is back. Due to diligent restoration efforts, the sandy expanse is as wide as a football field -- 300 feet. And it is clean -- shifted and raked daily.

The newly landscaped three-mile oceanfront boardwalk is a colorful conga line of runners, skaters, bikers, stroller-pushers and promenaders. It's Main Street. Strangers smile and say hello to strangers; teenagers hook up with teenagers. Here you can strut your stuff, or sit on a bench and gawk as the bathing-suited world goes by in every age (kids to geezers), shape (buff to bountiful) and color (mostly lobster red from the sun).

But it's hard to sit, even in a beach chair with a trashy book by the water's edge. First Landing State Park, just off 64th Street, beckons with nearly 3,000 acres and 19 miles of pine-needle-cushioned trails that lead to little bays and ponds fringed by moss-hung live oaks and bald cypress. A bike path runs 90 blocks, from Fort Story to the north to Rudee Inlet to the south.

There's dancing in the bars, and dancing under the stars, as outdoor stages sweeten summer nights with rock-and-roll.

VaBeach is revving its engine . . . Varoom, vroom, vroom.



Sunrise near 37th St. at Virginia Beach with a sand castle street sculpture in foreground and walkers along the boardwalk. (Karen Tam)

## BEST SURPRISE

Is that a bong being passed around? Yep. It's hookah night every Friday at *Croc's*. A dozen different-flavored tobaccos -- strawberry, mint, licorice . . . bubblegum! -- are available. Thursday is live band dance night, and the place is packed. Food's good, too.

620 19th St. (at Cypress Avenue), 757-428-5444, <http://www.crocsrestaurant.com/>. \$20 for a two-hour burn.

*Susan Harb, a frequent contributor to the Washington Post Travel, has had a cottage at Virginia Beach for 25 years.*