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Pair's romance chases away doom and gloom

A couple stay committed to a wedding at a lovely inn in St. Pete Beach.

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ST. PETE BEACH -- Terrorists had struck down the World Trade Center and attacked the Pentagon. Now Tropical Storm Gabrielle was threatening the area.

Cathy Hamersma and Andy Meyer had a decision to make. Should they cancel their dockside wedding planned for Saturday night, Sept. 15?

"Earlier in the week, when the disaster happened, we immediately thought about canceling, but we quickly realized that the best thing to do is to get on with life. Canceling would've placed too much emphasis on the tragedy," Mrs. Hamersma-Meyer said.

"But then we heard about the incoming storm, and I really thought we were really going to have to stop the wedding," she said.

Despite that, they decided to forge ahead with the plans they made several months ago when they visited Pasa Tiempo, 7141 Bay St., St. Pete Beach, as weekend guests.

"We were deciding where to hold the wedding, and we were sitting on the dock. I realized that we were supposed to be married right there," said Mrs. Hamersma-Meyer, 45.

For owners of Pasa Tiempo, the nuptials would be the second ceremony at their new banquet facility, which officially opened Sept. 1. After buying the 40-year-old property from Pat Bishop last fall, Ivone and Gordon Meltzer transformed the old innkeeper house into a 2,000-square-foot banquet hall and honeymoon suite.

Pasa Tiempo includes eight suites, two waterfront rooms, a bayside pool and courtyard with 16 fountains, a 30-foot hibiscus tree and countless oleander and rose bushes.

Rooms cost from \$110 to \$200 per night.

After the Sept. 11 attacks in New York and Washington, D.C., Mrs. Meltzer braced for cancellations.

"We didn't really know what was going to happen, but as it turned out, almost everyone has only postponed their visit until travel gets easier. Out of six calls after the attack on Sept. 11, five have already rescheduled.

"Then, when we heard the storm was coming, I assumed Cathy would have to postpone her wedding, but she was very strong in her decision to move forward," Mrs. Meltzer, 47, said.

All 18 of the invited guests attended the wedding.

"On Friday, we pretty much decided that if we didn't have to evacuate St. Pete Beach, the wedding would go on, inside or outside," Mrs. Hamersma-Meyer said. "We just really hoped to get married on the dock and then have the party in the new room."

They watched as Sept. 15 turned from stormy and gray to sunny and blue.

"By 6 p.m. when we held the ceremony, it was perfect. We got married outside. I remember saying to a friend, 'We are so lucky.' She looked at me and said, 'This isn't luck. This is something much more.'"

The tourism industry is hoping for a similar turnaround in the wake of the recent tragedies, and local residents may provide the key.

Mrs. Meltzer said the tragedies present hardships for tourism, though she is optimistic. She and her two employees, Deia Farrell and Angela Keglovich, expect to have close to full occupancy the rest of the year.

"Eighty percent of our guests are regular guests, and even before the crisis, we had started approaching the local market. It seems now, everyone (hotel owners and innkeepers) will have to target local residents, with support from state government, tourism associations and local chambers."

Wit Tuttell, spokesman for the St. Petersburg/Clearwater Area Convention & Visitors Bureau, agreed that locals will be a strong influence on the industry in the weeks to come.

"But right now we are staying flexible," he said. "We still have long-term goals. We won't abandon long-distance markets. We might have to shift around priorities and focus more on statewide customers. From our surveys in the last few weeks, people are in a holding position."

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