

Florida Beach Town Tries to Tame Spring Break

A tradition of around-the-clock spring break partying has drawn Lance Granata to this small Florida Gulf Coast town three times. But this year, his antics landed him in jail—twice.

The Michigan student ran afoul of a new community effort to tamp down on the debauchery that comes with being a leading collegiate spring break destination, without breaking up a lucrative party.

“They want the underage drinkers, but they don’t,” said Granata, 20. He was arrested for smashing a window at a Subway store and for underage drinking, which he considered “beyond ridiculous.”

Like previous Florida spring break hot spots Fort Lauderdale and Daytona Beach, this Panhandle town is facing a crisis of conscience over the trade-offs involved in hosting a binge for some 300,000 students who arrive through mid-April with coolers, beer funnels and credit cards.

Unwilling to evict spring break, a crucial season in a community where tourism brings in more than \$1 billion annually, the city has passed new rules to counter the worst excesses.

Bars must stop serving alcohol at 2 a.m. in March, two hours earlier than before. Partygoers must have a valid ID to drink on the beach, and the practice of digging deep holes in the sand for drinking games and sex is banned.

“We’re a very conservative area,” said Bay County Commissioner Mike Thomas. “We’ve got more churches than we do bars.”

"When you get this many people together being rowdy, it shows our community in a bad light."

Thomas supported the local sheriff's failed proposal to ban alcohol on the beach, where students fashion sand tables for beer pong and twerk dance in bikini-length shorts.

"If they tried to crack down on it, people would probably go somewhere else," said 18-year-old Lacey Spence of Tennessee as she sloshed beer out of a plastic cup.

Businesses agree. So beer cans and water bottles brimming with pastel-colored drinks filled the hands of thousands of revelers who blanketed the sand down to the ocean's edge at a free concert last week by country music star Luke Bryan.

100-MILE CLUB

Off the main strip, the county sheriff's office set up two open-air cells on the beach, where 513 people were booked in the first 10 days of spring break season.

The agency responds to dozens of complaints about noise and drunken pedestrians who spill into the streets outside nightclubs. Traffic congestion, with scores of spring breakers zipping around on rented scooters, leads to a spike in accidents.

"Our calls for service go off the map," said Major Tommy Ford, citing a 61 percent increase in calls during spring break since 2007.

The biggest problems often involve the "100-mile club," as locals call the non-students in their 20s and 30s who join the party from communities within driving distance of Panama City Beach, whose permanent population is about 12,000.

"They come to prey off the spring breakers," Ford said.

As spring break revved up last week, Mississippi State

University star quarterback Dak Prescott was attacked after a daytime concert, but not seriously injured.

Last weekend, one man was shot and another stabbed. Forty extra officers were called in to help law enforcement “take back the street,” Ford said.

Florida has long struggled with the crowds of rowdy students embracing its sun, sea and party life in March and April.

Fort Lauderdale announced on television in 1985 that spring breakers were no longer welcome after 350,000 students took nudity and drinking to new heights.

The party scooted up Florida’s east coast to Daytona Beach, which grew weary of the crowds in the late 1990s after publicity about kids falling off balconies. At the same time, the festivities picked up in Panama City Beach.

Mike Bennett, a hotel owner who chairs the local tourism council, took a pragmatic view as his staff hauled off trash bags filled with beer cans and spritzed away the stench of marijuana.

After being closed during the slow winter, his complex was fully booked, with rooms going for \$1,000 per week, he said.

Still, spring break dollars come with a price.

“I believe in Jesus,” Bennett said, “so I wrestle with this time of year.”

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