



The Grand Hotel at Point Clear on Mobile Bay

# A Grand Hotel in Alabama

By Chip Drago

For more than 150 years, the Grand Hotel at Point Clear on the eastern shore of Alabama's Mobile Bay has been a calm place amid the world's storms. So while many were amazed Sept. 16 when the eye of Hurricane Ivan passed directly over the historic resort and barely rattled the tea service, history was a better guide. Storms, fires, wars - all matter of catastrophe over the years - yet The Grand, with perhaps a nick here and there, has always emerged draped with a timelessness like the Spanish moss hanging from the many stately live oaks that grace The Grand's 550 acres.

"I'm not sure I can explain it, con-

sidering we are as exposed as we are to Mobile Bay," says The Grand General Manager David Clark. "I guess we're just blessed."

"I think the exciting part of The

Grand is that we've restored it to its greatness and we came close to losing everything with [Hurricane] Ivan," says Dr. David Bronner, CEO of the Retirement Systems of Alabama (RSA), The Grand's new owner.

"Obviously, we're pleased with the limited amount of damage that is easily corrected and pleased to be fully operational ... as one of the premier resort

properties in the United States."

Ivan caused far more extensive damage to other south Alabama resort properties on the Gulf Coast in



The Hall of Whispers, part of the hotel's European-style spa.





**A few trees were down and branches were strewn about the grounds, but the category three Hurricane Ivan did no long-lasting harm to The Grand. Within a couple of days the hotel's 600 employees were waxing floors, washing windows and straightening the grounds to their customary order.**

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Orange Beach and Gulf Shores as well as farther east in Florida.

“We are very fortunate here at The Grand to have sustained the minimal damage that we did,” says Knud Svendsen, vice president of sales for PCH Hotels and Resorts, Inc., representing the RSA. “We braced for a direct hit from Ivan, but luckily our historic hotel was spared. Our thoughts go out to our neighbors and friends in nearby communities who didn’t fare as well.”

“There was a little flooding, but it didn’t get into the lobby or the convention hall, which are the lowest areas on the property,” says Clark, a 15-year employee at The Grand. “We had been expecting the worst, a direct hit. Luckily, we were spared.”

Just last year, the hotel completed a \$50 million renovation, adding a spa and extra space for convention meetings. According to Bronner, the 405-room Grand’s availability is “more important than ever” because of the Ivan-inflicted disruptions elsewhere



**The Grand’s pool (“50,000 gallons of fun”) was renovated in 2002 to include a waterfall, two whirlpools, slide and entry pool for children.**

along the Gulf Coast. The hurricane made landfall early Thursday morning Sept. 16 in Gulf Shores, devastating beachfront properties that have long been among the state’s most popular tourist attractions.

The 157-year-old Grand’s survival instinct was especially fortuitous for the Mobile area with the arrival in October of the Holiday, a 1,600-pas-

senger Carnival cruise ship that began sailing from the Alabama Cruise Terminal at Mobile Oct. 16.

“With Gulf Shores out, The Grand becomes the number one tourist attraction in Alabama,” Bronner says. “It’s crucial because we’ve got Carnival cruises ... and we’ve got to have a place for those people to stay.”

Carnival Cruise Lines plans some 75 sailings from Mobile during its first year of operation in Mobile. The city hopes, based on the cruise line experiences of other ports, to retain its original ship, replace it with a newer and larger one and/or add a second vessel.

The Holiday’s one-year sailings translates into 100,000 or so passengers. The industry projects one to two overnight stays per passenger cabin, according to Bruce Skidmore, director of group sales for the Grand Hotel Marriott Resort, Golf Club & Spa.

“The Grand has been here so long, it’s maybe a disservice to say it [the new cruise business] will give us a greater visibility,” Skidmore says. “Still it should heighten our profile for those who aren’t familiar with The Grand.”

Skidmore says that Marriott and Carnival offer “land and sea meeting” packages in other markets and discussions are underway involving The Grand at Point Clear, the Riverview Plaza and the soon-to-open Battle House (the latter two in downtown Mobile).

Carnival has a one-year contract with the city that built a \$20 million



**The Grand offers 37 slips for sailboats, fishing boats and yachts.**

terminal facility to lure cruises to its rejuvenated downtown district. Financed and operated by RSA, the facility combines a secure area for arrivals and departures with a three-story parking deck. The RSA is also involved in downtown Mobile as the owner of the Riverview Plaza Hotel and in the restoration of the historic Battle House Hotel.

“It’s an exciting time in Mobile and Baldwin counties with the arrival of the Holiday and the combination of being able to offer a new, future four-star convention hotel in downtown Mobile and a four-star resort across the bay,” Bronner says. “Mobile becomes a destination spot. Instead of having just one element in place, we will have them all. We are thankful for that and thankful that Ivan decided to go in a different direction.”

The hotel closed Sept. 14, a day before Gov. Bob Riley ordered all residents south of Interstate 10 to evacu-

ate Baldwin County. Among its guests that day: Al Roker of NBC’s Today show, who broadcast reports of the approaching storm from the boardwalk along Mobile Bay.

Clark says employees removed many of the hotel’s most valuable possessions, including antique furniture, Civil War-era artwork and \$20,000 oriental rugs.

**I**van slammed The Grand’s fishing pier, as it did dozens of others along the bay, leaving pilings pok-

ing out of the bay waters like a ship’s wreckage. Parts of the property’s brick boardwalk were damaged by rising waters. A few trees were down and branches were strewn about the grounds, but the category three hurricane did no long-lasting harm to The Grand. Within a couple of days the hotel’s 600 employees were waxing floors, washing windows and straightening the grounds to their customary order.

The Grand used its brief down time to best advantage, says Skidmore, redoing floors, cleaning carpets and revamping the gift shop, tasks that aren’t easily accomplished when the property is fully operational. Skidmore says repairs to the boardwalk and the fishing pier would be performed with hurricanes in mind. The pier may become concrete and the boardwalk may feature elements that can be readily removed and stored in the face of an approaching storm.

The resort features two 18-hole golf courses, the Azalea and Dogwood layouts.

**There are a total of 36 holes at The Grand’s Lakewood Golf Club consisting of the newly redesigned Dogwood Course and the Azalea Course.**



**The 157-year-old Grand Hotel Marriott Resort, Golf Club & Spa is an AAA Four Diamond Award family-friendly historical hotel that just completed a \$50 million renovation.**



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A \$4 million renovation of the Azalea was planned and Hurricane Ivan served to accelerate the schedule, says Skidmore. The par-72, 6,785-yard course should return to service in November of next year, he says. The 7,620-yard, par-72 Dogwood course underwent a \$7 million overhaul that was completed in July. Eight Rubico tennis courts are available. Four courts are lighted.

The 20,000-square-foot spa suffered no damage from Ivan. The European-style spa opened in May 2002. According to a survey by Marriott International, The Spa at The Grand ranked number one in guest satisfaction among all its properties.

"It's probably not the best [Marriott] spa," Skidmore says. "But when you couple it with the sense of relaxation here on the grounds and by the water, people have an extremely high overall satisfaction with their spa experience."

Since the renovation, the oldest updated guest room is just two and one-half years old, says Skidmore.

"The biggest thing with so many of our guests is that they come on a leisure or social basis," Skidmore says. "So they find it and they want to come back again and again. They come on vacation and wind up bringing meetings here."

The Grand has 23 meeting rooms including the 9,750-square-foot Grand Ballroom and its beachfront patio for parties and receptions. In addition, there are the 5,000-square-foot Azalea Ballroom and the 4,473-square-foot Magnolia Ballroom, accommodating up to 280 for banquets and 470 for meetings.

According to Skidmore, The Grand ranks in the top 30 of Marriott 305 properties in a survey of its guests' "overall satisfaction." He says the Grand fluctuates between fifth and 20th when polling a guest's "intent to



**Carnival Cruise Lines (above on its maiden cruise from Mobile this fall) plans some 75 sailings from the city during its first year of operation there. In addition to accommodations at The Grand Hotel, visitors will also enjoy the renovated Riverview Plaza Hotel (above left) and the restored historic Battle House Hotel (top) now under construction.**

return." He says the top reason for staying at The Grand was the "recommendation of others."

"That means someone else experienced The Grand and says, 'Oh, my God, you've got to go,' and we get that business," Skidmore says. "We get visited based on that recommendation more than any other property."

"Sometimes it seems like we're the best kept 150-year-old secret in the country," he says.

Since its acquisition by RSA, The Grand had coupled its long history and tradition with modern amenities. The sophistication of the high-tech business world is available in the Grand's state-of-the-art Business Center, able to accommodate any office need. That stands in juxtaposition to the century and a half of rich antebellum images.

Jutting out into the waters of beautiful Mobile Bay, the resort was born in 1847 as the vision of P.H. Cham-

berlain. Quickly, it became a glittering magnet for antebellum society. But that beginning as a luxurious resort gave way to The War Between the States when it became a Confederate hospital.

Union gunboats shelled the Grand during the war. About 300 soldiers are buried on its grounds. In 1871, the steamboat Ocean Wave exploded while docked at its pier, killing 200.

After the war, an enterprising steamboat captain, H.C. Baldwin, restored the property to its original splendor and, in 1875, renamed it "The Grand." In World War II, the property again was called into the service of its country, this time as a training facility for the U.S. Army.

Now, completely renovated, The Grand again assumes her original mission, reigning as the Queen of Southern Resorts. ■