

Beautifying the beach

A look at the team that cleans and smooths Clearwater Beach every morning.



Photos by DOUGLAS R. CLIFFORD | Times

Lead service technician Thomas Lanni uses a John Deere tractor to pull a beach rake through sand at Clearwater Beach.



Service technician Avery Bates removes sand from the area north of Pier 66 on Clearwater Beach during his pre-dawn shift on Friday.



Park service technician Major Marchman clears trash bins of refuse using a Broyhill hydraulic load and pack machine while cleaning the beach.



BY JACK EVANS
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CLEARWATER BEACH — They come into work and find a moonscape. At 5:30 a.m., when day shift clocks in, the beach is still dark — dark enough that, when you first come upon the sand, it seems to stretch infinitely beyond the headlights of the heavy machinery.

That is the light they work by; that and the soft glow from the hotels and, some mornings, the moon itself still tacked up to the sky.

It's in these lonesome pre-dawn hours that Clearwater's beach beautification team does some of its most important work — dumping trash, clearing detritus, raking the sand into a clean, smooth plane. Clearwater Beach is the crown jewel of a tourist economy that draws millions of people every year, and many of them expect it to be postcard-perfect.

Only a few people come to the beach before the sun rises: the die-hard runners, the treasure hunters with their metal detectors. But soon the first groups will emerge from the hotels to claim prime real estate for the day. Then comes the morning rush, bringing families sprawled on blankets, college kids with their clandestine beers.

Traffic will jam up; parking will vanish. The beach crews work throughout the day, landscaping and clearing sidewalks and keeping the beach clean, but only the early hours provide space for the heavy machinery, the little garbage trucks and beach rakes.

“Last week was crazy,” said Rory Brodil, the team's supervisor, making the rounds Friday morning in a new, beach-friendly four-wheeler.

During that middle week of March, when all of Tampa Bay's school districts and many of the state's colleges were off at once, traffic stretched to the landward side of the Clearwater Memorial Causeway by 10 a.m., she said. Throngs formed around Pier 60, never mind the red tide. She expected more heavy weekend crowds. March, according to Visit St. Pete/Clearwater, is the biggest tourist-tax month for both Pinellas County and Clearwater.

The beach team does this work every day, though, tourist season or not. By the end of each night, it will be ready for them again. The cones that mark off an emergency vehicle lane during busy seasons get scattered erratically. Aluminum cans are left jutting out of the sand.

There is something alluring about the repetition. Brian DeWitt, a manager in the city parks department, gets it: He compared the action of the beach rake, the tractorlike machine that snares junk with a steel-tined belt and flattens the sand behind it, to the rock gardens of Japanese Zen Buddhist tradition.

Major Marchman, who on Friday morning was driving a small dump-truck with a clawlike attachment to empty the garbage cans dotting the beach, sometimes takes a moment to watch the sunrise break behind the palms.

“You think you'd get used to it,” he said. After four months on the job, he hasn't.

And there is pleasure in the endless task of cleaning up. Last week, Brodil said, she got to work, went to the stretch of beach near Pier 60 and found “the whole area was covered in trash.”

What do the crews find on the beach? Peek in one of the dumpsters where the machines empty out: Busted umbrellas. Fast food bags. Seaweed snack packaging. So many diapers. So many cigarette butts. Cans of Mike’s Hard Lemonade, Mike’s Harder Lemonade, Simply Spiked Lemonade, Miller Light, Bud Light, Bud Light Lime and Bud Light Platinum.

Or ask Brodil about the objects she loads into a truck to make way for the heavy machinery: chairs, new-looking toys, boogie boards, those beach tents that prove more cumbersome than their users are ready for. “They aren’t able to pack them back up, and they just leave them out here.”

Or get to talking with Thomas Lanni, the lead worker on the first shift. He’s been on the job for five years.

“Sometimes, you’ll see a pile of blankets that just looks like a pile of blankets,” he said. “Then you get closer and it starts moving.”

That, he said, you get used to.

For whatever beach misbehavior might be evinced in litter or caught in the act, Brodil said the beachgoing population makes the public-facing part of the job easy. Until two months ago, she worked in the parks department’s athletics division, where coaches and parents found plenty to complain about. Now, everyone she meets is nice. Why is that?

“We’re out here on the beach,” she said. “Wouldn’t you be?”

Perhaps some of the beachgoers know they’re footing the bill: Beautification operations are sustained by Clearwater’s paid parking fund, a city spokesperson said. That’s a 20-person team and its machines, which, around all that salt and sand, work for only half as long as they would a few miles inland.

“Everything down here doesn’t last,” DeWitt said.

So it was, too, with the beach crew’s work. It was 8 a.m. now, and the day shift still had another 8 hours to go, but already its earliest work was being undone. People were snapping selfies in front of the waves, reaching down to snag shells, chucking a football toward the surf. They were drinking from disposable cups and cans. They were walking onto the beach, in their sneakers and flip-flops, leaving the day’s first footprints in the smoothed-out sand.

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