

Jersey Shore Nuns Find Salvation in Surf, T-Shirts



Each summer, teaching nuns from the Sister Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary recuperate from months spent in the classroom at their Jersey Shore retreat.

Along a certain stretch of the Jersey Shore, the t-shirts seen advertising Nuns' Beach seem to be just another bit of satirical beachwear targeted at the tourist trade. But the beach in question is very real, as are the nuns who have flocked to the popular surfing spot for the last 75 years.

Nuns' Beach is a one-block strip of sand in Stone Harbor, N.J., a hamlet 40 miles south of Atlantic City. The beach is attached to a facility owned by the Sister Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, a teaching order based in Pennsylvania. Each summer, the property fills with nuns weary from nine long months in the classroom.

When the sisters hit the sand dressed in their summer habits — a light-weight material in blue and white — they stand out amid the sea of flip flops and tank tops. The nuns even don bathing suits, with certain restrictions.

“Not a bikini,” said Sister Anne Pierre.

“No, no,” agreed Sister James Dolores, shaking her head. “We wear one-piece suits, with the little skirt sometimes.”



That modest swimwear is a big departure from earlier eras. “Almost 25 years ago we used to have to wear a full covering over our bathing suit and shoes on the beach and in the water,” said Sister Dolores. “People would walk down to the bulkhead to point and stare.”

Back in 1936, when most of the land between Atlantic City and Wildwood was still dunes and marsh, the sisters bought the six-and-half-acre beachfront property for \$2,000. Today it is flanked by \$5 million homes owned by vacationers from Philadelphia, Baltimore and New York.

The nuns built a retreat dubbed Villa Maria by the Sea, with enough space to sleep 150 sisters for the summer. “This retreat time at this oasis of prayer and peace reinvigorates us,” said Sister Dolores, who has been the full-time property manager since 1994. “It gets us ready to go back to the classroom.”

The sisters own their beach, which is rare in a town where most of the coast is public land. The beach was unprotected by municipal lifeguards in the early years, so the nuns hired their own.

Since the property faces some of the gnarliest waves in town, the sisters have long allowed surfers to get their fix whenever nuns aren’t on the beach. Those local surfers coined the term Nuns’ Beach for the strip, and the nickname stuck.

In the 1990s, when the order was struggling to pay a property-tax bill of more than \$100,000 and maintain their large facility, they took ownership of the Nuns’ Beach brand and began capitalizing on

their status as a righteous oddity on the sometimes profane Jersey Shore.

The Nuns' Beach Surf Invitational was launched in 1996 as a fund-raising vehicle, and the contest now attracts an array of local sponsors like Pete Smith's Surf Shop, Kindle Auto Plaza and the Windrift Hotel. Surfers come from as far as California to compete.



Despite the relationship between the sisters and the surfers, none of the women has made hanging ten a habit. With an average age of about 65, “most of us are too old” to surf, Sister Dolores said. “I do like to say that the sisters surf the waves of life in service of God’s people.”

As a money-making endeavor, the surfing competition hasn’t been a huge success. But Sister Dolores sees the annual event as a branding boon.

“It was through the surf contest that the people in the town and elsewhere became aware of who we are, what we do and that we’re needy,” she said. And t-shirt sales followed.

The Vatican may frown on the selling of indulgences, but the Pope never said anything about souvenirs. The sisters declined to say just how much revenue they generate annually, only that their bills are covered between merchandise sales, money raised in the surf contest and gifts from local benefactors.

They now sell Nuns' Beach visors, towels, magnets and — new this year — barbeque aprons. “Those are

moving really well,” Sister Dolores said. “The men love them.”

The nuns know how to cater to their beach-going clientele, with baseball caps featuring a clever slogan (“Pray for Surf: Nuns’ Beach”) and drawings of nuns carrying a board. Sister Dolores even turned herself into an icon for this year’s surf-contest logo.

“I got on the wave runner in my habit to pose for that picture,” she said with pride. Naturally, the image is now sold on t-shirts.

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