The turquoise blue coastline of Clearwater, Florida has much to offer its residents and visitors, but perhaps the beach’s most celebrated aspect—beyond its water, which really is clear—is its sand. Affectionately called “sugar sand” by the locals, it’s been lovingly rolled in, sunbathed on, and walked along for ages. But recently, someone decided to build an entire festival around it, and bring in expert sand artists (yes, there really is such a thing) to transform the famous sugar sand into larger-than-life sculptures.
As part of the 60th anniversary of Clearwater’s Fun ‘n Sun Festival—a 10-day family friendly celebration of fireworks, concerts, barbecues, and tournaments—the inaugural Frenchy’s Sugar Sand Festival (which debuted April 19, 2013) featured 1,000 tons of the cotton candy soft sand, hand crafted into a walkthrough maze of exhibits, all made out of sand. The 10,000 square-foot waterfront tent featured jaw-dropping displays of incredible skill (overhead constantly: “how did they do that?”), kid-friendly sand sculpting clinics, and rapid speed sand demonstrations, during which the sculptors took audience members’ unusual requests and turned them into masterpieces in a matter of minutes. A giant Camp Hyatt Sandbox just outside the tent allowed children to play in the fluffy, powdery particles and throw gigantic beach balls at each other.

Occurring during the year of Florida’s 500th anniversary, this event was years in the making. It was the brainchild of Lisa Chandler, a fixture in the area who’d first seen such masterful sand sculpting in South Africa, and decided those same sculptors had to come to her hometown and turn its sand into art.
works of art. It finally became reality this year after much imagining and planning, when Frenchy’s—an institution in Clearwater with several restaurant locations and a hotel—decided to be the main sponsor. Judging by the large amount of visitors and press attention, it was a great success, and will no doubt become an annual part of the Fun ‘n Sun Festival.

A true highlight of the festival—this year available to only a small group of VIP’s, next year to more people wishing to partake—was the in-sand dining experience. Tables were hand carved into the beach and beautifully decorated, and local upscale restaurants, such as Hyatt’s SHOR, served extravagant, five course dinners to the in-sand diners, while local passers-by oohed and ahhed.
Of course, if you’d like to partake of the crystal clear waters, meandering mile long beach promenade, al fresco seafood joints, and mild temperatures of this idyllic gulf coast town, there’s plenty to do year-round. Beyond attractions like the nearby Dali museum, the Clearwater Marine Aquarium (dedicated to rescue and rehabilitation, where Winter from *Dolphin Tale* resides), and countless boat tours, Clearwater is practically obsessed with ongoing – mostly free – events and festivals. This city, named “Florida’s Best Beach Town”, has a festival for every occasion.

Some of the hundreds include:

- **Sunsets at Pier 60**, a free celebration of the sunset with live music, street performers, crafts vendors, and beachfront movies (Nightly, 365 days/year)
- **The Bright House 2013 Clearwater Super Boat National Championship & Seafood Festival** (September 27-29, 2013)
- **The Hispanic Heritage Festival** (September/October)
- The Clearwater Jazz Holiday (October 17-20, 2013)

[Website Link]

Where to Stay

Hyatt Regency Clearwater Beach – This all-suite hotel with magnificent water views and a rooftop, gulf-facing swimming pool was the first high-end hotel to be built in recent years as part of a beach-wide refurbishment.
The hotel to be built in recent years as part of a beach-wide refreshment. Every suite features a full kitchen—making it perfect for families—and hotel dining ranges from casual poolside lunches with tropical drinks to the upscale and acclaimed SHOR American Seafood Grill. Private cabanas, a full-service spa, and live music on the pool deck make it beachy and luxurious. 301 South Gulfview Blvd., Clearwater, 727-373-1234; clearwaterbeach.hyatt.com

Where to Eat

Frenchy’s – With four locations in Clearwater, each a little different, chances are every visitor to this beach town will wind up eating at one of them. They are famous for their grouper – they have their own grouper boats – but everything served at these casual eateries is surprisingly good considering the reasonable price points. If you see a man around town who seems to know everyone, it’s probably Frenchy – he opened his first restaurant here in 1981 and is still involved in day to day operations. www.frenchysonline.com

Clear Sky Café – At any time of day this popular restaurant is overflowing, but it’s the brunch that truly brings in the crowds, and for good reason. The unique Bloody Mary bar is a favorite among locals and tourists alike, and with five different types of French toast and six varieties of eggs benedict, there’s no shortage of choices. Go for the lobster brie bennie—it’s incredibly decadent and delicious, and at $12.95, a steal. 490 Mandalay Ave., Clearwater, 727-442-3684; www.clearskybeachsidecafe.com

Tags: Aquarium, beach, Clearwater, entertainment, Florida's 500th Anniversary, foods, Fun 'n Sun Festival, Hotels, Kid-friendly, Pamela Jacobs, Sand sculptures, Sugar Sand