



Thrift Shop Tourism

In cars, on buses or while sailing the seas, Patti Clark, Florida's Happy Thrifter, treats her guests like Resale Queens.

BY WAYNE JORDAN

When Patti Clark stepped into an elevator aboard the Royal Caribbean cruise ship, she was dressed “to the nines” in her thrift shop cocktail dress. A woman behind her leaned forward and whispered into her ear, “I love your outfit, but you have left the price tag on.” Clark replied, “I know. I’m heading to our Minnie Pearl Happy Hour and Fashion Show. Everyone wears their favorite thrift store cocktail wear, leaving the price tags attached as a nod to comedienne Minnie Pearl.” Clark’s reply created a buzz among the elevator

crowd, and suddenly everyone wanted more information about the thrifting group and what they were up to.

“What they were up to” was another Happy Thrifter cruise from Tampa to Cozumel, Mexico. It was a gathering of new and old friends brought together by their love of thrifting and a desire to have a lighthearted good time. The business tagline of Clark, a.k.a. The Happy Thrifter, is “We Put the Fun in Resale Adventures.” Browsing the photos on her website and Facebook page, it’s apparent that this is true. I’ve never seen so many genuine smiles and sparkling eyes. Says Clark, “We are so thrilled to now offer

three ways — buses, cars and cruises — to participate in Thrift Shop Tourism.”

Thrift Shop Tourism

Bill Shafer, the host of the Emmy-nominated PBS series “Growing Bolder,” coined the phrase “Thrift Shop Tourism,” and the concept has taken root in Southwest Florida. Interviewing Clark, Shafer says, “It’s really never happened before where someone has connected all of these independent little shops in Tampa, and St. Pete, and Clearwater, and beyond, and created an outing, a safe way for everybody to get together, and socialize, and just have fun. You’ve invented Thrift Shop Tourism.”



Patti Clark poses with a cruise ship to Cozumel. Her Happy Thrifter motto: "Let Go and Have Fun."

Indeed.

A headline in the Charlotte County edition of *Florida Weekly* reads, “The Happy Thrifter tours turn shopping into a popular attraction.” Happy Thrifter Tours has become a media darling in Southwest Florida. They have been featured on Fox 13 Tampa Bay, WFLA News, WTSP 10, and over three dozen other newspapers, magazines, podcasts, and television broadcasts.

Stage One: The Newspaper

When Clark moved to Florida 20 years ago to care for her parents, she was already an established eBay seller. Southwest Florida was thick with resale shops, and she capitalized on the glut to keep her eBay store stocked. She made friends wherever she went – Happy Thrifter isn’t just her business name; it’s her life’s philosophy. Other shoppers would often remark, “Wouldn’t it be nice if there were a brochure listing all these stores?” Clark jumped on the idea. Leveraging her knowledge of local thrift markets, Clark created a brochure titled “The Happy Thrifter.”

The brochure has since grown into a full-sized newspaper listing resale shops from Ocala to Naples – about 450 of them. It is published four times yearly in two editions, one for the Greater Tampa Bay area and another covering Apollo Beach to Naples. Each edition is typically over 70 pages and contains merchant information, stories and advertising. It’s distributed free to the public at Happy Thrifter merchants, airports and visitor centers. Each edition includes a four-page pull-out map for personal auto touring titled “Road to Resale Adventures.” Patrons can use the map to plot a rewarding thrifting/resale route.

Stage Two: Motorcoach Tours

Early on, Clark shopped with friends, but her car was only big enough for four people. She often quipped, “Someday, I’m going to rent a bus and take everybody.” Thus began the Mystery Bus Tours. What’s the Mystery? On the first trip, patrons asked where the bus was going, and Clark shared the itinerary. Unfortunately, not everyone agreed on the destinations. On subsequent trips, Clark replied, “Where we are going is a mystery. The itinerary will be announced on the bus.”

Mystery Bus Tours happen on Thursdays. The coach picks up passengers – dubbed “Resale Queens” – in several cities. The bus makes four to six merchant stops daily, depending on the destinations. Stops are chosen from seventeen cities from Ocala to Naples. At these “shop until you resale drop” events, patrons are gone all day, from 8 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Participants are asked to bring shopping bags and a suitcase, box, or lidded plastic tub for storing their purchases in the bus’ cargo area. The merchants provide snack trays, door prizes and discounts.

A luxury motorcoach full of like-minded people is just the beginning. Since Florida traffic sometimes moves slowly, there are movies, popcorn, and – for those who imbibe – wine (strictly BYOB) to fill the slow spots. The deal includes a catered lunch, gift certificates, door prizes, raffles and merchant swag bags. Best of all, merchants offer hefty discounts to participants – around 70%. At checkout, patrons show their Happy Thrifter wristbands to get the discount. The steep discounts on



Images courtesy Patti Clark

merchandise make the \$84 bus ticket worth the investment.

Stage Three: Thrifting Trip Cruises

The third part of the Happy Thrifter Adventures is the “OH SHIP, Florida Girls Thrifting Trip” event. These four-night cruises depart from the Port of Tampa to the Western Caribbean or from Miami to Key West and the Bahamas.

Onboard activities are planned with the group in mind:

- Welcome meet and greet and group photo session
- Guest speakers sharing tips on reselling and thrifting
- Minnie Pearl Happy Hour and Fashion Show



A well-read group of Happy Thrifters.



A Mystery Bus Tour welcoming committee in Punta Gorda, Fla.

- “Make Ship” free thrift store
- White Elephant gift exchange
- Game nights, including the popular Slot Pull Group Game
- Dazzle Duck Hide and Seek

The usual cruising amenities apply:

- Onboard meals all-day
- Swimming, dancing, and performances
- Port shopping

Local Tourism Success

Happy Thrifter events are in demand in Southwest Florida; the buses and cruises book quickly, and the newspaper has become an invaluable resource for thrifters. But thrifters aren't the only

ones that benefit – merchants and the organizations they represent have found a steady source of revenue in these events. In 2021, at the height of the pandemic, the Happy Thrifter buses kept running (applying the usual safety precautions). When Clark reviewed the tour results for the pandemic year, she learned that the 23 tours still generated \$218,000 in revenue for her Happy Thrifter merchants.

Keeping the tours running smoothly is no small task; there are a lot of details to attend to. Clark's degree in marketing and her years of experience as an event planner enable her to keep her team of 23 on track. Her team includes office and editorial staff, tour sales and

support, tour guides, marketing and distribution.

Tourism is booming, as is the second-hand market. Worldwide, revenue from used merchandise is expected to reach \$77 billion by 2025, up from \$36 billion in 2021. Shopping – thrift or retail – is integral to travel and vacations. Tourism boards nationwide should “hitch their wagons” to this surging trend.

To reach Patti Clark, order a copy of *The Happy Thrifter* newspaper, book a bus tour or cruise, or join the mailing list visit www.thehappythrifershopper.com. You'll find their Facebook group at www.facebook.com/thehappythrifershopper.