

Thrifting by the busload

Trips have made stops in Venice, Punta Gorda and Fort Myers

By **SARA DINATALE**
TAMPA BAY TIMES

ST. PETERSBURG — Patti Clark stood at the front of a 60-seat coach bus with a microphone in hand.

“OK, resale queens,” she shouted, “that was a great shop. Wasn’t it?”

Rows of smiling faces cheered and clapped in agreement. A few stragglers stood outside the 40-foot bus, loading their hauls into the undercarriage. The rest sat cozy in their seats, clutching totes filled with home decor, clothing and other knickknacks.

For the last four years, Clark has led bus tours around Florida at \$60 a ticket. But there are no stops at the beach or visits to the state’s famous theme parks.

Instead, the people on board have a specific mission: to thrift, bargain and find a mix of great deals and vintage treasures. As more and more people find out about the “Mystery Resale Shopping Bus Tours,” the quicker they sell out.

Resale and secondhand shopping is having a major moment. The number of resale shops — from vintage boutiques to nonprofit charity shops — has grown 7% in each of the past two years, according to the Association of Resale Professionals. Even major retailers are partnering with online thrift and consignment stores to get in on the action.



TAMPA BAY TIMES PHOTO BY SARA DINATALE

Patti Clark, standing, and her busload of “Happy Thrifters.” Clark takes about 60 shoppers around to some of Florida’s best thrift shops. Her newest route just launched in St. Petersburg.

But Clark’s Mystery Tours may be among the most creative resale oriented businesses. Clark maps out thrift and vintage shop stops along a route that usually focuses around one city or region. She slots out about an hour for each shop, meticulously planning everything long before her shoppers hop on board. Each trip has a catered lunch, door prizes and raffles.

OFTEN START IN VENICE

The trips often launch in Venice, where Clark lives. From there, the bus stops at designated pickup points on its way to that day’s city. Clark just launched the St. Petersburg route, which featured shops such as the Market at Left Bank, Bungaleaux on Central and the local Goodwill. The

tickets sold out in 29 minutes.

“I was in the shower and I heard bells,” Clark said. “I couldn’t figure out what it was.”

It was the email alerts as her inbox quickly filled with ticket sales. The new route and St. Pete’s thriving thrift scene appealed to Clark’s loyal clientele. Some of the women on the most recent tour lived as close as Sarasota, but had never explored St. Pete’s thrift shops and vintage boutiques.

Kathleen Johnson slid two boxes of like-new brightly colored fiesta silverware in front of the cashier at the Market at Left Bank. Johnson, a retired Spanish teacher from Sarasota, was spending the day searching for housewarming gifts for a friend who just purchased a new bungalow.

Just outside the shop, women

sipped free coffee and champagne. They mingled, laughed and talked about past and upcoming trips with the bus tour: Fort Myers, Bradenton and Punta Gorda.

“So where are you off to next?” the cashier, Teyka Steh, asked Johnson as she placed the silverware in a large paper bag.

“We don’t know,” Johnson said, laughing. “They don’t tell us.”

MORE LIKE A TREASURE HUNT

It’s all part of the fun, Clark said. Keeping the route a surprise makes the journey feel even more like a treasure hunt. The bus stops at other cities to pick up thrifters along the way to the destination. On the road, they watch movies on bus TV screens, munch on popcorn and sip wine coolers.

More thrifting Information

To learn more about the mystery shopping tours and area thrifting, check out The Happy Thrifter at thehappythriftersshopper.com

To read some of the strange items people have found while shopping, visit this Facebook page:

www.facebook.com/StrangebuttrueFloridaThriftStoreFinds

Clark estimates her trips pump about \$10,000 total into the local shops they visit on any given trip. She calls her company and its newspaper about the state’s best thrift shops and vintage stores the Happy Thrifter.

The recent St. Pete tour was mostly made up of retired women, though Clark said some trips have had younger people. One of her favorite shoppers was a 91-year-old man named Arthur. Her most loyal shopper has been on 16 trips. Some are seeking gifts, others their own goodies or items they may be able to sell for a profit online or in their own stores.

Clark runs trips regularly between November and May. Her next one is March 12 through Bonita Springs and Naples. She always does them on Thursday, when shops aren’t as busy, so the focus can be on her crew of resale queens.

While at the Bungaleaux, a woman who goes by “High Hair Mare” shouted down the shop’s stairs to Maria Dicicco, a Nokomis jewelry maker.

SEE THRIFT, 3D