



STORY BY CHRISTINE SCHAFFRAN

JUST BEACHY

Tried-and-true sellers make these coastal souvenir stores must-stops in their beach towns year after year.

In any seaside shop, an owner or buyer can name their bestselling souvenir.

In Santa Monica, it's the magnet.

"We found out that people love magnets," says Katherine Vasquez, retail manager and buyer for Premier Parks LLC, which operates Pacific Park amusement park and the Pier Gear gift shop on the Santa Monica Pier in California. "They come from all over the world and take it home as a souvenir."

Among the bestselling magnets is one that's cus-

tom made with iconic images of the Ferris wheel, the Santa Monica arch, and the Route 66 sign at the end of the pier.

Not only is there a wall front and center within the store dedicated to the small magnetic mementos, but there is another unit elsewhere on the boardwalk called The Magnet Wall that hopes to catch the attention of avid collectors.

Vasquez believes it's the portability that make them so popular for travelers.

"I think after the pandemic, we saw a shift," she

explains. "Now when people travel on an airplane they have to pay extra for luggage, so they want to carry smaller stuff, so magnets definitely do well."

A WEARABLE WINNER

In Gulf Shores, Alabama, Owner Andrea Weir doesn't hesitate to name her No. 1 seller at Island Outfitters.

"T-shirts are the number-one-selling item in the whole store," she declares without a second thought. "And it has been for decades. As long as I've been in the business."

As a third-generation souvenir store owner, Weir's experience in the industry spans decades. Her grandmother, Josephine Weir Nittolo, began as the cafe owner of Jo's Lunchbox, cooking fishermen's catch and other food, before shifting to retail and introducing locals to Souvenir City in 1956 — before the town of Gulf Shores was even established. Today, Weir is proud to be one of the few locally owned companies in the town where her family is known as one of the founding families.

In 2008, Weir took all of her industry know-how and poured it into an 18,000-square-foot building with a pale yellow and coastal blue facade that stands a block from the sugar-white beaches; a totem-pole sign beckons beach goers to stop in and have a look around.

Once inside, guests can wander through shelves filled with beach souvenirs such as beach towels, chairs, shoes, swimsuits, floaties, sunglasses, ashtrays, picture frames, shot glasses, coffee cups, snow globes, wind chimes and jewelry. If that's not enough, they can peruse the racks of hoodies, jackets and sweatpants before finding the perfect T-shirt adorned with pineapples, palm trees, sharks, crabs, turtles, mermaids, hammocks or cocktails — with most also including a salute to their Gulf Shores locale.

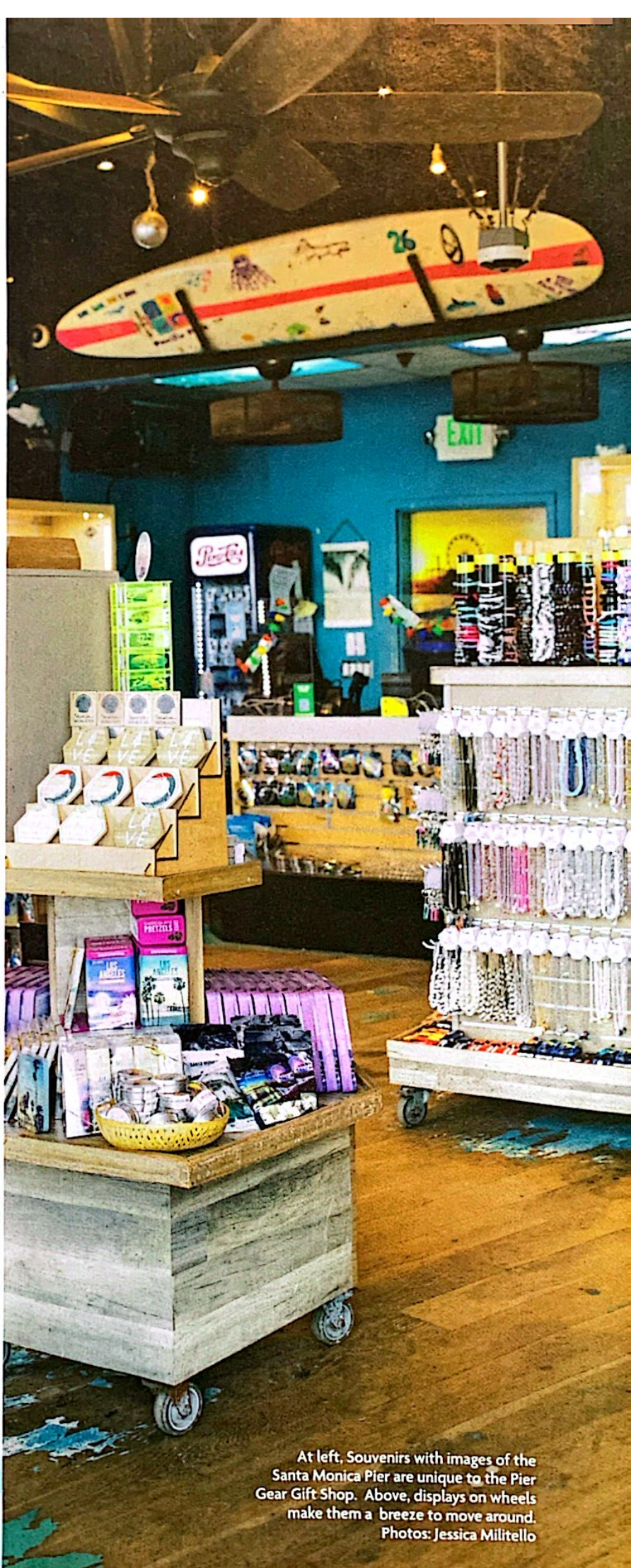
Among those that put a smile on the faces of tourists and visitors are tie-dyed T-shirts — a fad that Weir notes is cyclical in popularity that ebbs and flows when new generations discover it.

And while the T-shirt has never wavered as a favorite, there are others that hold a special place and even call guests back for a second visit, maybe even a year or more later.

"We make a lot of fudge in our own kitchen on site here, so a lot of people come back remembering the fudge, craving the fudge, buying the fudge," Weir says. "I tend to forget about that."

Fortunately for her, visitors don't forget the unique flavors the store churns out, such as peanut butter chocolate, Almond Joy, strawberry daiquiri, chocolate walnut, chocolate pomegranate and pumpkin walnut pecan caramel. Among the favorites for Weir is the store's bushwhacker flavor, she notes with a laugh.

"We change our flavors a lot," she says. "Maybe



At left, Souvenirs with images of the Santa Monica Pier are unique to the Pier Gear Gift Shop. Above, displays on wheels make them a breeze to move around. Photos: Jessica Militello



says. "They're people that we can trust. Over the years you see a lot of stuff changing, so the ongoing relationships are important."

When it comes to top vendors at Island Outfitters, Weir notes, she remains loyal to the vendors that have been doing business with her family since her grandmother began. She says the relationships are sacred for more than one reason.

"Some of my vendors ship me merchandise in January, February and I don't have to pay for it until July because they're vendors that I've been doing business with for that long," she explains. "My parents did business with them, and my grandmother did business with their grandparents so it's

a generational thing. It's important for me to have a vendor that's been around a long time, that knows what they're doing and that has a good product."

The bottom line is when it comes down to selecting souvenirs, trust your gut, your numbers and your vendors.

After all these years, Vasquez still relies on basic retail formulas to sell products and find merchandise that appeals to Pier Gear visitors. She says working with what you have and making it pop is all you need to turn a "no" into a "whoa."

"People are visual buyers. They're drawn to something that catches their eye," she explains. "So keep your displays full and looking nice." SGN

Pier Gift Shop visitors in Virginia Beach will find an eclectic mix to choose from. Photos: Don Monteaux



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