



WORKING FOR SCALE

Tampa Bay Times, July 1, 2018

Florida's best-known industries include citrus, seafood and selling tacky souvenirs to tourists. But there's one booming Florida industry that hardly ever gets a mention from the Chamber of Commerce folks.

Mermaids.

All over the state there are now scores of women—and a few men—who regularly pull on prosthetic tails and pretend to be those mythical creatures made popular by Hans Christian Andersen and Walt Disney. Some do it for fun, but quite a few are diving into it as a business, charging by the hour to appear at everything from birthday parties to political events.

“This mermaid industry has just skyrocketed. It's crazy,” said Eric Ducharme, aka “the Mertailor,” whose Crystal River-based business is making high-quality tails. “I don't know if it's a fad, or if it's here to stay.”

To judge how crazy the mermaid business is right now, consider this: Ducharme, a Lecanto native, sells custom-designed tails for up to \$5,000 each. He's working on 80 now, each one designed to match the customers' personal measurements.

“Half of those people who have purchased those tails are just hobbyists,” he said. “It's a way for people to connect to a different world, but not in a weird type of sense.”

But for the rest, it's a business and they're all trying to make a splash. Their swimming may look leisurely, but they hustle for high-profile gigs. For instance, when Tampa played host to the Republican National Convention in 2012, a party at the Florida Aquarium featured mermaids cavorting in the fish tanks.

To see where Florida's mermaid industry started, you have to visit Weeki Wachee Springs State Park. That's where Ducharme got his start, too, although he quit when he was a teenager, blaming what he called “mermaid politics” for ruining his dream job.

A former Navy frogman named Newton Perry created this Hernando County roadside attraction in 1947 by cleaning all the old refrigerators and other junk out of the spring and building an underwater theater full of hidden air hoses. Then he hired nubile women to perform a languid, aquatic ballet in the crystal-clear water, to the delight of the ticket-buying public.

In the 1950s, Weeki Wachee was one of the nation's most popular tourist stops, but it nearly went belly-up in the 2000s when the profits (ahem) tailed off. In 2008, the Florida Department of Environmental Protection bought it and turned it into a state park.

As a result, Florida is the only state where the list of government jobs includes "mermaid." Starting pay is \$10 an hour.

When Weeki Wachee held auditions in January 2018 for six new mermaid positions, 60 people showed up, despite the cold. In maybe the most Florida thing ever, a manatee surfaced in the spring right in the middle of their swimming trials.

Stayce McConnell, 38, the lead mermaid at Weeki Wachee, grew up watching the mermaid shows and marveling at the way they glided through the water. Now, after 16 years on the staff, she oversees the training for the newbies. It combines earning scuba certification, learning first aid and underwater choreography, plus "all the tests you have to take to be a state employee," she said.

The ones selected trained hard for three months before ever swimming in their first show. Their graduation was marked by performing a routine they designed.

"Once you know how to be a mermaid, it's something that's a part of you," she said. "You don't do it for the money. You do it for the experience."

But other mermaids are definitely in it for the money. In St. Augustine, Trina Mason started out playing around with underwater photography, which led to her becoming a mermaid for hire who also breathes fire and occasionally juggles. She's been doing it for six years, most recently at Wolf's Museum of Mystery.

She had to figure out the business on her own. She once caught her own chin on fire. She spent \$400 on her first tail, and it caused an uproar among the other mermaids because it was a copy of someone else's. Her second, an original by the Mertailor, cost \$2,600. She now charges \$300 an hour to swim around in that 60-pound silicone-and-neoprene special.

Meanwhile, down in Fort Lauderdale, Marina Anderson regularly pulls on her tail to do snap rolls as she swims past the portholes in the historic Wreck Bar. She became fascinated by the life aquatic as a girl in Puerto



Marina Anderson (*center*), who goes by the names “MeduSirena” and “Marina, the Fire Eating Mermaid,” poses with some of the mermaids she leads in underwater performances for the patrons of the Wreck Bar in Fort Lauderdale. Photo courtesy of Marina Anderson.

Rico, watching Jacques Cousteau documentaries and Esther Williams movies. She started free diving before she was 10 and later studied marine biology.

Now she considers herself “a dance performer” who models her mermaid moves on sea lions. She supervises a squad of 15 mermaids who put on seven shows a week at the Wreck Bar. Sometimes they perform underwater burlesque in which the tails come off.

She’s even done some fire-eating (not to be confused with fire-breathing), earning her the nickname of “Marina, the Fire Eating Mermaid.” She also goes by “MeduSirena.” She’s 47, and jokes, “It’s a good thing water lifts!”

She wants bar patrons watching her show to become immersed in the illusion that they’re watching a real mermaid.

“If I chill right in front of one of the windows and they aren’t thinking about the fact that I’m not breathing and my eyes are being assaulted by chemicals, but they’re just appreciating the artistry of it, then my job is done,” she said.

Serena Woody, 29, of Pensacola, started off making mermaid-themed art, then began dressing as a mermaid to sell it at art shows, and then wound up running a business called Mermaids of Nue Blue Hues.

She’s part of a “pod” of 15 part-time mermaids who, she said, like to get

together once or twice a month to “take a break from reality and be weird and swim around for an hour or two and then go have lunch.”

Six of them work for her, rotating duties as they show up at birthday parties and other celebrations for pay. If the event is on dry land, that’s \$150 for two hours. If they have to swim around, then they charge \$250 for two hours.

“The mermaid community is bigger than people realize,” Woody said. “Maybe it’s because we’re kind of below the surface.”