

# The Happy Thrifter tours turn shopping into a popular attraction

BY EMILY LEINFUSS

Special to Florida Weekly

A Florida company has put “thrift shopping tourism” on the map with its destination resale adventures via bus tour or car road trip. In a state known primarily as a vacation destination, that’s no small feat.

The Happy Thrifter is a 6-year-old business that publishes an annual Happy Thrifter Resale Shopping Guide and offers Happy Thrifter Mystery Resale/Thrifting Shopping Bus Tours from its headquarters in Venice.

“Our ‘tour-ists’ are telling us that visiting thrift and resale stores is on their bucket list of things to do in Southwest Florida,” said company founder and owner Patti Clark. Whether they’ve experienced a Happy Thrifter bus tour adventure or designed their own thrifting/resale excursion with the help of a four-page pullout map in the Resale Shopping Guide, they’re all reporting in as satisfied customers, Ms. Clark added.

“It’s really never happened before, that someone has connected all of these independent little shops in Tampa, St. Pete, Clearwater and beyond and created an outing,” said TV producer Bill Schafer, who interviewed Ms. Clark and featured the Mystery Resale/Thrifting Shopping Bus Tour on his show, “Growing Bolder” on WEDU-PBS.

“You’ve put ‘thrift shop tourism’ on the map,” Mr. Schafer noted, adding that that Happy Thrifter Mystery Tours are “a safe way for everybody to get together and socialize, and just have fun.”

Kate Holmes, who’s been a business consultant to professional resalers since 1982, agrees.

“I believe (the statistics) say the No. 2 or No. 3 activity for Americans on vacation is shopping — and that trend doesn’t just mean buying retail,” she said. “The Association of Resale Professionals reports that ‘resale destination shopping is also on the rise.’”

According to NARTS, “No one is immune to the excitement of finding a treasure and saving money. Shrewd shoppers take advantage of the opportunity resale offers to save money on apparel, furniture, and other consumer goods.”

A natural entrepreneur, Ms. Clark began to turn her passion for thrifting into a successful enterprise in 2017. The first “The Happy Thrifter Resale Guide” was 24 pages when it published in 2018. The 2022 edition has expanded to 72 pages and two editions, one for the Greater Tampa Bay area and one that covers Apollo Beach to Naples. They are available at area visitor racks, airports, welcome centers and Happy Thrifter merchants.

Ms. Clark’s Mystery Resale/Thrifting Shopping Bus Tours have also experienced phenomenal growth since launching in 2018. An initial seven area



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## Resale queens gather in front of the bus

tours have increased to 17, including Venice, Bradenton, Naples, Fort Myers, Port Charlotte, Punta Gorda, Englewood, Sun City Center/Ruskin, Ellenton/Palmetto, Lakeland, St. Pete, Bonita Springs, Cape Coral, North Fort Myers and Tampa.

“I knew that Patti was on to something,” said Happy Thrifter shopper, crafty artist and business proprietor Maria Diccio. “One day she wandered into the store I used to have in Nokomis and started telling me her ideas about publishing a thrifting guide and taking people on resale tours.”

Ms. Clark came back to the store the following day and asked Ms. Diccio — currently the owner of the Venice Mercado, an indoor vintage and antique flea market — to invest in her vision.

Ms. Diccio reported that, “Just then, someone came into the store and asked, ‘Is there any place else to shop?’ I handed her a check, and the rest is history.”

## Like Disney for shoppers

When Ms. Clark refers to the Mystery Resale/Thrifting Shopping Bus Tours as “the new Disney World for shoppers,” she’s not just talking about how entertaining and diverse they are, but also how much behind-the-scenes planning goes into each one. And when she calls participants “Resale Queens,” it’s because they really do get the royal treatment.

A catered lunch, door prizes and raffles — all on a luxury motor coach — are only the beginning. Ms. Clark also must coordinate details such as door prizes, gift certificates, goodie bags and special Happy Thrifter discounts with the six stores included on each tour. Plus, many tours have themes, including Holiday, Luxury, Valentine’s, Mardi Gras, Easter and more.

On one Christmas tour, Loving Hands Thrift store in Bradenton brought in Santa, offered holiday songs and cookies, and saw store manager Sheri Kentner, along with store volunteers, dressing up as elves. Ms. Clark recalls that, and other festivities organized by the destination stores.

“At Loving Hands, Santa and the others were waving to us as we arrived. The Red Barn Flea Market in Bradenton met us off the bus with golf carts to bring our supplies in for lunch into the building. That was a hoot. Vintage Marche (St. Pete) clapped for all of us as we got off the bus and entered the store. Habitat for Humanity Restore in Port Charlotte had ‘WELCOME HAPPY THRIFTER’ on its marquee on U.S. 41, and Salvation Army Family Thrift Store in St. Pete put ‘WELCOME RESALE QUEENS’ on its street signage marquee.”

The “tour-ists” themselves attest to how creative, fun and special their shopping adventures have been.

“It was like going on a treasure hunt; you never know what you may find,” said Lynn Stull, who discovered a beautiful sculpture of a mother and baby dolphin on her tour.

“I went on one of the first tours and have been on many more, sometimes as a tour guide, said Ms. Diccio. “What’s amazing is, through these years, it’s become a true meeting place for people of all ages. There are repeat customers. It feels like family.”

Ms. Ketner observed that, “Women’s groups and some men are looking for things to do, especially during the Florida snowbird season. The Resale Tour offers the opportunity for people to spend the entire day together, finding bargains and unique things while having fun.”

## Resale cachet and cash-save

The success of The Happy Thrifter enterprise reflects the growing acceptance and even cachet of resale/thrift shopping, according to consultant Ms. Holmes. She points to resale’s ecological and economic benefits as that trend’s drivers. Ecologically, resale and recycling are simply one and the same.

Economically, buying resale means consumers save on goods they either need or want and with enterprises like the Mystery Resale/Thrifting Shopping Bus Tours and The Happy Thrifter Resale Shopping Guides, more business is driven into local Southwest Florida economies.

What’s more, because many Happy Thrifter merchants support mission-driven nonprofit organizations, it’s also “bargain shopping for a greater good,” according to FOX 13 News in Tampa. Take, for example, Naples’ Shelter Options Shoppe, which helps victims of domestic violence and human trafficking rebuild their lives; SunCoast Hospice Thrift Store in St. Pete, which assists individuals and families who need hospice care; and Bradenton’s Loving Hands Ministry, where sales go to the organization’s 24-month residential, faith-based drug and alcohol treatment program.

When Ms. Clark added up just how much the Resale Tours brought to local communities, she was astonished.

“For the 23 tours we did before COVID, the amount exceeded \$218,000,” she noted. “You can’t put a price on that kind of community service.”

For more information about The Happy Thrifter, call Ms. Clark at 816-352-0975, email [thehappythriftershopper@gmail.com](mailto:thehappythriftershopper@gmail.com), or see [www.ThriftShopping-Tourism.com](http://www.ThriftShopping-Tourism.com) or [www.thehappythriftershopper.com](http://www.thehappythriftershopper.com). ■

# National Shell Museum’s free online lecture series continues Sept. 14

The Bailey-Matthews National Shell Museum’s free online lecture series continues at 5:30 p.m. Wednesday, Sept. 14, with “Saving the Queen of the Sea: Queen Conch Conservation Aquaculture.” The talk will be led by Megan Davis, Ph.D., research professor, Aquaculture and Stock Enhancement Program at Florida Atlantic University Harbor Branch Oceanographic Institute.

Conservation aquaculture is the farming of fresh and saltwater plants and animals for restoration and food. Dr. Davis’s focus for the past 40 years has been aquaculture for the queen conch, a species of mollusk that is a cultural icon of Florida, the Bahamas,

and the Caribbean. They are known for their beautiful pink-lipped shell and are harvested as a fishery species for delicacies such as conch chowder, fritters, and salad. The talk will explore the life cycle of the queen conch, the status of the conch fishery, and how FAU Harbor Branch has joined with partners and communities to build and expand queen conch throughout the Caribbean for the sake of the species, the ecosystem, and the people who depend on the fishery for their livelihoods.

Dr. Davis has led many team projects throughout the Caribbean and Florida, including 10 years in the Turks

and Caicos Islands as co-founder and chief scientist for the world’s largest queen conch farm. Dr. Davis and her team work on queen conch restoration and conservation community partnership projects in Florida, the Bahamas, Puerto Rico and other locations in the Caribbean. See [www.conch-aquaculture.org](http://www.conch-aquaculture.org) for more information and follow Dr. Davis on Instagram @queenconchlab for regular updates on the projects.

The 2022 online lecture series is made possible by a gift from Mark and Kathy Helge.

Registration is required at [ShellMuseum.org/lectures](http://ShellMuseum.org/lectures). ■



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Megan Davis, Ph.D., research professor, Aquaculture and Stock Enhancement Program, Florida Atlantic University.