Dining and entertainment empire-builder Tilman Fertitta is working toward an opening in late May for his new Galveston Island Pleasure Pier, which will jut out 1,000 feet over the surf at Seawall Boulevard and 25th Street.

Savvy native son looks to recapture Isle’s past

Fertitta resurrecting iconic Pleasure Pier built in 1943

By David Kaplan

As a boy growing up in Galveston, Tilman Fertitta rode his bike up and down the Seawall. He went to fairs and carnivals when they hit town and had a season pass to Sea-Arama Marineworld. In high school he worked as a lifeguard at the Flagship Hotel and engaged in another beach town tradition — flirting with out-of-town girls.

Now Fertitta, who built a fortune with a showman’s flair, is resurrecting one of Galveston’s most iconic tourist attractions — the Pleasure Pier. The $60 million project will put a roller coaster and Ferris wheel over the Gulf of Mexico and is expected to encourage visitors to extend their trips to the island.

It’s the latest waterfront venture in Fertitta’s dining and entertainment empire. “Subliminally, Galveston has had a huge impact on me,” Fertitta said in his first detailed public comments on the project. “I realized how people flocked to the water. You are always going to do a lot of business by the water.”

Construction is under way. After its scheduled late-May opening, the Galveston Island Historic Pleasure Pier will jut out 1,000 feet over the surf at 25th Street, where the original Pleasure Pier stood from 1943 until it was destroyed by Hurricane Carla in 1961. More recently, it was the site of the Flagship, an over-the-water hotel built in 1965 that was demolished after 2006’s Hurricane Ike.

The project will feature 16 rides, carnival games and souvenir shops. Food vendors will offer sausage-on-a-stick and other tourist favorites. And it...
will house the state’s first Bubba Gump Shrimp Co., which Ferrita owns through his Houston-based Landry’s.

Ferrita says he aims to make the Pleasure Pier a first-rate family-friendly tourist spot on par with the Navy Pier in Chicago and Santa Monica Pier in Southern California. Most of the rides will be unique to Southeast Texas, and Mike Kane, regional director of Landry’s theme park division, says the pier will be a key addition to the Galveston area. Before the original Pleasure Pier, there was another amusement venue across the bayou: Electric Park, built in 1906, featured vaudeville shows, rides, trinkets, a restaurant and a man covered in tattoos. The rides lit up at night, said Dwayne Jones, executive director of the Galveston Historical Foundation.

The original Pleasure Pier featured rides, an arcade, an aquarium, concessions and fishing at the end of the pier, Jones said.

High-profile rides at the new Pleasure Pier will include the Iron Shark Steel Roller Coaster, a 100-foot-tall structure offering four 360-degree inversions and a back stretch that catapults over the water, the Texas Star Flier, which will swing riders over the water 250 feet above the Gulf, and a 100-foot-tall Ferris wheel called Galaxy Wheel with programmable LED lights. Kane said.

Visitors will have to pay an admission fee, not yet set, to enter the amusement area. But diners at Bubba Gump won’t have to pay an extra fee. Jeff Cantwell, Landry’s senior vice president of development, said.

Ferrita acquired the 30,000-square-foot Bubba Gump seafood chain soon after taking Landry’s private in 2010. Many of the Galveston restaurateurs are in tourist spots internationally, from Bali operations on that stretch, including the San Luis Resort, Rainforest Cafe, Hilton and Holiday Inn hotels and Landry’s seafood house. Ferrita said the new Pleasure Pier’s next project will help Galveston as it continues to rebound from Hurricane Ike in 2015. Last year’s tourist season was the city’s second-best ever, based on hotel occupancy, he noted.

"The Flagship Hotel was a show of strength after Hurricane Ike," Ferrita said.

Likewise, he added, the new Pleasure Pier will add to the city’s post-Ike vitality.

david.kaplan@chron.com

The Electric Park, which occupied an area near the Seawall and 25th Street, featured vaudeville shows, rides, a restaurant and a man covered in tattoos.

A vintage postcard depicts the original Pleasure Pier, which drew throngs with rides, arcades, an aquarium, and a fishing pier. Now a new Pleasure Pier is going up at the same location.

Thomas K. Shea

The mild weather that drew joggers to the Seawall has been a boon to construction on the new Pleasure Pier, which replaces the Flagship Hotel in Galveston.

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