



Sea Isle City Gears Up For Annual Winter Swim & Festivites

by Kelley Anne Mc Gee

For those who can't bear saying goodbye to the Jersey Shore and the good times usually associated with being there, not even for one season, take heart. There's still fun to be had at the shore even during this normally quiet and desolate time of the year.

Preparations are currently underway for a major winter event and celebration soon to take place that's sure to please even the most desperate of shore lovers seeking something fun to do there.

On February 17, Sea Isle City will hold the annual Polar Bear Plunge at its 41st Street beach location. The event, which will have its 13th year, is sponsored by the Sea Isle City Tourism Commission.

Perhaps no one knows more about the yearly cold dip into the Atlantic here in chilly winds than the Polar Bear Queen herself, 82-year old Irene Jameson, who originally came up with the idea for such an event to be held in Sea Isle City and then put it into motion.

According to Mrs. Jameson, the former school teacher who now works as a public relations person for the Sea Isle City Tourism Commission, her son had suggested the idea to her as a way to help attract tourism to the shore town. Its population shrinks to 3,000 this time of year, with a third being snowbirds who usually spend their winters in Florida.

But, she had her own thoughts on the event. She wanted it to be different from the national Polar Bear Clubs such as Coney Island's (the oldest) and other Jersey Shore towns' such as Ocean City and Atlantic City, which typically hold their annual winter swims on New Year's Day.



Sea Isle City Polar Bear Plunge

She wanted to create more of an all-day event and a kind of mid-winter festival and celebration that would revolve around its main highlight, the actual dip into the ocean. She eventually approached the tourism commission, which welcomed her idea.

"The first year we only had about 25 plungers and 200 viewers. I tried to get my local AARP Club involved too. "Come on; we can do it," I told them. "We're not too old. We may be seniors, but we're not dead," she laughs. "A few good sports went along with us, but typically the plungers are usually anywhere between 30 to mid-50's, along with myself. Viewers of all ages come out to watch."

According to Mrs. Jameson, last year there were about 500 plungers and 7,000 spectators. Every year the event seems to grow and get bigger and better. They usually try to get some sort of famous personality or celebrity to take the annual plunge with them too, such as a well-known weathercaster or sports announcer from one of the major TV networks. Press from all over

usually covers the event.

The whole town opens for the event and participates. Some places even offer free hot chocolate to plungers and onlookers. Families come down and spend the weekend with other family members, or people rent out places or stay in nearby motels just for the event.

Beginning with a costume parade and contest at noon, folks sometimes come dressed as polar bears or boats, among other things, and Mrs. Jameson, who wears a crown, bikini with a sash and a long fur coat, is carried on a throne made out of real ice. The actual plunge into the ocean takes place at 2 p.m., rain or shine, and some years they even have swum in icy waters or with snow still on the beach. Brrrrrr.

A party follows afterward at a local bar and restaurant which supplies free musical entertainment and hot food; there's a cash bar for drinks. Also, heated tents are set up outside for families, which supply food, non-alcoholic drinks and entertainment for children such as clowns and face-painting.

Same day registration for plungers takes place beginning at 10 a.m. and there's a \$25.00 fee to register, which is donated to the local tourism bureau, which in turn is able to offer free family events such as concerts. For details or more information, please contact (609) 263-tour or visit the website: www.seaislecity.org.



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