

Out to sea at the nearly 60-year-old Frying Pan Tower near Southport, NC. Photo courtesy of FPTower.org.



Frying Pan Tower soldiers on amidst efforts to preserve the former light station.

BY STEVE HANF

SEPARATED BY SOME 400 MILES and a near-endless stretch of waves, it's not as though folks on the Outer Banks can really call the famed Frying Pan Tower a neighbor.

More often than not, though, the same winds that blast our local beaches during hurricane season have been there, done that, a day or two before at the old Coast Guard light station 32 miles off the North Carolina coast near Southport. And, in some very neighborly gestures over the past few years, several storm-battered American flags that once flew atop the tower have been sold at auctions to benefit those impacted by coastal storm damages.

About \$10,000 was donated to the Red Cross after Hurricane Florence in 2018, and nearly \$6,000 in aid went directly to Ocracoke following Dorian in 2019. The story of those wind-shredded flags being sent ashore to raise sizable funds for good causes was both unusual and heartwarming enough to garner national media attention

"We've done that each hurricane," says the tower's executive director, Richard Neal. "Dorian didn't hit us very much, but it really got you guys up there. So, when

our flag got torn up, we auctioned it off and sent [the proceeds] to families to help them rebuild."

If it seems odd that people would pay money for a tattered flag they watched over a webcam during a hurricane, you're not entirely wrong. Then again, what's *not* a little odd about Frying Pan Tower? From its origins as a cutting-edge piece of navigational technology to its current-day second life as a volunteer getaway spot, the structure is a compellingly unique piece of maritime history.

From the 1700s onward, the Graveyard of the Atlantic claimed plenty of vessels in the shallows of Frying Pan Shoals – an area so treacherous and difficult to monitor that the United States Lighthouse Service stationed a lightship there for more than a century starting in 1860. By the mid-1900s, more cost-effective light towers had largely replaced lightvessels, however. Modeled after Texas-style offshore oil drilling platforms, these stations – which were merged under U.S. Coast Guard supervision – included more permanent quarters for crews who operated the lights.

Frying Pan Shoals Light Station was one such post after the 80-foot-tall tower was installed in 1964, and it

remained operational until it was decommissioned in 2004. Though the Coast Guard considered dismantling the tower to create an artificial reef, it eventually went on the government auction block – which is where Richard Neal comes into the story.

A Charlotte resident, Richard's winning bid of \$85,000 made him the first private owner of the tower in 2010. After turning it into a bed and breakfast for a few years, he briefly considered selling the tower outright before eventually divesting his ownership interests in 2018 to create FPTower Inc. – a nonprofit organization with a mission that's both simple and vast.

"Restore the tower. That's pretty obvious," Richard says as he ticks off several key points of the company's mission statement. "We also want to protect mariners, the people out there in boats, free divers and scuba divers, and fishermen. We've seen boats catch on fire, or people have heart attacks [and] nearly drown, and we've been instrumental in saving a few lives, so I'm grateful for that."

When it comes to the third part of the organization's mission, simply tuning in to their undersea cameras makes things as clear as the tower's surrounding waters.

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“Showing what’s going on under the ocean’s surface,” Richard explains enthusiastically. “There are all kinds of creatures down there. A barracuda’s next to a fish that’s next to a shark that’s next to a sea turtle – all within 10 feet of each other, and they’re not just going crazy eating each other. They’re just living.”

But the last part of FPTower Inc.’s mission is perhaps the simplest one of all: to preserve.

“Let’s pass on this message and get involved,” Richard adds. “I decided several years back that the best way to go forward was to give [the tower] away and have other people participate and enjoy it. And it’s been great. This is a crazy world we live in. So, let’s learn more about it. Let’s take care of each other. Let’s do some research.”

Visitors arrive in small groups to fulfill this mission about every other week. While guests can elect to pay outright for an eco-tour adventure, many sign up as volunteers who provide a donation to cover expenses for things such as travel – which requires taking either a boat or a helicopter ride – and then trade their individual labor for room and board once they’re onsite.

From welding to electrical work, painting, sewing curtains and even cleaning or providing expertise as a project manager, volunteers can do a bit of everything since it truly takes a village to keep the 5,000-square-foot living area shipshape – particularly with its communally shared kitchen, dining, and common rooms, plus its eight bedrooms situated 135 feet above the ever-rolling Atlantic.

No matter what, though, plenty of time remains for everyone to soak up the stunning sunsets and the star-splattered sky.

“There’s nothing like being on the ocean without being rocked and made sick,” Richard says with a laugh. “You can’t see any lights on land at that point. You may or may not see any ships. It’s just you and the wind and the fish and the birds.”

Guests range in age from mid 20s to upper 70s. The adventurers are everyday folks – teachers, retired firefighters, grandmothers. Richard estimates that visitors track about 55 percent male, with some families opting for a trip to Frying Pan Tower in lieu of a more conventional excursion to places such as Disneyland or Las Vegas.

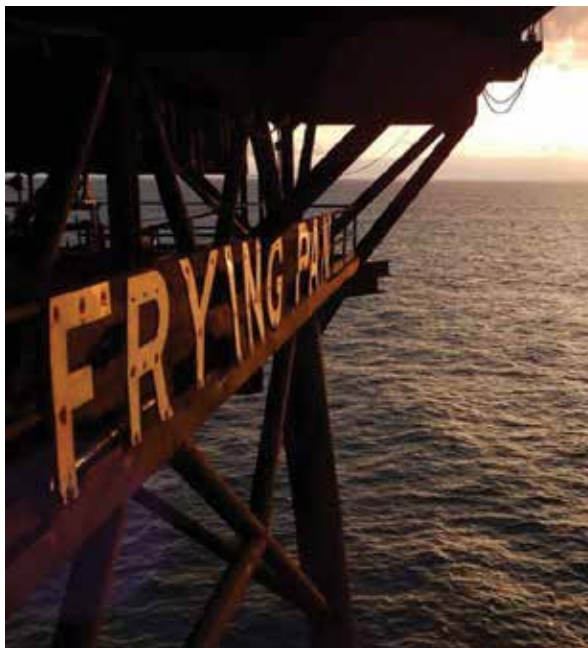
“We don’t have any dancers here, though,” Richard jokes about the latter option.

He notes that about a dozen people from the Outer Banks and Hampton Roads have made the trek out there over the past 10 years. But they also come from all around the globe: Brazil, Australia, South Africa, Germany, and Canada. Earlier this summer, they even had their first visitor from India.

“How do they find out about us? I don’t know,” Richard admits. “Mostly, they just show up.”

“There’s nothing like being on the ocean without being rocked and made sick.”

**-Richard Neal,
Executive Director**



Pictured here, from top to bottom: Divers explore the waters surrounding Frying Pan Tower, which is located 32 miles off the coast of NC; A solar-powered recreational room offers tower visitors a place to relax; Visitors who arrive by boat are greeted by a sign for the tower on the southside of the structure (bottom left); A group of volunteers contribute to their stay by tackling a tower painting project (bottom right). Photos courtesy of FPTower.org.