DEWEY BEACH, Del. — In his letters to the Corinthians, Paul preaches that as adults, we put away childish things. Clearly, the apostle never summered in this mile-long stretch of beachtown along the Delmarva (Delaware-Maryland-Virginia) coastline. It is Friday afternoon, and 25,000 single professionals, from echoes to baby boomers, are pouring into this village of 500 for their weekly rite of regression. Think spring break, but every weekend.

For the guests at a three-level condo called Captain Morgan House (after the rum; they all love naming their beachhouses here), this will be a checkered 48 hours. The house will be filled with lobbyists, House and Senate aides, computer network developers and management consultants, ranging in age from 23 to 37.

There will be a $420 bar tab at the Starboard tonight (at $6 a drink, you can do the math). A Saturday afternoon sexual escapade will occur in plain view of neighbors. A punch will be thrown on the dance floor of Mama Maria's Italian Restaurant & Pizza Bar Saturday night. And in the wee hours of Sunday morning, bartenders at the Rusty Rudder will donate milk and butter to an after-hours macaroni-and-cheese fest back at the house.

From Rhode Island to Fire Island, and from the Hamptons to the Jersey Shore, the largely East Coast ritual of hard-working singles shedding power suits and pumps for beachhouse escapism each Friday is in full swing.
"This isn't something that's ever going to go away," says Captain Morgan crewmember Pete Winkel, 30, a Wayfarer-wearing Baltimore systems analyst. "This is something that you want to make a part of your life on a regular basis."

These folks don't check their degrees at the door. Housemate Becky Buchanan, 29, a recruiter for law firms in Washington, D.C., invokes psychologist Abraham Maslow when musing that Dewey Beach is just one step on the pyramid-climbing road to self-actualization. Discussions over Froot Loops at the Starboard's Bloody Mary brunch Saturday morning, where there's a fake Great White shark bursting out of the roof, can turn on the works of Nathaniel Hawthorne.

Devotees flock to Dewey to share a condo, often with total strangers, where they'll step over sleeping guests on the floor and mark their own food in the refrigerator. Nowhere is this beachhouse tradition more endemic than in Dewey Beach, where a history of biker parties and legal beach drinking has long since given way to incorporation and strictly enforced noise ordinances. City fathers, in fact, are tightening strictures on noisy beach houses. But the reputation as a party town — or stigma, depending on your point of view — lives on.

It is Armed Forces Weekend here at Captain Morgan House. There's an Army captain, West Point graduate Patrick McNamara, 26, sleeping in a Jeep Cherokee after giving ground to the frigid air conditioning, set at 60 degrees to keep the top floor comfy. Also in retreat is Navy Lt. John Aston, 29, a dentist bunking on the back porch.

Guests live amid wicker furniture, lava and beer-logo lamps and a Chinese gong that, when clanged to announce trips to a bar, rattles the molars. At 3 a.m., they try to sleep while a meteorologist plays Madden NFL 2001 football on the PlayStation — with computer-generated cheering and endless penalty calls of "Delay of game. Delay of game."

The adult experience in Dewey is more like that next verse in I Corinthians (13:12): "For now we see through a glass, darkly."

By 9 a.m. Sunday, Captain Morgan house dad Tom Brierton, 34, bleary-eyed but wearing his favorite aqua-blue Hawaiian shirt with the charging rhino on the back, carefully inserts contact lenses over a balcony table strewn with Styrofoam cups, beer cans, torn cookie packages and ashtrays.

"You get worn down by the end of summer," he says.

So the question from the uninitiated might be: Why?

Why would otherwise upwardly mobile, generously paid professionals drive three to five hours to visit this sandy, slow spot along Highway 1? The beaches are pleasant, it's true. But other elements of resort living are
in short supply.

You won't find luxury golf courses or valet parking here. And culinary excellence? The finest examples are five pizza joints in a 2 1/2-block radius, outlets for "suicide" chicken wings to go and those Starboard brunches, where guests are greeted by 400 hot sauces with names like Fifi's Nasty Little Secret.

And why do you find Glenn Tarapchak, 34, a computer systems solution manager whose home is three blocks from the Pacific Ocean in Marina Del Ray, Calif.? He flew 3,000 miles and drove three hours from Washington, D.C., to spend the weekend here. He'll head back on Sunday.

"Trust me, you've never been to a place like Dewey," he says, bent over the Golden Tee golf video game at the Starboard at noon on Saturday.

There are two mantras in this town: The shackles of responsibility blessedly slip away the moment you cross the Chesapeake Bay Bridge, and what happens in Dewey stays in Dewey.

"It's almost like a bond," says Captain Morgan's Charlie Joesten, 33, a slender, 6-foot-5 defense industry management consultant from Arlington, Va., who likes to use the phrase "white-collar anarchy" to describe the lifestyle. "You're nameless and faceless. You're not pegged. Your slate is clean every weekend. Dewey is a chalkless society."

Some of that is wishful thinking, of course. Given the many beachhouse Web sites, some memories are longer than others. But there is this notion of a place apart from everything else.

"I've always said, I wish I could go to an island where everybody is single," says Jennifer Bellone, 30, a speech pathologist from Bethesda, Md. "Dewey Beach is like that island."

"In Washington, D.C.," says D.C. legal assistant Lisa LeVert, 26, "the first question is: 'What's your name?' The second question is: 'What do you do?' In Dewey Beach, there's no second question."

Dewey is so small, people move easily on foot. Saturday, the Captain Morgan crew pub-crawled in a downpour. It began at an afternoon jam session at The Bottle & Cork and wound up at a Hawaiian luau party at a beachhouse called the Visceral Winds, where they served countless platters of paper cups filled with vodka Jell-O shots and squirited into people's throats another concoction pumped out of a bug-spray dispenser.

The crew went from there to Mama Maria's and, eventually, the Rusty Rudder. There was no hurry. No schedules, no business cards, no networking. It was like you died and went to Jimmy Buffett heaven.
"You've got a little money in your pocket. You're in your mid-20s. You're not struggling. You're doing well. It's the culmination of all those factors," says Captain Morgan crewmember Len Napolitano, 28, of Washington, an ex-paratrooper and director of business development for a software firm.

"It's that sense of safety, security, commonality," he says of Dewey Beach.

The punch thrown at Mama Maria's notwithstanding, violence here is rare. There is no sense of menace in the streets or bars. Inebriates offer a "pardon me" as they push through packed dance floors.

It's mayhem without the machismo, a calibrated kind of raising the roof. And this cocoonlike separation from the world is only enhanced by belonging, within this club, to an even smaller club: the beachhouse, where the sort of friendships once kindled only in a college dormitory now go to seed and take root. And, of course, there is always that chance of romance and, dare we say, marriage.

Dewey Beach's mayor of seven years, Bob Frederick, 48, met his wife, Susan, while a beach house habitué in 1985. A year later, he hired one of those banner-dragging Cessnas to pop the question.

At the other end of the romance spectrum is Jack Dilanian, 27, a software sales director from Tysons Corner, Va. He drives a $60,000 Mercedes S500, wears a Rolex, has been coming here for six years and is very clear about what he wants when he meets a woman.

"You have to be fearless. You can't be afraid of rejection," he says. "You'll get slapped at that point. Or you'll get completely blown off. Or you'll get your hand taken and you'll be escorted out of the bar and back to her place."

"People call this the adult spring break," Napolitano interjects. "Do I think it's debaucherous? Absolutely. Do not disagree. Is it Sodom and Gomorrah? I don't know. I think D.C. is like Sodom and Gomorrah. I think Dewey is like: We don't care."
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