

BACKGROUND/OPINION

Each MB trip makes new memories

By Cheryl Somers Aubin

Even now, the memory seems hazy, like trying to find the exact spot where the ocean ends and the sky starts.

When did we first come to Myrtle Beach? What was the year? While we can't agree on the exact year, we do all agree that we fell in love immediately with the beautiful beaches and embraced the gentle courtesy of the area's warm, generous people.

The Somers family legend goes that we discovered Myrtle Beach on the way to Florida one spring break. The weather was nice and we tried to check into a well-known oceanfront hotel at the most northern part of Myrtle Beach, but it was fully booked.

As we passed back by the small, garden-style motel next to it, the owner was just taking down the "no vacancy" sign. Little did we know that the Hillcrest Motel and Myrtle Beach would enter our lives and our souls and call us back every year for close to 30 years now.

In any family, a lot happens in almost three decades, and ours is no exception. Moves, kids going off on their own, careers — and lots of growth as individuals and as a family. But despite these changes, our times at Myrtle Beach have always been a time for reflection, relaxation and family togetherness.

A lot of the summers here have blended together in my memory. They are of playing shark and Marco polo in the pool with the families who, like us, returned year after year. Times at water parks, miniature golf and movies, and the "fun zone" as my mom and dad call it. Visits to the

Gay Dolphin and the Boardwalk. Even Waccamaw Pottery before it became a franchise.

Mostly though, it is the hundreds of daily walks to the beach in the morning, returning for lunch and then the pool in the afternoon that I savor. I call these days to mind during the darker days of winter or when it seems like spring just won't ever come. My Myrtle Beach memories keep me warm and filled with promise.

There are, of course, those times that stand out. The summer that we moved from Maryland to Boston after our Myrtle Beach vacation was a sad one. We all thought we would never return. It was also the summer I discovered boys.

It may have been the emotions of feeling that I was losing two homes; it may have been the pre-adolescent hormones starting out, but I fell pretty hard that summer for the cute guy in the white cut-off shorts. I was crazy about Monty.

After we moved, I wrote my very first love letter to Monty on purple and white flowered stationery in purple ink. Using my sister's Mickey Mouse tracer light table so I could write straight lines on the paper, I finished the letter, doused it with perfume and mailed it off. I never heard back.

Despite our move to the north, our family decided to continue our Myrtle Beach tradition. There are families we have met along the way who grace our memories. For my little sister Donna and me, meeting Gina, Robin, Julie and Hope was one of the best memories. We wished we could be like them with their beautiful accents and careful manners and genteel ways.

The Autrys are an integral part of our memories of Myrtle Beach and my mother and Karen have established a wonderful year-round friendship. I can't believe now that their little 4-year-old boy, Chris, blond and bespectacled, who would knock on my door to ask if I could play, is now a grown man and a newly minted Ph.D.

We watched in sadness a decade ago as the motel we had always stayed in was sold, and a condo put up on the front lawn. When the condos didn't sell, the motel fell into disrepair. It became a rent-by-the-month place, and the pool turned a sickening shade of yellow.

For those summers, we stayed at new high-rise condos nearby. But as we walked to the beach, out of deference for the memories that motel held, we averted our eyes. None of us could bear to look at what had happened to our "home away from home."

Then one summer, the old place looked better. We learned that the original owners had bought it back. They, too, were saddened by what had happened.

There were the rainy days at Myrtle Beach, too, and all of us outgrowing the small condo we stayed in those few years and thinking we had outgrown Myrtle Beach and maybe each other. But something drew us back. One year I brought my new husband, and now we are bringing our son.

My extended family now takes up almost a whole floor at the Hillcrest. We create new memories as we laugh among ourselves and recount adventures and misadventures of our vacations here.

But like the leaves that will fall in the autumn that comes too soon, our family must scatter back to our homes and our lives and our phone calls to Myrtle Beach will overlay the others and fade gently in time to a sense of place, of family and of home.

Aubin lives in Falls Church, Va., is a writer and is shopping her first book with agents. She and her extended family are spending this week at the Hillcrest Motel on North Ocean Boulevard.

