

Island hopping in Texas

By Carlita Valladollid

At first, you might just have to blink and rub your eyes. Are you on Bourbon Street? The architecture in the shadows suggests an old-world prosperity and a parade of giant floats is moving through a sea of people...beads are flying, swirls of gold and green and red feathers bounce to the music from a live jazz band weaving in and out of the merry-makers who have overflowed onto the street...Is this Mardi Gras? Well, yes, actually. Texas style.

Like the few nooks and crannies in the United States, which have somehow managed to hold onto their character, the string of barrier islands off the Texas Gulf Coast hides some of the best-kept secrets of Americana. These were the stomping grounds of pirate Pierre LaFitte, of Mexican General Antonio Lopez Santa Ana after his victory at the Alamo, where anglers still fight the 800-pound marlin at the edge of the Caribbean Sea and 21st-century civilization is tempered with balancing doses of nature and history. Plain and simple: Island-hopping in Texas is a trip!



Wanna Start Here?

Your tour of the Texas coast could begin at the oldest town in south Texas, Port Isabel on South Padre Island. As you might imagine, the area has a polka-dotted past, which includes pirates and Indians and even a few wandering conquistadors. And who could forget the images of “girls gone wild” during the annual spring-break conflagration each year on the slender island’s beaches? But day in and day out, the temperate, sub-tropical clime of Port Isabel is the perfect place to fuel for the ground-bound portions of the ultimate airborne wanderlust. One of the first things you’ll see is the tallest, the Point Isabel Lighthouse—first authorized by the U.S. Congress in 1853, now a state park open to the public. The original lighthouse keeper’s cottage is available for touring, and the town’s chamber of commerce is collocated at the lighthouse. Two other local museums, the Treasures of the Gulf Museum and the Port Isabel Historic Museum, display artifacts from some 16th-century Spanish shipwrecks

The city of Galveston (above) offers one of America’s most fascinating concentrations of diverse architecture, many of which are on the national register of historic places. Galveston is also the site of a Mardi Gras celebration that many say rivals its more famous cousin New Orleans.



*One of America's
Best Kept Secrets
is Perfect for Pilots*

and the U.S.-Mexican War from the mid-1840s, respectively. For more, call 956.943.7602 or log on to portisabelmuseums.com.

The oceanfront also offers a fleet of charter fishing vessels ready to attack a variety of indigenous pescados, including Wahoo, mahi mahi, marlin, sailfish and tuna, as well as the local population of trophy-sized redfish, speckled trout and flounder. If you don't feel like a day at sea, lots of great fish stories still emanate from the local piers. Try your luck with a rod and reel at Fisherman's Wharf (956.761.7818) or Fishbones Fishing Pier (956.761.4665).

South Padre Island eventually joins North Padre Island to stretch 130 miles along the Texas coast, making it the largest barrier island in the world. In the center of it all is the Padre Island National Seashore, a primitive marine life holdfast. Expect to camp if you'd like to stay overnight (visitor information, 361.949.8068). The park is ground zero for a successful program to re-establish Kemp's Ridley Sea Turtles. More than 10,500 hatchlings have been released and, to date, more than a hundred have returned to nest.

At the end of the line is the hometown of Farrah Fawcett, Corpus Christi, a stark shift from the

windblown dunes of the island. This growing Texas city sits landside of the sixth largest deepwater port in the United States and is everything you'd expect from a town of 300,000 people. A good place to start a trip to Corpus Christi is the city's website, corpuschristicvb.com.

Highlights from the area include the World War II carrier the USS Lexington (usslexington.com), one of the most decorated vessels remaining from the era. Tours are self-guided, which means you can work your way through endless passageways and corridors at will, pausing to take a ride in the ship's flight simulator or catch a move in the Mega Theatre. For more, call 800.LADY.LEX.

The area's "King of Kitsch" just might be the monthly female roller-ball games at Saxet Hall, 3926 Leopard Street, Corpus Christi. See more at hurricanealleyrd.com.

Hopping Along

Move yourself further up the line toward Port Aransas on Mustang Island and enjoy a no-tie-down-fee stay over at the 3,500-foot Mustang Beach Airport. Ride a shuttle all over town for 25 cents a pop, and you can probably avoid renting a car. The town is a quiet little slice of heaven with uncrowded beaches, lots of bird watching and more good fishing. There's even a floating casino boat (texas-treasure.com) that leaves Port Aransas and travels international waters legally for a liaison with lady luck.

One world-class event that comes out of Port Aransas each year is the Texas Sandfest (texassandfest.com), where sandcastle sculptors arrive from around the globe to compete for a three-day competition (April 18-20, 2008). These huge works of art rival anything you've seen anywhere, anytime.



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A number of marinas dot the southern Texas coast (above), providing resting places for nautically notables, like the USS Lexington (right top) and the Colonel steam driven paddle wheeler (right center). Tourists along the coast can visit by foot, by float and sometimes even by trolley (right bottom).




ISLAND HOPPING IN TEXAS

One of the most popular spots for the Texas Island hopping is near the end of the line in Galveston. Only the foolish would miss a visit to the Strand National Historic Landmark District (there are literally HUNDREDS of houses on the national register), once called the "Wall Street of the Southwest." Walk the streets to ogle some of the most impressive Victorian-era structures in the United States or enjoy the tour from a horse-drawn carriage. More than a hundred shops, antique stores and restaurants now fill the Strand, and you could easily spend a week there without getting bored.

And that's not even close to being all. Other notables on this cozy Texican Island include the Grand 1894 Opera House, which was recognized among the top few in the nation, the Texas Seaport Museum with the 1877 tall ship Elissa, the restored Union Depot with its Railroad Museum, the Moody Gardens with a 1.5 million-gallon aquarium and a 3-D IMAX theatre.

A sure winner for the aviation-addicted is Galveston's Lone Star Flight Museum, featuring 40 historically significant aircraft. Even better, the museum offers flights in its "Thunderbird," a completely restored B-17 bomber that flew 112 missions over Germany during WWII. A B-25 Mitchell bomber with Doolittle Raiders nose art is also available for rides, as is a PT-17 Stearman and an AT-6 Texan. You cannot fly their P-47 Thunderbolt, however, or their F4U Corsair, F6F Hellcat, SBD Dauntless, a Spitfire or the newly restored Hawker Hurricane. They have to draw the line somewhere, or you'd want to fly everything, wouldn't you? Wouldn't you? Learn more about the museum at lsmf.org.

But whatever you do, don't miss the Mardi Gras. Ninety-seven years old and going strong, this two-week celebration in Galveston, Texas, rivals its original namesake from the neighboring state to the east. Coming up this year, January 25 to February 5, hundreds of thousands of people will turn up for more than 50 galas, parties, pageants and events. Call the Galveston Visitors Bureau at 888.GAL.ISLE or go to galveston.com. 



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The Lone Star Flight Museum offers rides in this meticulously restored B-25 bomber (above). For those who are not yet smitten with aviation fever, there's lots of other great things to do, from water sports like surfing and windsurfing, to visiting jewels of 19th century American lifestyles.



Fishing the Texas Islands

Padre Island Blue Horizon 956.571.3138 elcapitansteve.com	Port Aransas Offshore Adventures 800.567.5132 portaransasadventures.com	Corpus Christi Dolphin Dock 800.393.3474 DolphinDock.com	Galveston Texas Coastal Charters 281.831.7885 galvestonfishing.net
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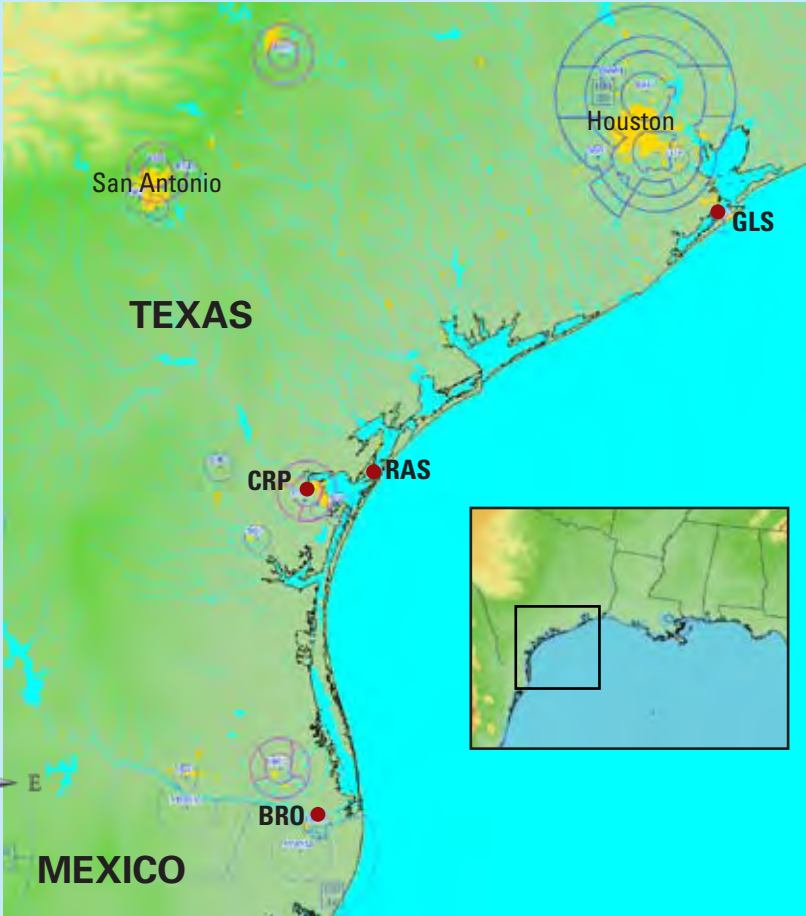
TEXAS ISLAND HOPPING

Galveston - GLS
Galveston City Airport/Scholes International
409.741.4609
galvestonairport.com

Port Aransas/Mustang Island - RAS
Mustang Beach Airport
361.749.4111
cityofportaransas.org/airport.cfm

Corpus Christi - CRP
Corpus Christi Airport
361.289.0171
corpuschristiairport.com

South Padre Island - BRO
Brownsville South Padre
Island International Airport
956.542.4373
flybrownsville.com



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