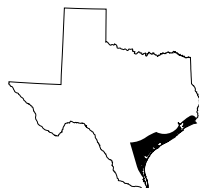


Gulf Coast



America's 'Third Coast,' as it likes to call itself, is a place of many contrasts. All along the Gulf of Mexico, there's a quietude that is often surprising given the images of rowdy spring break high jinks on South Padre Island or the madcap Mardi Gras celebrations of Galveston. Yet even these towns are significantly calmer at times other than during their signature events.

Some parts of the Gulf Coast – like Port Arthur or Brazosport – have forgone any significant future from tourism in order to profit from the contemporary need for oil. Drilling rigs, refineries and related industries cover huge tracts of land. Meanwhile other areas seem to have forgotten the future altogether. Tiny coastal communities like Fulton and Rockport slumber away in solitude, and wandering coastal back roads in these areas is reason enough for a visit.

It's out on the sandy barrier islands where you find some of the greatest interest of the Gulf Coast. Galveston is built on a barrier island, and despite the very real peril from hurricanes, it has a fascinating heritage found in its old downtown and neighborhoods, while it still knows how to cut loose at the shore.

Port Aransas is another gem, with a culture that might have you donning flip-flops and staying a decade or two. Other watery delights are found in coastal highlights such as Aransas National Wildlife Refuge and the good museums of Corpus Christi. In any place along the coast, expect the best seafood imaginable (with a dash of Cajun color in the Golden Triangle).

HIGHLIGHTS

Best Single Stop

Galveston combines acres of sandy joy with the state's most historic downtown (p234)

Ideal Place to Whoop it Up

Spot majestic and rare but recovering whooping cranes at Aransas National Wildlife Refuge (p244)

Where to Pound Sand

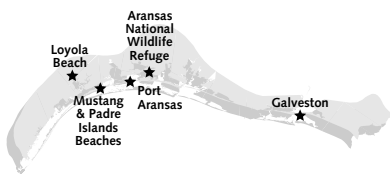
Mustang and Padre Islands (p253) have endless white sand beaches; some purely for fun, others carefully protected

How to Feed Like a Whale on Shrimp Tails

Join the crowds for the tasty seaside seafood at King's Inn in Loyola Beach (p255)

Best Place to Liberate Your Inner Beach Bum

Port Aransas (p251) has goofy old places to stay, goofy seafood joints for chow, and laid-back bars to be a goof in



GOLDEN TRIANGLE

The cities of Beaumont, Port Arthur and Orange make up the corners of the Golden Triangle, the southeasternmost corner of Texas. The area was first settled by French and Spanish trappers in the early 19th century, and has more in common culturally with neighboring Louisiana than it does with the rest of Texas. A large and freewheeling Cajun community and the state's largest African-American population by percentage (33%) combine to give the Triangle a culture that is as rich and spicy as the ubiquitous gumbo. This is not a part of Texas that subscribes to the abstemious notions in force elsewhere in the state.

Prior to 1901, the subsistence lives of the local trappers meant that the area could have been legitimately called the Beaver Triangle. Then oil was discovered south of Beaumont on a site called Spindletop, and the Triangle turned golden with cash. It was then the richest discovery made in the USA, and it sparked the creation of the entire US petroleum industry. Companies that later transmogrified into giants such as Chevron and ExxonMobil got their starts here. Some of the world's largest petrochemical works are found near Port Arthur and Beaumont. Pollution and a dependence on fluctuations in the price of oil are some of the legacies; oil spills – such as the massive one in 2010 – and hurricanes, some of the hazards.

Taken separately, the cities of Beaumont, Port Arthur and Orange are not compelling tourist destinations, but together they warrant a day or two of exploration. They bristle with small museums as well as fascinating sights related to the oil industry. The towns are roughly 20 miles apart and well connected by roads, meaning that it makes most sense for a visitor to treat them as one.

South of the Golden Triangle, the Texas Gulf Coast begins. The stretch curving southwest to Galveston is quiet much of the year and boasts attractive beaches and grass-covered dunes.

Orientation & Information

Beaumont is linked to Houston, 83 miles to the west, by I-10, which continues east into Louisiana. Orange is 23 miles east on I-10. Port Arthur is 17 miles south on the combined

DRIVING DISTANCES

Austin to Corpus Christi 192 miles, 3 hours
Corpus Christi to South Padre Island 172 miles, 3 hours
Houston to Beaumont 86 miles, 90 minutes
Houston to Galveston 50 miles, 45 minutes

US 69/96/287; the parallel TX 347 is a slower but more interesting road.

If you're entering the area from the east, you'll find a state-operated **Texas Travel Information Center** (☎ 409-883-9416, 800-452-9292; 1708 I-10 E; ☎ 8am-5pm) just over the Texas-Louisiana border in Orange. It has statewide information and a nature walk over the swamp out back.

BEAUMONT

pop 111,500

On January 10, 1901, a heretofore dry exploratory well leased by Anthony Lucas started to rumble and then blew out a fountain of oil. Soon hundreds of wildcat oil explorers had oil rigs crowded together like pine trees in a forest. The Spindletop field dried up within 10 years, but the oil industry was in the Golden Triangle to stay.

Besides the petrochemical industry, Beaumont has developed a busy port on the Neches River that services offshore oil-drilling platforms. Sights related to the oil industry are the main draws. The downtown is mostly quiet apart from a block of upscale bars.

Information

Babe Didrikson Zaharias Museum & Visitors

Center (☎ 409-833-4622; 1750 I-10 exit 854, Martin Luther King Parkway; admission free; ☎ 9am-5pm) Has regional information and a room devoted to the achievements of one of the greatest female athletes of all time.

Beaumont Convention & Visitors Bureau (☎ 409-880-3749, 800-392-4401; www.beaumontcvb.com; 505 Willow St; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Fri) Downtown, with good regional info.

Sights & Activities

TEXAS ENERGY MUSEUM

This **museum** (☎ 409-833-5100; www.texasenergy-museum.org; 600 Main St; adult/child \$2/1; ☎ 9am-5pm Tue-Sat, 1-5pm Sun) is a mixed bag. Downstairs are exhibits that attempt to dazzle visitors with the science of oil drilling and a good bit of jingoism. Upstairs exhibits cover the Spindletop