



# Gulf Coast & South Texas

## Includes ➔

Aransas National Wildlife Refuge .....	266
Rockport & Fulton .....	268
Corpus Christi .....	271
Port Aransas .....	276
Mustang & Padre Island Beaches .....	279
Harlingen .....	281
Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge .....	282
Port Isabel .....	282
Brownsville .....	289
McAllen .....	293
Laredo .....	297

## Best Places to Eat

- ➔ McMillan's BBQ (p271)
- ➔ King's Inn (p281)
- ➔ Joe's Oyster Bar Restaurant (p283)

## Best Natural Places

- ➔ Aransas National Wildlife Refuge (p266)
- ➔ Padre Island National Seashore (p279)
- ➔ Sabal Palm Sanctuary (p290)

## Why Go?

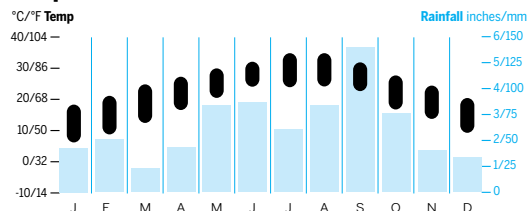
America's 'Third Coast,' as it's dubbed itself, is a place of many contrasts. The mellow beach-town scene of Port Aransas is a sea of calm compared with the frenetic hedonism of South Padre Island (SPI), for one. Yet they also have much in common. At both Aransas National Wildlife Refuge and Padre Island National Seashore, you can get lost in nature. Much of the coast is undeveloped.

Besides SPI, there's fun to be had in Corpus Christi (and even Port Aransas can kick up its heels for some merriment). Inland you'll find reminders of the state's dramatic history from the Palo Alto Battlefield National Historic Site to the legacies found in stone around Goliad.

History is still being made in the very south along the Rio Grande. Border politics affect all aspects of life and Mexican culture accents the towns and remote stretches from Brownsville to Laredo and beyond.

## When to Go

### Corpus Christi



**Mar Spring Break!** Hordes of partying teens may appeal or cause you to go scurrying.

**Apr–May & Sep–Oct** The weather is reliably balmy but crowds are few.

**Dec–Feb** In the very south, mild weather brings 'Winter Texans' but don't expect too much.

## THE COASTAL BEND

The name 'Coastal Bend' can rather amor- phously apply to communities from Galveston to South Padre Island. But its heart is the rural stretch running from the southern tip of Galveston Island to Corpus Christi. Here small towns, many forgotten by time, lie Gulf-side at the end of long and quiet roads. Many shelter in the profusion of inlets and bays, protected by more than 100 miles of uninhabited barrier islands. The only visitors to the islands are birds, which flock here by the score.

The region just south of Galveston, around the Brazos River, doesn't get much respect despite the clever marketing moniker that has been dreamed up for it: 'Brazosport.' Or maybe that's the reason for it. South of here, the countryside is rural and often bucolic. Natural areas such as Aransas National Wildlife Refuge and Goose Island State Park should be your focus along with the towns of Fulton and Rockport.

It's more than possible to drive from Galveston south along the confusing maze of roads to Corpus Christi or Port Aransas in a day and still see the best sights.

## Brazosport Area



POP 92,000

Nine towns – Brazoria, Clute, Freeport, Jones Creek, Lake Jackson, Oyster Creek, Quintana, Richwood and Surfside Beach – are part of a confused hodgepodge crisscrossed by industry railroads, highways, creeks, lakes and channels and surrounded by chemical plants, collectively known as Brazosport.

This area has been the focus of many arguments between the federal Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the state of Texas over pollution regulations and their enforcement.

## Sights


### Sea Center Texas

( 979-292-0100; [www.tpwd.state.tx.us/sea-center](http://www.tpwd.state.tx.us/sea-center); 300 Medical Dr, Lake Jackson; ☀ 9am-4pm Tue-Sat, 1-4pm Sun;  **FREE**) One attraction worth tracking down in the tangle of Brazosport is this fun aquarium. Learn about Texas salt marshes, the surf zone and coastal bays. A large tank holds gulf stars like huge groupers and slithery eels. Out back are 35 acres of fish hatcheries which you can tour at certain times. A walkway extends across 5 acres of wetlands.

AQUARIUM

### Varner-Hogg Plantation

HISTORIC SITE


( 979-345-4656; [www.visitvhp.com](http://www.visitvhp.com); 1702 N 13th St; adult/child \$6/4; ☀ 8am-5pm Tue-Sun) This plantation dates to the early 1800s and includes a grand mansion built by slaves. Amidst beautiful pecan and magnolia trees, visitors learn how past owners made money growing, drilling and distilling – often with indentured help. It's located 18 miles north-west of Lake Jackson.

## Matagorda

POP 1300

Place-names in this area must have been hard to come by, because authorities decided to confuse everybody by christening a bay, a town, a county, a peninsula and an island with the same name – Matagorda. The tiny town offers a link to the peninsula (Matagorda Peninsula, not to be confused with Matagorda Island, the remote state park off Port O'Connor), a popular spot for fishing.

The town still has a vintage feel to it and has a few stores. Head south on TX 60 over the grand new bridge which arches high above the busy Intracoastal Waterway (views from the top show the land seeming to dissolve into water), and drive 6 miles to the end of the road to meet the gulf.

There are 22 miles of lonely white-sand **beaches** out here. With a permit (\$10; buy it at any gas station in Matagorda), you can drive out and onto the beach and stake out your claim. **Matagorda Bay Nature Park** ( 979-863-2603; [www.lcra.org](http://www.lcra.org); ☀ 8am-5pm) **FREE** is a great resource with numerous programs where you can learn about the

## DRIVING DISTANCES

**Austin–Corpus Christi** 192 miles,  
3 hours

**Brownsville–Laredo** 204 miles,  
3½ hours

**Corpus Christi–Brownsville**  
159 miles, 2½ hours

**Corpus Christi–South Padre Island**  
172 miles, 3 hours

**Houston–Beaumont** 86 miles,  
90 minutes

**Houston–Corpus Christi** 211 miles,  
3¼ hours

**Laredo–San Antonio** 154 miles,  
2½ hours