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UNDER 100

100 Miles or Less: Matagorda and Palacios

From wild game and wine festivals to the most important shipwreck in history, this stretch of the Gulf Coast has it all.

BY

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The Luther Hotel, built out of pine and cypress, is 113 years old.

IMAGE: [GOOGLE MAPS](#)

MATAGORDA IS THE THIRD-OLDEST CITY IN TEXAS, and perhaps the one most likely to make a visitor say *Why? Why here?* At least, that was my question the first time I

visited Matagorda one summer in college, brushing away dense clumps of mosquitoes at every step and wondering how its proximity to the Gulf of Mexico—mere inches away!—didn't seem to have any tempering effect on the town's sweltering heat. Forget Matagorda Bay's natural harbor, protected by a long barrier island; how did people live here before air conditioning?

Yet here they landed, 60 colonists from New York, sent here by Stephen F. Austin to build a town that could protect his incoming settlers. It was 1827 and Austin had finally secured permission from the Mexican government for what would eventually be called [Austin's Colony](#), which saw 30,000 settlers move to Texas between 1821 and 1836. Matagorda thrived during this time despite the heat and mosquitoes, which our much hardier ancestors probably saw as mere distractions on par with the frustration we feel when Facebook is down or Starbucks is out of peppermint syrup. That is until the [Runaway Scape](#), when they all abandoned the place posthaste in advance of General Santa Anna's army as it began rampaging across Texas, trying to conquer it all over again for Mexico.

They came back eventually, and I could go on, because Matagorda's history is deeply captivating, whether you're a native Texan or not. It's a place every history buff should visit, but which often goes overlooked in lieu of more touristy attractions like the Alamo. Does the Alamo have a famous shipwreck you can also visit? *No*. You just don't want to visit in the summer, unless you're of hardy settler stock. Instead, go now; there's nothing like the serene beauty of a Texas beach in winter.

That beach is best observed from the historic [Luther Hotel](#) in nearby Palacios, just a few miles down the coast. Now entering its 113th year, the Luther's thick pine and cypress walls have withstood everything from Hurricane Carla to the general ravages of salt air and strong southerly winds that prevail along this part of the Gulf Coast. Grab a seat in one of the rocking chairs on the front veranda facing Matagorda Bay and take in the nightly sunsets that color the skies in tropical pinks and oranges. Frugal travelers take heed: many of the charming old rooms in the Luther are equipped with their own kitchens, so you can save on the cost of dining out. Those in search of luxury accommodations, on the other hand, should check out [The Peaceful Pelican](#) down the street, where owner/chef Ruth provides a deluxe four-course dinner on Friday and Saturday nights.



The City by the Sea Museum is housed in a downtown Palacios structure that dates to 1910.

IMAGE: [GOOGLE MAPS](#)

Saturdays in the area should be reserved for a visit to the [City by the Sea Museum](#), which showcases what is arguably the most important shipwreck in the world. The muddy muck and mire of Matagorda Bay is where French explorer Robert de La Salle's ship *La Belle* sank in 1686—his loss and our gain, as those muddy waters kept *La Belle* preserved in remarkable condition until it was rediscovered and excavated in 1985. How well preserved was the site? Let's just say they found brain matter within the 300-year-old wreck, among many other fascinating discoveries. But don't stop there; the museum also includes excellent exhibits on the native Karankawa Indians and the devastation wrought by Hurricane Carla in 1961.

Those with children in tow will also want to carve out time for a visit to the [Matagorda County Museum](#). Why? Imagine the Children's Museum of Houston tossed back in time a few centuries. Here, your kids can have a hands-on pioneer experience in a tiny town that features everything from a fully-stocked general store and one-room schoolhouse to "horses" in the small corral. *It's adorable.* And if your kids are the outdoors-y types, pack the poles and buy some bait

at [Buddy's](#) (which also sells oysters by the sack, FYI): Palacios offers two 400-foot lighted public fishing piers, one of which is directly in front of the Luther Hotel, so y'all can cast lines day and/or night.



Get your fill of Gulf seafood at Poco Playa.

IMAGE: [COURTESY POCO PLAYA](#)

That said, it would be a sin to leave the area without some freshly-caught Gulf seafood, whether you hauled it in yourself or not. For those who don't even know how to set a trot line, there's [Poco Playa](#), a dining destination that includes a 3,000-square-foot "village" with gift shops, boutiques and even a museum—but you're really there for the food. Local catches include parmesan-crust red snapper with crab, yellowfin tuna in a teriyaki glaze, blackened redfish, baked oysters, and shrimp served any way you can think of.

Not a fan of seafood? Bay City, just down the road, will be hosting its annual [Wild Game & Wine Camofest](#) next weekend. On Jan. 23 from 1 to 5 p.m., enjoy an afternoon of live music accompanied by samples of—you guessed it—local wild game and Texas wine. Tickets are \$15 and the wearing of camo is encouraged; frankly, we can't think of a more Texan way to spend the weekend.