



# My Secret Coast

Matagorda mesmerizes with her charms, again and again.



**Marshes off Beach Road, Matagorda. With about 500 residents and abundant coastline to explore, Matagorda attracts visitors searching to unwind.**

**No coastal highway passes through Matagorda. But when you follow Texas 60 south from Bay City to its terminus where the Colorado River empties into the Matagorda Bay, prepare to be beguiled.**

## Visiting Matagorda

For more information about lodging, attractions, and activities, see Matagorda County Convention & Visitors Bureau's website. Other helpful websites include

www.matagordabay.com, www.matagordatexas.com, and  
www.matagordabaytexas.com.

### **Local shops to check out:**

Stanley's Market, 725 Market St. Call 979/863-7613.

The Spot at Matagorda, 811 Fisher St. Call 817/713-2227.

Tropical Maniac, 455 Fisher St. Call 979/240-9058.

Polka-Dot Bikini, 244 Fisher St. Call 979/863-5005.

The Purple Palm Boutique, 1303 Fisher St. Call 979/557-2868.

Cattails at Karankawa Village, 22996 TX 60. Call 979/863-7737.

### **Dining**

Locals and savvy tourists head to Lighthouse BBQ and Cafe for a dose of home-style country goodness. Try the Texas Trash for a stick-to-the-ribs breakfast, or pop in for authentic barbecue for lunch or supper. 18411 Texas 60. Call 979/863-2328.

Chef Edie Lanier infuses her Spoonbills restaurant with a passion for impeccably fresh coastal cuisine. As Lanier uses locally harvested fruits, vegetables, and seafood, her menu changes frequently, but the Nut-Crusted Fish is a perennial favorite, as is the Fried-Green Tomato Tower appetizer with shrimp, crab claws, and house-made remoulade over fried green tomatoes. 773 Cypress St. Call 979/863-7766.

Poco Playa Restaurant & Bar showcases local seafood with daily specials. The staff will also fry, blacken, or grill your cleaned-and-filleted catch. 582 Fisher St. Call 979/863-7308.

Riverbend Restaurant & Tavern sports a covered back deck overlooking the Colorado River and moorings for those arriving by boat. The burger and seafood offerings are fresh and ample, but don't pass up the house-made breaded and crab-stuffed fried jalapeños. 1427 Beach Road (FM 2031). Call 979/863-7481.

### **Adventuring**

**Kayaking and Stand-Up Paddleboarding:** Christy and Clay Bishop of Matagorda Adventures Company offer guided kayak and SUP tours and rentals, as well as kayak

fishing, paddling classes, and yoga. Call 832/779-4157.

**Bay and Offshore Fishing:** USCG Captain Bink Grimes works the East and West Matagorda bays and the Matagorda and Port O'Connor jetties, and also offers offshore fishing trips and waterfowl hunting excursions. Call 979/241-1705 or email [binkgrimes@sbcglobal.net](mailto:binkgrimes@sbcglobal.net).

**Birding and Wildlife Viewing:** The Lower Colorado River Authority's 1,600-acre Matagorda Bay Nature Park is anchored by the Natural Science Center and has about two miles each of Gulf beachfront and Colorado River frontage, plus hundreds of acres of coastal marshes and dunes. Restrooms and outdoor showers serve anglers, beachgoers, RV campers, and tent campers. Call 979/863-2603.

**Beachgoing:** Matagorda boasts clean, sandy beaches, stellar shelling, superb surf-casting, and outstanding shorebird viewing. Cruise along the 22-mile-long public beach after purchasing a Matagorda County permit (\$10) from one of the local merchants. Use of four-wheel drive and good judgment is advised; should you lack either or both, contact the Matagorda Beach Wrecker: 979/320-7969.

**Horseback Riding:** T&D Adventure Parks, LLC., across from the entrance to Matagorda Bay Nature Park, offers hour-long horseback rides on the beach daily, by reservation only. Call 979/824-3327.

## Lodging

A colorful tepee adorned with leaping redfish marks the entrance to Karankawa Village. The Lodge features eight rooms and connects by a boardwalk to Cattails, a mercantile carrying coastal apparel, home decor, gourmet foods, coffees, and wine. 22996 Texas 60. Call 979/863-7737.

Matagorda Sunrise Lodge has 11 bedrooms in two side-by-side stilt houses on the Colorado River, plus a lodge building for entertaining large groups. 190 St. Mary's Slough. Call 979/241-1705.

Luxuriate in 1890s splendor in the two second-floor rooms at The Purple Palm Inn, upstairs from the Purple Palm Boutique. 1303 Fisher St. Call 979/557-2868.

Stanley-Fisher House Bed & Breakfast is a Texas Historic Landmark, built in 1832 by Samuel Rhoads Fisher, one of the signers of the Texas Declaration of Independence and colleague of Stephen F. Austin and Sam Houston. 107 St. Mary St. Call 979/863-2920.

Want to just saunter over the dunes to the beach? Rent a big river house where you can fish and crab right outside your door? Stay in town, near shops and restaurants? Full Stringer Rentals has rental listings to suit every taste and budget. 258 Fisher St. Call 979/863-1143.

Here, the mighty Colorado River watershed feeds vast marshes laced with leveed rice paddies and jungle-like wetland preserves such as Mad Island Wildlife Management Area and the Big Boggy and San Bernard national wildlife refuges.

Back when Spanish cartographer Alonso Álvarez de Pineda first mapped the Texas coast in 1519, the Colorado River percolated its red clay-tinted waters into a large bay through hundreds of square miles of marsh filled with impenetrable canebrakes, thus both the bay's and the river mouth's appellation of "thick bush" (*mata gorda* in Spanish). Shielding Matagorda Bay from the Gulf of Mexico is a 65-mile-long barrier peninsula that arcs from Pass Cavallo at its southern-most point to the mouth of Caney Creek at its northernmost—also bearing the Matagorda moniker.

Spanish explorer Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca shipwrecked near the Matagorda Peninsula in 1528. As he wrote in *La Relación*, his 1542 book about his expedition, he took solace among the indigenous Karankawa people, who sympathized so deeply with his loss of crew and ship that they sat on the shoreline and wept along with him. Descendants of natives dating to 10,000 B.C., the tall, lithe Karankawas adorned themselves with lip and nipple piercings, elaborate tattoos, and a thorough smearing of alligator or shark grease to repel mosquitos. The Karankawas—fierce warriors when the situation demanded it—resisted assimilation, fled southward, and were last seen in Tamaulipas, Mexico, in the mid-1800s before vanishing entirely.

In 1827, Stephen F. Austin gained permission from Mexico to establish a town at the mouth of the Colorado, using one of the deeper cuts through the canebrakes to establish the port of Matagorda. A customs house, built in 1831, processed the paperwork for shipments of colonists, soldiers, and supplies. By 1834, Austin's settlement at Matagorda boasted 1,400 residents, making it the third-largest town in Texas.

These days, it's a bit smaller.

## **Saturday on the Town**

Matagorda now has about 500 full-time residents, and judging by the crowd as I enter the Volunteer Fire Department's banquet hall on a Saturday night, it appears that everyone from toddlers to octogenarians has showed up for the all-you-can-eat spaghetti fundraiser. As the band hauls in equipment and folks queue up in the serving line, I scan the room for outdoors guide Christy Bishop, who had taken me out on an exhilarating marsh tour via kayak earlier. Since she and her husband, Clay, are both volunteer firemen, I'm here at their fundraiser so we could visit some more.

While I wait for Christy, I chat with several of the shopkeepers I had met that afternoon. My husband, Shannon, and I had enjoyed a delightful lunch at Riverbend Restaurant, our table on the outdoor patio affording a sweeping view of the Colorado River. Shannon had devoured his cheeseburger while I sampled several items from the appetizer menu, including deep-fried jalapeños, as plump as pillows with a stuffing of fresh crabmeat; and “oyster babies,” fried fresh oysters tossed in garlic butter and blanketed with Monterey Jack cheese. After lunch, we’d been exploring the village’s side streets and historical markers when a bank of fog had rolled in, thick as pea soup. This was Shannon’s signal to grab a well-earned nap, and mine to do what any red-blooded Texas gal would do while unfettered in a coastal town: explore the shops.

I first headed to Stanley’s Market for a \$10 Matagorda County permit to drive on the beach—and to marvel at the awesomeness that is Stanley’s. After more than a half-century of serving both locals and tourists, the staff at Stanley’s has developed an uncanny ability to stock whatever it is that visitors forget to bring, plus fishing licenses and tackle, ice chests, crab traps, fresh produce, groceries, apparel, beachwear, boogie boards, soft drinks, wine, beer, and a full-service deli counter with delicious cheeseburgers.

Fisher Street, Matagorda’s main artery, is lined with historic homes and churches as well as an eclectic mix of shops. First, I strolled through the tropical courtyard of Poco Playa Village Shops, making a mental note to return to Poco Playa Restaurant for some of its seafood specialties. Then I popped into The Spot at Matagorda, where I visit with proprietors Tom and Susan Davis. “This building was Matagorda’s main mercantile; it’s at least 100 years old,” Susan said. “It was vacant for 40 years before we purchased it.” Brushing back a wisp of hair with a sigh, she commented that the restoration of an old building is a seemingly endless process, but one she and her husband find rewarding. Interesting items here include long-sleeved, SPF-rated fishing shirts embellished with intricate embroidery work depicting redfish, owls, and school mascots. (If you’d like your own design, custom embroidery orders take only a week to complete.)



Beach-bar bummin' at Poco Playa.

A short stroll up Fisher Street landed me at Tropical Maniac, a riotous delight of artwork, apparel, beachwear, and home decor where I was particularly smitten with a larger-than-life pink flamingo crafted from hammered metal.

Just past the Full Stringer Realty office (which can provide information on rentals in the area), I slipped into Polka-Dot Bikini, a boutique featuring designer swimwear, sassy sundresses, and summery sandals. The shop carries top-of-the-line fishing apparel for men and women, as well as several racks of chic tropical menswear.



Luxe lodging at Cattails at Karankawa Village.

Next, I admired the assortment of leather sandals, whimsical tees, and sundresses at Purple Palm Boutique before hopping in the Jeep to drive a mile up Texas 60 to Cattails at Karankawa Village. Owner Sue Milberger gestured to the racks of cotton sundresses and beach coverups. “They’re all 50 percent off,” she said, “as I’m making room for the summer 2017 styles.” I browsed those, as well as the tastefully curated beach-themed jewelry, watercolors, and oil paintings. Milberger also stocks an extensive selection of wine and cigars, but I succumbed to the aroma of coffee wafting from behind the counter. “Best cup of coffee in Matagorda,” she claimed as she handed me a mug, and after the first sip, I nodded in agreement.

One question is on everyone’s lips this afternoon: “Goin’ to the fire department tonight?” And so after exploring the area’s retail offerings, I headed back to the lodge to wake Shannon and make our way to the VFD Hall.

Nearly everyone I’d met this afternoon has come to the VFD’s fundraiser tonight—a testament to the bonds so integral to a small town’s survival. By the time Christy arrives, I’m deep in conversation with newfound friends, but I break away to visit with her and relive our morning in the marsh.

## Marsh-Mellow Memories



We had met in the predawn hours on the shoulder of Beach Road just past Rawling's Bait Camp. Across from the bait camp, a popular kayak launching spot called Rawling's Cut meanders through the marsh into East Bay. While I settled into a kayak to have my camera at the ready, Christy stood atop a sleek paddleboard bearing her distinctive mermaid logo. The sun had barely broached the horizon as we pushed off, sending kaleidoscopic splinters of refracted light across the glimmering bay.

We paddled east into the sunrise as big-shouldered redfish cut deep V-shaped wakes both to the port and starboard, shrimp and baitfish skittering in frenzied alarm. Directly ahead, a flock of roseate spoonbills rose from the marsh, their rose-hued wings translucent against the rising sun. A reddish egret, its long, beard-like breast feathers undulating in the gentle breeze, held its wings aloft umbrella-like, creating a shady spot to attract hapless baitfish escaping the sun's glare. Great blue and little blue herons, white ibis, wood storks, and several species of egret hunted in pickets along the channel's edges while rafts of ducks—blue-winged teal, redheads, gadwall, and wigeon—sailed skyward at our approach, only to circle back and splash down again after we passed. Squadrons of brown pelicans flew in formation overhead while shorebirds, including plovers, whimbrels, black-necked stilts, and impossibly-long-billed curlews, probed the mud for mollusks, crustaceans, and aquatic invertebrates. Small wonder that birders swoon over Matagorda, where at least 248 species have been cataloged to date.



Paddleboarding as the sun hovers on the horizon.

We paddled southeast into Three Mile Lake, a large marsh-rimmed lake on the backside of Matagorda Beach known for its spectacular fishing and birding. I studied three wade-fishermen plying the edges

of a shallow oyster reef with enviable success, and I watched a kayak angler, his craft bristling with an array of rods, paddle purposefully into a slough. I made a mental note to bring rods on my next trip. With no motorized boats in the shallow marsh, anglers have both stealth and solitude on their side.

Although I'm an experienced kayaker, the watery ribbons veining the marsh became an impenetrable labyrinth of sameness to me, even with the rooftops of the Beach Road stilt houses in sight. Thankfully, these waterways are familiar neighborhood roads to Christy.

This evening at the Firemen's Hall, I thank her again for the splendid morning we shared, and I vow to return soon.

Sunday morning, Shannon and I are up and out the door by sunrise, cameras and binoculars in tow. First, we drive the beach, creeping along in hopes of finding some of the rarest shorebirds. A few beach strollers, shell-seekers, and a handful of surf casters revel in the early spring warmth as graceful plovers, willets, and other sandpipers dance ballerina-like at the surf's edge.



Stuffed crab, fried shrimp and sides at Spoonbill's.

We've worked up an appetite, and we know just where to go: up Texas 60 to the Lighthouse BBQ & Cafe, which occupies a small frame cottage in front of an RV park. We opt for the Sunday breakfast buffet, a bountiful home-style spread of fresh fruit, bacon, sausage, hash browns, pancakes, and eggs to order.



Later that morning, we drive down the road to the left of the Matagorda Bay Nature Park's Natural Science Center, which features exhibits of shells and sea life common to the area. While Shannon photographs birds, I pause on the jetties, watching the shrimp boats and offshore anglers heading out the channel into the open Gulf. This channel, I learn, is relatively young.

"Up until the 1920s, Matagorda was all one big bay," Matagorda County Extension Agent Bill Balboa says. "Gulf of Mexico traffic to and from Matagorda had to enter the Bay at Pass Cavallo, 34 miles to the west, or at the smaller, less reliable Mitchell's Cut at the east end of the bay near Sargent. In the 1920s, Matagorda officials dredged a channel for the Colorado, using the spoil material to build what is now Beach Road, cutting Matagorda Bay in half and creating East and West bays."

Matagorda has seen more changes in the past century. The section of the Intracoastal Waterway between Galveston Bay and Corpus Christi wasn't completed until 1941. Until 2009, in fact, a single, floating swing bridge cobbled together from a retrofitted barge provided the only vehicular access to the peninsula, as well as the only way mainland ranchers could drive their herds to the winter grazing grounds they relied upon before the Intracoastal sliced through their ranches. The unreliable and costly system required frequent repairs and around-the-clock operators, so the Texas Department of Transportation determined to replace it with a soaring modern bridge.

In the process of building the 3,387-foot-long, 73-foot-high structure, disaster loomed in the form of 2008's Hurricane Ike, which was predicted to hit Matagorda while the partially built bridge was in full cantilever. Fearing that the entire cantilevered section could be lost, engineers worked feverishly with cables to secure the structure and prevent it from cracking. Fortunately for Matagorda, Ike veered north just before landfall, sparing the nascent bridge.

The bridge earned its Matagorda chops that day, I think to myself. For this feisty little town, so rich in history, so warm in heart, so resplendent with natural resources, could have vanished like the town of Indianola had years ago—simply scoured away by repeated hurricanes. Instead, it clings to its roots and celebrates its history, as delicate as its shorebirds, as tough as its canebrakes, as enduring as its tides.

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