

TEXASTM HIGHWAYS

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Simply Palacios

Easy-Breezy in “the City by the Sea”

Written by Jill Lawless.

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Illustration by Drue Wagner

An old, unlikely legend holds that Spanish sailors shipwrecked in Matagorda Bay saw a mirage of three sparkling palaces on a distant shoreline, and named the surrounding inlet Tres Palacios Bay.

Palacios is on Texas 35, midway between Corpus Christi and Galveston. For general information, contact the [Palacios Chamber of Commerce](#), 361/972-2615. For bike, kayak, and stand-up paddleboard rentals, contact [Palacios Paddlesports](#) at 979/241-5395.

Though still today no royal opulence awaits on the waterfront, the bay’s namesake town of Palacios harbors real treasure in its simple pleasures.

The quiet, mid-coast burg offers no broad, sandy beaches or high-rise hotels, but you will find birding and biking, parks and playscapes, fishing and kayaking, shrimp and shopping, and hints of a glamorous past. Consider these tips for a quick coastal fix or an easy-breezy weekend—all free, or affordable—in “The City by the Sea.”

Palacios Past

Matagorda Bay is linked to another, better-known shipwreck story (this one true): the sinking of French explorer La Salle’s ship *La Belle* in the bay’s murky waters in 1686. Palacios served as the headquarters for the ship’s excavation in the 1990s, and the City by the Sea Museum displays photos from the project along with a few artifacts, including trading beads and a piece of the innovative cofferdam built around the excavation site. Plans call for an expanded *La Belle* exhibit in the next few years, but in the meantime, you can view the museum’s other exhibits of Palacios history, which document the Karankawa and other early inhabitants; the era of Camp Hulen, an anti-aircraft training facility during World War II; and the devastation caused by Hurricane Carla in 1961. Built in 1910 to house the town mercantile, the museum building is itself a historical gem. Free admission. Call for hours, 361/972-1148; www.citybytheseamuseum.org.

Play Along the Bay

Cycle or stroll the 1.5-mile paved path along Palacios’ seawall, where several lighted piers and jetties prove popular with anglers—and with gulls and pelicans eyeing bait buckets from lampposts above. Next to the T-head pier in South Bay Park, a playscape and patch of sandy beach draw young ones for shoreline fun, while on the water, kayakers ply the bay’s gentle waves. Access to the parks and piers is free (remember your fishing license).

Note: At the west end of the seawall in South Bay Marina, catch a glimpse of *La Petite Belle*, a half-scale replica of La Salle’s ship that belongs to the

Palacios Area Historical Association (361/972-1148;www.citybytheseamuseum.org). The two-masted vessel sets sail for special events, including the Pirate Festival (June 19-20, 2015) and the annual Fourth of July festivities (www.palacioschamber.com).

Bygone Glam

During World War II, stars of stage and screen came to town for USO shows at Camp Hulen—and many of them rested up at the ritzy Luther Hotel. Among the glamorous guests to walk these halls: Rita Hayworth, Carole Landis, Shirley Temple, Bob Hope, and bandleader Artie Shaw.

While the hotel's lavish prime has passed, today's regulars return to the lodging for its homey feel and bayside setting. Images of Hollywood royalty line the lobby stairway, and a small history room holds volumes of historical documents, photographs, and letters. Hospitable owner Jack Findley provides occasional free public tours, and welcomes groups to stop in for a look by appointment. Call 361/972-2312 or email lutherhotel@warpspeed1.net.

Marsh On

Along Tres Palacios Bay at the site of old Camp Hulen, the Texas State Marine Education Center hosts area school groups for marine activities and nature study. The center also welcomes the public to the classroom building to view the few small displays of shoreline finds, La Belle excavation photos, and photos and memorabilia from the Army base's heyday.

Behind the building, a 708-foot pier extends over the salt marsh and into the bay, with access to a shell beach, and a boardwalk leads to 1.25 miles of nature trails.

Featuring several stops on the Great Texas Coastal Birding Trail, the Palacios area claims more than 450 bird species, some of which you'll spot at the Center and in the wetlands in and around town. White pelicans, black skimmers, great

egrets, cormorants, and roseate spoonbills number among the species that share the airspace here. Free admission. Center hours vary, so call ahead (361/972-3774; or go to www.palaciosisd.org and search for “marine science center”).

No Skimp on Shrimp

Known as the “Shrimp Capital of Texas,” the Port of Palacios is home to some 170 commercial shrimp boats, one of the largest fleets on the Gulf Coast. Sample the bounty at several local and area restaurants, including the Outrigger Grill, recently reopened by original owner Wayne Dodd. Wayne’s daughter, Chef Kelly Davis, keeps the shrimp and other seafood sizzling (fried and grilled), and also serves up salads, sourdough burgers, and fried-chicken platters on Fridays.

Call for lunch and dinner hours, 361/972-2975; www.outriggergrill.com.

The rustic joint brings in Texas bands for regular concerts, and features open-mic nights at 6 p.m. on the first and third Thursday of the month (BYO guitar). A mere \$5 pays for your entry and a light meal like red beans and rice or King Ranch chicken. A good deal after a good day in Palacios.

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