

Travel:

MATAGORDA COUNTY... TEXAS' UNDISCOVERED GULF SHORE

by Don Woodland

A fraction of the hundreds of shrimp boats that tie up at Palacios, Texas

Tired of vacationing in heavily-trafficked tourist areas? Well, for the outdoors enthusiasts who are looking for a vacation destination that is off the beaten path, “undiscovered”, and decidedly less expensive, there’s Matagorda County, Texas. This is the last undeveloped spot along America’s Gulf coast. Imagine, if you possibly can, a Gulf-front area that is charming, sparsely populated, uncongested with traffic, and whose business community is almost entirely made up of independent

(60 miles) from Houston (the nearest major airport). It is here where the 900-mile Colorado River meets the Gulf of Mexico, where miles of undeveloped shoreline hug the coast, and where some of the nation’s best birding can be found. Most of the county is level. Temperatures in the county vary from an average low of 44° in January to an average high of 92° in July. Bay City, Palacios, and Matagorda are the county’s principal population centers:

Bay City

The county seat and the largest city in Matagorda County is Bay City. The first thing you notice about the town is its classic town square, with the County Courthouse in the center and the retail buildings that line it. These buildings have survived from their 1894 beginnings, and are all occupied. You’ll enjoy the shopping.

A driving tour of Bay City reveals some of the most charming residential areas you can imagine for a small town. The homes along Avenues G and F are particularly pretty. (www.visitbaycity.org, www.baycity.org, www.baycitychamber.org)

Bay City is home of the **Matagorda County Museum**. The museum is housed in a beautiful old post office building erected in 1918, serving as a post office until 1989. The first floor has exhibits outlining the early settlement, industry and social and cultural history of the county. There’s a unique display of “white sculpture”—life size figures resembling famous locals. There’s also exhibits on the Karankawas, Matagorda County’s native Indians from the 1500’s. There’s also their famous La Salle exhibit:

The French explorer La Salle had a dream of colonizing the area at the mouth of the Mississippi River, invading and conquering Spanish provinces in Mexico, and claiming the land in the name of France. Not only was the mission a series of missteps and failures, but La Salle’s personality was sometimes irrational. Because of this, La Salle eventually landed at Matagorda Bay in Texas, nearly 500 miles away from his destination. In 1995, the Texas Historic Commission, working from these maps, finally found the frigate La Belle’s watery grave. More than a million artifacts were extracted, many of

which are on display at this and six other Texas museums. The museum is open Tue-Fri 10-4 Sat-Sun 1-4, and is located at 2100 Ave. F in Bay City. Guided tours are available upon request. (979-245-7502) (www.matagordacountymuseum.org)

The **Matagorda County Birding Nature Center** spans 34 acres on the Colorado River and offers nature trails, gardens, boardwalks, bridges, and an outdoor education center. Call for guided tours. The center is open 7 days a week (daylight hours) \$3.00/person; \$5.00/car; members free; 1025 State Hwy 35 South, Bay City (979-245-3336) (www.mcbnc.org)

Also just outside of Bay City is the studio of the unusual Western Sculptor Danny Stephens, whose ceramic horse and cowboy sculptures are totally unique and exquisite in workmanship. It’s a must-see for art or cowboy enthusiasts. (361-588-7038)

Palacios

Palacios is a small, “undiscovered” town by the sea. It’s quiet, unpretentious, and for those reasons, a very relaxing place

to visit. The town has one of the largest shrimping ports in the state of Texas--with over 600 Bay and Gulf shrimp boats



Gulls swarm to dine on trimmings from a fishing expedition along Texas’ Colorado River in Matagorda.

hotels, B&B’s and restaurants. The virtual absence of chain or franchise restaurants is especially refreshing. Restaurant prices are extraordinary (e.g. \$1.75 for onion rings, \$2.50 for desserts), and home cooking is the rule. Nothing fancy or frilly.

Matagorda County is in the Coastal Prairie region of Texas, adjacent to the Gulf of Mexico, and about two hours’ drive



Tourists getting a birds eye view of Matagorda County



The Matagorda County Museum



White Sculpture at the Matagorda County Museum

making Palacios their port. It is a very beautiful sight to drive around these areas and observe these stately boats.

The Palacios' seawall stretches three miles along the waterfront and is a favorite spot for many walkers. There are also three public boat ramps and numerous lighted jetties and piers for fishing and two miles of lighted sidewalk. The historic **Luther Hotel** is along the seafront. Along the west end of the south bay seawall at Railroad Park is a man-made sand beach, perfect for launching small sailboats, building sand castles, sunbathing, and beach picnicing. There are also free boat ramps and numerous lighted jetties and piers for fishing. You'll also want to walk out the wharf to the Pavillion, a unique wharf built originally in 1904, which over the years has been the site of dances and concerts. (www.palacioschamber.com)

Matagorda

Matagorda, the third oldest town in Texas, is located seven miles by car from

the Gulf of Mexico. It has a population of 1,752, but weekends and the summer swells that number considerably. The main industries are commercial and recreational fishing and ranching. In 1834, the town was the third largest city in Texas. (www.matagordachamber.com)

History buffs should spend some time at **Matagorda Cemetery**, one of Texas' oldest cemeteries--dating from 1829. It marks those who died: of yellow fever, the Texas Revolution, the War of 1812, the Civil War--and also those who died at the hands of the native Indians, the Karankawas. Also, you'll want to see the site of the Christ Church, the first Episcopal Church in Texas, which was organized in 1838.

Twenty miles of beach are accessible by automobile at **Matagorda Beach**; the remaining thirty-five miles are accessible only by boat, making it an unblemished paradise isolated from much of the public. These beaches are a beachcomber's

dream. Also available to the public is a fishing pier and beachside picnic area. Permits are required for vehicles entering the beach. Four-wheel drive vehicles are recommended for areas on the beach beyond the first three miles.

Texas A&M's Floating Classroom offers a hands-on learning experience aboard the 57' Karma, located at Matagorda Harbor. This 5½-hour focus on the environment has dates available to the general public. For more information, call 979-863-2940. (<http://tinyurl.com/l497j>)

A very small town in Matagorda County (barely a cross-roads) that you will not want to miss is **Blessing**. Here you can step back in time 100 years and find some real home-style cooking and historic accommodations at the Hotel Blessing. The daily family-style buffet at Hotel Blessing is a reminder of a simpler time. Most rooms in Hotel Blessing are decorated with the original furnishings. (www.hotelblessing.com)

Birdwatching is a major draw for

tourists. Matagorda County's location in the middle of the Texas coast places it on the central flyway for migratory birds. The surface of the county, a flat plain that rises from sea level to a maximum elevation of 70 feet, is divided by the Colorado River and bounded on the south by the Gulf of Mexico, making the area an ideal attraction for many species. Birds can be seen any time of year in Matagorda County, but migration-time (late spring and fall) bird watching proves to be the most rewarding.

Matagorda County has ranked number one in the Audubon Society's annual Christmas Bird Count for the last six years. More species were spotted in this area than anywhere in North America! 251 species were observed in December 2005 in Matagorda County. Examples of birds that can be spotted include the painted bunting, Tennessee warbler, scarlet tanager, roseate spoonbill, assorted hummingbirds, warblers and more.

The waters of Matagorda Bay offer prime **fishing**. The bay is shallow, which



Reaching for Country Fried Steak at the delightfully unpretentious daily buffet at Hotel Blessing



The pier is wonderful for fishing at Matagorda Beach.

allows for a variety of fishing opportunities. 9% of fish are usually caught in water from 1-3' deep. Offshore enthusiasts will find excellent opportunities for snapper, dolphin, kingfish and ling, a short run out of the Matagorda Jetties (www.matagordaharbor.com), or from Sargent. A 15-minute boat ride puts you in the middle of some great fishing.

Drift and wade fishers will find plenty of redfish and speckled trout. Deep-sea fishers in the Gulf of Mexico can catch grouper, red snapper, amberjack, wahoo, black drum and more. Tournaments are plentiful in Matagorda County during the warm weather seasons; there's nearly one a month.

West Matagorda Bay offers miles of grass flats that are enjoyed by both fishermen and wade fishermen, and consistently produce heavy stringers of redfish and speckled trout.

The Colorado River is considered to be the prime winter fishing area on the Texas Gulf Coast. Every year as the shallow waters of the adjacent bays cool, speckled trout and redfish seek out the warmer waters of the Colorado.



A Bull Redfish caught off Matagorda

Day on the Bay Services offers fishing trips as well as nature tourism. JP and Ozzie are excellent fishing guides. If you're experienced, they can show you where to get the big ones. If you're a complete beginner, they can show you everything you need to know, and they have all the gear you'll need. (www.dayonthebayservices.com/)

A temporary (five-day) non-resident fishing license is \$20 and valid for five days in a row for non-Texas residents. It is required unless you are over 65. Fishing licenses can be obtained at local shops and charter offices.

Matagorda is a hunter's paradise with a wide assortment of game. In a state where much **hunting** land is privately held, Matagorda County is fortunate enough to have land that is open to the public for hunting. Three such areas exist: Mad Island Wildlife Management Area, Big Boggy National Wildlife Refuge and a portion of the San Bernard National Wildlife Refuge.

The Texas Parks and Wildlife Department holds permit drawings for Mad Island alligator hunts. For a small daily fee or annual permit fee, a hunter may hunt waterfowl on designated days of the different seasons. Wildlife/nature tours are also conducted at different times of the year.

Big Boggy is located on the coast east of Matagorda along the Intracoastal Waterway. While much of the refuge is closed to public entry, a large area is open to hunters. Hunters may enter by boat but the area is also accessible by automobile with a designated parking area. No special permits are required.

Waterfowl is perhaps the most outstanding reason for hunting Matagorda County. Dove, quail, feral hogs and alligators are just a few more enticements. Whitetail deer, small game and varmints round out the types of game available for hunting. Leasing the hunting rights for property is one way to hunt. The use of a guide is another. Many outfitters service Matagorda County offering a variety of species and hunt packages.

For those interested in local farming, **farm and ranch tours** are provided by John Elliott that enable you to see a working rice farm and cattle operation. (979-245-2064).

Fish farms are also available to tour. There are 3,000 acres of fish farms countywide. For more information, call 979-245-8913.

Golfing opportunities include **Rio Colorado Golf Course**, a Gary Player-designed course beautifully situated high on the wooded bluffs of the Colorado River just off State Hwy. 60, southwest of Bay City. The course combines native coastal prairies common to the Texas Gulf Coast. Call 979-244-2955 for information. Also for golfers, there is the **Bay City Country Club**, West Hwy. 35, 979-245-3990; the **Bay-City Golf Club**, Celanese Park, and the **Palacios Golf Course**, Hwy. 35, 361-972-2666.

Whether novice or advanced, there are **kayaking and canoeing** trips to meet any desire. They can be rented by the hour, or for about \$50 per day.

Floating down the Colorado River, one can enjoy vistas of rice farms and prairie dotted with cattle until the river meets the gulf.

Along Caney Creek, paddlers enjoy tree-lined bank that shade the water below, offering a prime opportunity to see woodland bird species from the water.

In and among the saltwater marshes, paddlers feel the peace, quiet and solitude offered by the secluded atmosphere, even if part of a group.

Many of the marshes, creeks, rivers and bays in Matagorda County have been thoroughly mapped for the experienced paddler who wants to get out and explore, and beginners can always drop into the Colorado for a leisurely trip downstream.

For more information about Kayak rentals, contact **Freebird Kayak and Canoe Adventures** (979-863-7926).

Favorable winds, affordable harbor fees and beautiful vistas make the coastal communities of Sargent and Palacios perfect for visiting **sailing** buffs. Both of these small towns feature sheltered waters from the more active Gulf of Mexico, and are popular spots for sailors cruising the Gulf to stop in for a break in their journeys.

Bi-annual Cattle Drive

Want to see a real cattle drive? Since 1919, the Huebner family has been driving



Danny Stephens shows off his latest clay western sculpture

hundreds of cattle from family farms and ranches to the Matagorda peninsula. The three-to-four day journey leads them down county roads, through towns and across the Intracoastal Canal Bridge to the mouth of the Colorado River, where the cattle swim across the channel to the peninsula. It is here where they spend their winters grazing on the land's nutrient-rich salt grass. Each spring the cattle are returned to their homes before hurricane season begins. The event typically occurs each March and November.

Restaurants

won't leave hungry. And you can opt for not-so-hot salsa.

The **River Bend Restaurant** offers a spectacular view, from indoors or al fresco.

The **K2 Steakhouse** in Bay City offers an extensive, diversified menu and a wonderful salad bar.

Victoria's Mexican Restaurant has been serving Tex-Mex food for more than ten years in Bay City.

The **A&A Bar-B-Que** is an eatery in Bay City where they announce when your order is ready. It's good eating.



Cattle crossing the Colorado River in the Bi-annual Matagorda cattle drive

There's not an expensive restaurant in Matagorda County. And because they're all competing for the local trade most of the year, prices remain very competitive. Shrimp is the rage down here.

Here are some area favorites:

The **Outrigger**, in Palacios offers indoor or al fresco dining all day. The salads are a great value. Try the homemade pie or cheesecake for dessert. (www.outriggerrestaurant.com)

The **Palacios Mexican Restaurant** is a favorite in the area. We guarantee you

Accommodations

If you're a hotel person, you have quite a selection: the Bay City Inn, (979-245-0985), the Best Western Matagorda Hotel, (979-244-5400), Econo Lodge (979-245-5115), the Economy Inn (979-245-6333), Holiday Inn Express (979-323-9500), among many others.

However, this part of Texas is a real Bed & Breakfast find. The B&B's here are charming, clean, and extremely reasonably priced. If you're paying more than \$90 a night, you're not looking hard.



The beautiful Pavillion at the seawall in Palacios

So our advice is to contact the Chamber in whichever town you want to stay in and see what's available. There's many to choose from.

For example, there's the **Moonlight Bay B&B and Paper Moon Guest House**, 506 S. Bay Blvd., in Palacios. (877-461-7070). This is a waterfront B&B owned by Gaye and Earl Hudson. After a morning stroll on the seawall, relax with a book in the library or sit in the white rockers on the porch and enjoy the gentle sea breeze.

Or try Nick and Kathy Nichols' **Main Inn Bed & Breakfast**, 208 Main St., Palacios (888-972-3408). The Inn is a German Gothic style stone house, built in 1915 of cochina veneer. In-house rooms are \$60 per night. The Nichols' also offer water excursions on their yacht "Papillon."

The **Stanley-Fisher House**, in Matagorda, is one of the first houses ever built in Texas (1832) The house has withstood the tests of time and elements,



The Main Inn Bed & Breakfast in Palacios is a charmer.

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and has been restored by Rik & Peggy Stanley to its original splendor with modern amenities by owners Rik & Peggy Stanley. (979-863-2920)

Le Jardin De La Mer is another charmer, located in Palacios. (361-972-5983)

The best time to visit Matagorda County is in the fall. However, as on Cape Cod, its peak season is the summer. Even in peak season, the place feels uncongested. You'll enjoy the small-town feel, the low restaurant and accommodation prices, dealing with independently-owned businesses, and the very friendly people. And yes, Southern hospitality still reigns.

The spring and summer also afford visitors a chance to see those wildflowers so famous in Texas. Matagorda County is home to many of the five thousand wildflower species found in Texas; brilliant orange, cream, yellow and purple Indian paintbrushes cover Matagorda County's pastures. Bluebonnets, the official Texas flower, can also be found lining the

highways. Other species found include cosmos, coreopsis, winecups and crimson clovers, which bloom well into summer.

William P. Hobby Airport (HOU) is approximately 78 miles from Matagorda County and is served by Air Tran, American, American Eagle, Atlantic Southeast Comair, Delta and Southwest. Rental car agencies at HOU include Advantage, Alamo, Avis, Budget, Dollar, Enterprise, Hertz, National and Thrifty.

George Bush Intercontinental Airport (IAH) is approximately 98 miles from Matagorda County and is served by 23 passenger airlines including American, Continental, Delta, Northwest, Southwest, United and USAirways. Rental car agencies at IAH include Advantage, Alamo, Avis, Budget, Dollar, Enterprise, Hertz, National and Thrifty.

For a guide to tourism-related businesses and attractions, contact the Matagorda County Economic Development Corporation at (979)245-8913, or email to mcedc@co.matagorda.tx.us. For additional tourist information, go to www.visitmatagorda.com.

And thanks for traveling!