

GALVESTON, TEXAS

# ISLAND SOUL

– Historic Beach Town Visitor Guide –

## Sustainable Tourism

Help keep our Island  
clean, green and pristine

### **Underwater Wonderland**

JUST OFF THE COAST LIES  
AN AQUATIC OASIS

### **Historic Fan Favorites**

THESE RESTAURANTS HAVE BEEN SERVING  
HUNGRY PATRONS FOR DECADES

### **All Aboard**

REMINISCE ABOUT THE GLORY  
DAYS OF TRAIN TRAVEL AT THE  
GALVESTON RAILROAD MUSEUM





# Sustainable Tourism

A Galveston visit provides an opportunity to help keep the Island clean, green and pristine.

By Crai S. Bower



Early morning light  
cascades across the beach





CLOCKWISE FROM THIS PAGE: An adventure with Artist Boat; roseate spoonbills; bird watchers during FeatherFest; a sea turtle at Texas A&M-Galveston's rehab program



A

s parents, we have a responsibility to share the joy of nature with our children. Yet our success in doing so can prove challenging. To begin with, today's young people are more

informed about the state of the planet than at any time in human civilization. Whether learning about critical habitat loss, natural disasters, species extinction or a changing climate, our kids are only too aware that our planet and its environmental future are in dire straits.

However, there are also ecological success stories, important institutions, and other positive efforts that too often get lost in the media.

A Galveston treasure, the 684-acre East End Lagoon Nature Preserve is one of the few remaining sizable tracts of undeveloped coastal prairie and salt marsh on the island. The area is home to a diverse collection of birds and marine mammals that thrive in the brackish waters found here.

A family trip offers an ideal opportunity to engage positively with and celebrate our environment. Visiting

natural areas, learning about important environmental efforts and participating in local projects not only benefit the local ecosystem, but participants also experience optimism by making a difference, sharing their experience with others and, often, altering the trajectory of their lives to study, volunteer and work in related fields.

"Awe-inspiring scenes" occur with great regularity in Galveston and its environs. Winter sees sandhill cranes return by the hundreds to their wintering grounds in the West End. Spring brings migratory songbirds and other avian species by the thousands. Those birds that made the perilous journey across the Gulf of Mexico will refuel here before continuing their journey northward. The sea turtles return to the nest from May to mid-July. Bird migration reverses direction in the fall when species travel to their winter habitats in Mexico, Central America and South America.

In addition to one of North America's largest estuaries, Galveston offers the opportunity for citizen researchers to contribute to the scientific record. For decades, amateur birders have tallied species and individual numbers during the annual Christmas Bird Count and peak migration periods. This data is then used to detect population trends, alert scientists to potential risk factors like light pollution, and



generally provide information that would be impossible to collect were it not for local and visiting bird enthusiasts.

The Galveston Island Nature Tourism Council (GINTC) works closely with Visit Galveston to create tourism programs devoted to local nature. The Council offers free birding field trips, the perfect opportunity for visiting families to engage in a wonderful, shared pastime and learn how to identify birds. Many lifelong birders credit this type of introductory excursion when they were younger for shaping their lifetime passion for birdlife and the natural world, and a return to East End Lagoon and other Island hotspots to practice their craft.

The GINTC hosts various events throughout the year, including FeatherFest, the annual spring birding and nature photography festival. FeatherFest is considered among the finest birding festivals in North America. They also host Galveston Sea Turtle Saturday, an annual sea turtle restoration symposium; Galveston Winter Texan Nature Programs; and FledglingFest, a youth program during FeatherFest.

Paige Breon fell in love with nature as a child. The nesting program manager for the Gulf Center for Sea Turtle Research, Breon studies the age and growth of green and Kemp's ridley sea turtles as part of her graduate coursework in marine

biology. Recruitment of volunteers is one of her responsibilities.

"Nesting season is April 1 to July 15 for the upper Texas Coast," she says. "During these months, I oversee around 300 volunteers who patrol in Utility Terrain Vehicle (U.T.V.) and walking routes looking for nesting sea turtles. We patrol 87 miles between the Bolivar Peninsula, Galveston Island and Follet's Island. Our training for the Sea Aggie Sea Turtle Patrol is in March, and I invite anyone to join me."

Breon explains that a healthy marine ecosystem depends on the success of the sea turtle population that grazes on seagrass to keep the seabed healthy and reduce jellyfish blooms. They also contribute to the nutrient content of dune ecosystems where they nest.

"Unfortunately," she says, "human activities such as marine pollution, fishing





## **Environmental Opportunities in Galveston**

### **Project S.I.T.**

The Seawall Interpretive Trail provides an excellent self-directed interpretive trail of Galveston's rich coastal living communities.

### **Turtles About Town**

Turtles About Town is a community art project dedicated to Galveston's most famous inhabitants, our sea turtles. The self-guided tour is a great way to admire artistic impressions and learn about these vital animals.

### **Beach Ambassador Program**

The Coastal Zone Management crew collects an astounding 2 million pounds of trash annually across the 32 miles of Galveston beachfront. Galveston Beach Ambassadors lead the way in these efforts.

### **Up2U Galveston**

Up2U Galveston offers free trash bags located in wooden boxes on Galveston Beach. Visitors are encouraged to grab a bag and help clean this important environment.







FROM LEFT: One of the many sculptures on the self-guided Turtles About Town tour; excavating sea turtle eggs for incubation

practices and destruction of habitats have caused their numbers to dwindle. Additionally, sea turtles have been hunted for their shells and other materials. It is important for us to take action to help them recover from these threats and ensure their survival.”

Breon says working with like-minded individuals, including volunteers, students and experts in the field, is a highlight of her work. She thinks every visitor to Galveston should be aware that the Island is home to many protected and endangered species living in vital ecosystems. She also states that environmental awareness when traveling anywhere is essential to stem the destructive tide, as it were, and make little impact when we leave.

“Bring reusable items like water bottles and research ahead of time to learn about the protected and preserved areas as well as the unique environments. Remember that when enjoying nature not to leave anything behind: This is someone’s home.”

Breon says her passion for her work is "never-ending." She also enjoys her time off the beach and outside the lab. She likes to shop and eat on The Strand and visit Seawolf Park and Galveston Island State Park, where she recommends, not surprisingly, taking a nature walk.





## Eating Out

These restaurants contribute to the oyster recycling program on Galveston Island:

Cajun Greek

Shucks Tavern and Oyster Bar

Fisherman's Wharf

Fish Tales

Monarch Restaurant

Blvd Seafood

Gaido's/Nick's

Texas A&M Galveston's  
Seafood Safety Lab

Part of Texas A&M-Galveston, the Gulf Center for Sea Turtle Research continues to expand programs and fundraising efforts. The Moody Gardens Conservation Fund also supports numerous research projects involving animals, from local sea turtles to African penguins. Known for its iconic Rainforest Pyramid and Aquarium Pyramid, Moody Gardens is a research organization at its heart.

The Aquarium Pyramid exemplifies Moody Gardens' broad environmental education outreach. The 1.5-million-gallon aquatic habitat features diverse species from the Gulf of Mexico, South Atlantic, North Pacific, South Pacific and Caribbean. Visitors engage in numerous programs that entertain and educate them about the state of the world's marine environments. Family members, young and old, who develop a fascination for the creatures and relationships on display often contribute to conservation efforts and volunteer when they return home.

This inspiration is displayed no better than at Moody Gardens' new Coral Reef Lab. The immersive lab focuses on the challenges facing the Florida Reef Tract, including information about current efforts to preserve the remaining coral reef, among the most delicate and important marine environments on our planet.

"Corals are animals and are highly impacted by their environment. Through this effort, we are helping nature respond to a crisis and recover to become a healthy ecosystem once again," says Greg Whittaker, Moody Gardens, animal husbandry manager, on the Moody Gardens website. "We are looking forward to educating our guests about

the diversity of Florida's coral reefs and the importance of maintaining a healthy ecosystem for them to thrive."

Like hands-on exhibits in the Coral Reef Lab, habitats throughout Moody Gardens increase visitor empathy and ultimately lead to more engagement in programs that support global animal conservation efforts. Most visitors will never have the opportunity to see a rare Komodo dragon, the world's largest lizard, or a giant Amazon River otter in the wild. However, their feelings toward these species mirror those who travel to Indonesia or South America.

Animal encounters take us that much closer to extraordinary members of the natural world. Biologists lead visitors through a 45-minute session, including the food prep kitchen and behind the scenes of the exhibit, where they receive information about the penguin's life history and meet a penguin in the flesh. Cnidarian biologists lead groups through the process of maintaining the popular jelly lab. Intimate animal encounters with giant Amazon River otters and other species are in the planning stages.

Moody Gardens also takes the lead in local rehabilitation and conservation efforts across Galveston Island. The innovative Oyster Shell Recycling Program is a collaborative effort between Moody Gardens and seven local restaurants that return oyster shells to Galveston Bay to construct a human-made oyster reef (see sidebar "Eating Out"). The oyster reef will become a critical habitat for local fish, invertebrate species and vegetation.

The coastal margins are also the primary focus of Artist Boat, an innovative nonprofit program that connects visitors





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CLOCKWISE FROM OPPOSITE PAGE:  
Chargrilled oysters at BLVD;  
Artist Boat's Beautify the Bucket  
program; the Texas A&M-Galveston  
Sea Turtle Patrol; a biologist  
placing coral in a tank at Moody  
GHardens' Coral Rescue Lab



East End Lagoon is a  
684-acre nature preserve



and residents to Gulf Coast environments. The Artist Boat staff commits to preserving and restoring 1,400 contiguous acres within the Coastal Heritage Preserve on West Galveston Island. Additionally, Artist Boat is determined to create the first major environmental education center on the Gulf Coast.

Artist Boat has already established numerous programs, from Project S.I.T. (Seawall Interpretive Trail), a project that transformed 70 benches along Galveston's Seawall into educational works of art, to the Marine Debris Art Contest that invites participants to create art pieces "made primarily from marine debris and demonstrate the effects aquatic trash can have on our oceans."

There are many ways that anyone can participate in Artist Boat's efforts to restore the local Gulf habitat. "Sea Citizens" will assist in maintaining the Coastal Heritage Preserve by educating the public and attending events. Thursdays and Saturdays are Open Workdays at the Preserve, an opportunity for volunteers to remove invasive species, collect trash, and plant native plants across the vast 898-acre preserve. Open Workdays offers a perfect chance for visiting friends and families to give something back to the magnificent Galveston Bay and Estuary.

True to its name, Artist Boat also offers an innovative "Paint and Paddle" excursion they call an Eco-Art Public Kayak

Adventure. The kayaking and plein-air painting workshop originates in distinct areas within the Galveston environs.

Explore restored and natural marshes of Coastal Heritage Preserve, one of the most pristine examples of a coastal prairie complex. Paddle one of Galveston's premier ecological and historical jewels at Galveston Island State Park. At East End Lagoon, paddle in natural wetlands adjacent to the Houston Ship Channel and second largest port in the United States where Herons will greet you as you view large vessels passing by.

Artist Boat is one of several Galveston organizations working to preserve and restore the fabled Galveston ecosystems, environments famous for species diversity from oysters to sea turtles. A major staging area of the Central Flyway, home to various marine mammals and hundreds of fish species, Galveston Island offers visitors many ways to enlighten family holidays by learning about and participating in efforts to protect this important habitat for generations to come. 🌸

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Writer and photographer Crai S. Bower contributes scores of travel and lifestyle articles and images to numerous publications including *Condé Nast Traveler*, *Garden & Gun* and *AARP*. His essay, "Finding Love on the Slopes," received a 2022 Lowell Thomas Award for Excellence in Travel Journalism.