

Flock to the Coast

*Come winter, the bayside community of **Palacios** beckons to travelers, both feathered and unfeathered*

Text by **KATHLEEN KASKA**

See!

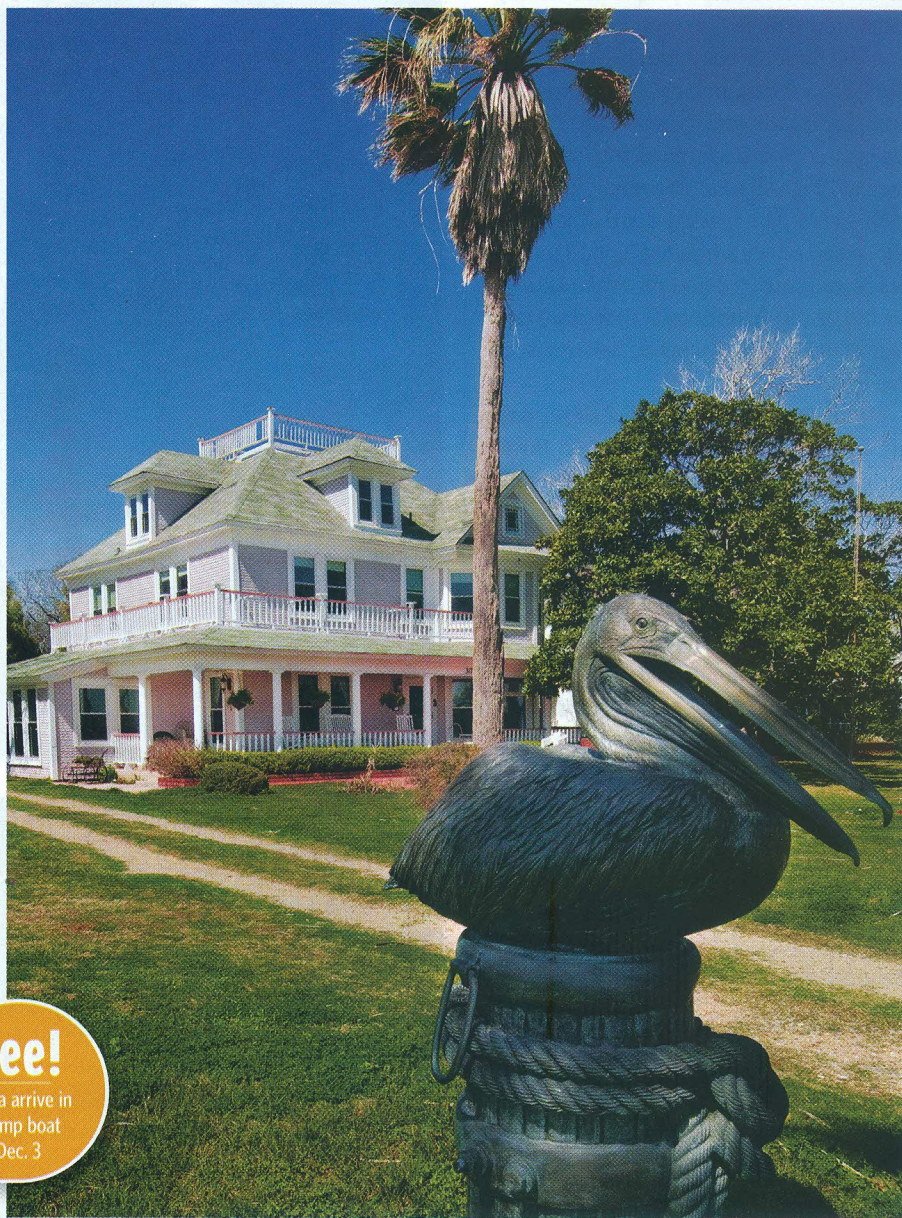
Santa arrive in a shrimp boat on Dec. 3

Our weekend agenda includes a picnic of raw oysters and ice-cold beer.

IT'S DECEMBER ON THE TEXAS COAST. MY HUSBAND AND I, ALONG with 200-plus species of birds, have migrated to Matagorda County, as we often do this time of the year. The birds have come for a respite from ice and snow, some of them to enjoy abundant Gulf Coast seafood. We're here for the same reasons—plus, we like watching the birds—and we've chosen the peaceful, picturesque town of Palacios as our base for the weekend.

Driving into town on Texas 35 South, we exit on East Bay Boulevard, where we hug the coastline along the Palacios waterfront. I cross my fingers as we round the bend in front of the Texas Baptist Encampment, hoping to spot a flock of long-billed curlews feeding near the amphitheater. I've encountered them on this very spot at least once every visit, and ...

An historic marker at the 1910 McGuire Home on East Bay Boulevard—now The Peaceful Pelican B&B—marks the site of the Palacios Preparatory School, which operated nearby.



yes! There they are again. Watching them maneuver those spiky, eight-inch bills while they probe for tiny invertebrates in the grass is a comical sight.

Less than two miles into the city limits, we've already checked off three birding sites on the Great Texas Coastal Birding Trail: East Bayshore Drive at Grassy Point, Trull Marsh, and the Palacios Waterfront/Texas Baptist Encampment. Without getting our feet wet, we've spotted white ibises, buffleheads, a long-billed dowitcher, redhead ducks, the ever-present killdeer (whose high-pitched squeak is unmistakable), and my old friends, the long-billed curlews. It's going to be a great weekend, and I haven't even slurped an oyster yet.

We check into our usual room at the charming but timeworn, 108-year-old Luther Hotel, which I discovered on another foray to the area 10 years ago. Owner Jack Findley has recently taken over the management of the hotel and lives on the premises. Findley's late wife, Claire Findley, was the daughter of Charles Luther, who bought the hotel in 1936. From the old photos in the lobby, it's clear the Luther has changed very little since the Forties, when Hollywood celebrities such as Rita Hayworth and Carole Landis stayed here during World War II while entertaining the troops at nearby Camp Hulen. A gas heater warms the lobby. On the wall behind the front desk, the original letterbox holds the room keys, and guests still use the buzzer on the wall to summon the desk clerk. The only sign of modern times are the current newspapers on the coffee table.

Before heading out for the afternoon, I step out the hotel's back door and walk about one-and-one-half blocks to Main Street to catch up on local happenings at the Old Main Street Bookstore. Along with the latest bestsellers, owner Jan Pierce serves up a variety of gourmet coffees, fresh-fruit smoothies, chocolate biscotti, and other snacks. Artworks by local artists, most of which are for sale, hang on



the walls. This afternoon's talk is about the possibility of a new pavilion being built near the waterfront adjacent to the fishing pier, on the same spot as the grand pavilion where Artie Shaw, Harry James, and Jack Teagarden entertained in the 1940s. Pierce sells me some clever bookmarks designed by 13-year-old Palacios resident Hayley Reynolds. Each is stamped with an animal paw print; the proceeds benefit a local animal rescue center.

With several hours of sunlight left, we drive to the Texas State Marine Education Center on the old Camp Hulen grounds. The center opened in 1988 as an interdisciplinary facility for teachers and students who want to learn about aquatic environments. Inside what once was the commanding officer's home, I meet the center's coordinator, Mary Kathryn Smith. "We worked with more than 7,000 students—from pre-K through college—at the center last year," Smith tells me. "We teach them about sea life, biodiversity, water quality, and how pollution affects Trespalacios Bay, which is part of Mata-

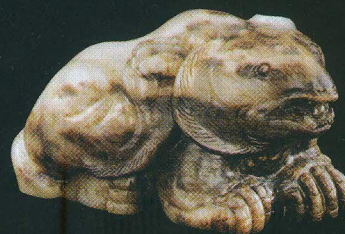
The 1910 R.J. Hill Building houses the City by the Sea Museum, where an exhibit commemorating the 50th anniversary of Hurricane Carla runs through summer 2012.

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December 10
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Monster Truck Winter Nationals

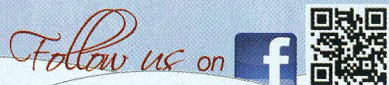
Bell County Museum

January 14–February 18
The Great Bell County
Quilt Crawl
www.quilt-crawl.org

November 18–January 8
Nature in Lights at BLORA

December 10
Christmas on the
Chisholm Trail

January 21
Belton Market Days



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A relaxing, bayfront park fosters Palacios' reputation as the "City by the Sea."

gorda Bay, the state's largest bay system."

Our respect for this natural area renewed, we begin exploring the 125 acres, starting with a hike along the salt-marsh habitat, where a spoonbill is wading in the shallows. Songbirds serenade us while we wind our way through the coastal prairie and estuary trails. The setting sun and hunger send us back to town.

Dinner choice that evening is a no-brainer: the Palacios Mexican Restaurant (known locally as the "PMR"). Selecting our meal, ditto. Shrimp fajitas arrive piled high, sizzling loud enough to make heads turn, and accompanied by flour tortillas, refried beans, rice, guacamole, shredded cheese, sour cream, and pico de gallo. After mountainous servings of fried ice cream, we waddle back to the hotel and turn in early.

Next morning, the day's plan shapes up during a jog along the waterfront. Our first stop is the IGA grocery store for bread, cheese, and dark beers to take to the LCRA Matagorda Bay Nature Park on FM 2031, where the Colorado River meets the Gulf of Mexico. Before driving over the new Intracoastal Waterway Bridge, we grab a pint of fresh oysters at Buddy's Seafood & Bait in Matagorda and ice them down. The salt-marsh

habitat alongside the road leading to the park draws a plethora of wading birds. Pullouts along the way and an observation stand just before the park allow us to spot blue herons, great white and snowy egrets, and white-faced ibises. We find a clapper rail hidden in the grasses. Once at the park, we hike out to the jetty that the U.S. Corps of Engineers recently constructed on the Colorado River, where jaegers, terns, and gulls dive in the calm waters. It starts to rain during our beach hike, but we're not concerned. Coastal weather is unpredictable, so you go with the flow, which in our case means windshield birdwatching—and a dashboard picnic of raw oysters and ice-cold beer.

Back in Palacios, the sun is out again, and we walk over to the City by the Sea Museum. Hearing about the town's previous pavilions at the bookstore yesterday sparked my curiosity, so I look at the historical photos that tell the story of the succession of Palacios pavilions since the town's inception in 1903. These structures, with names like Pleasure Pavilion and Roundhouse, extended out over the bay. They were the hub of social life, where folks gathered to swim, dance, and even play basketball. One of the earlier pavilions had mooring docks and a restaurant. All

were either damaged or destroyed by hurricanes. The current pavilion—a smaller, open-air structure built in 1991—lost its roof during Hurricane Claudette in 2003.

Our history lesson continues with a stroll downtown to view five murals depicting life in a small coastal town.

Early pavilions were the hub of social life, where folks gathered to swim, dance, and even play basketball.

Artist Dayton Wodrich captured the heart of Palacios with scenes that portray the area's early settlers, fishing, farming and ranching, and bird life.

On the way back to the Luther, we stop by another favorite eatery, Outrigger Grill, and pick up a menu. Back in the room, I pull up a rocker and plan my evening meal. The melodic litany from the Bubba Blue character in *Forrest Gump* replays in my head. Will it be blackened shrimp, grilled shrimp, fried shrimp, boiled shrimp, bacon-wrapped shrimp, or coconut shrimp? My mouth starts to water.

Having lots of choices is a good thing. Next time we'll stay a week. **TH**

Palacios

is 30 miles north of Port Lavaca on Texas 35. The community's free Seaside Holiday event begins on Dec. 3 at 6:30 p.m., when Santa arrives at the waterfront in a shrimp boat. He then takes a golf cart to the Luther Hotel, where he hears children's wishes and volunteers serve hot chocolate and cookies. The Texas Fishermen's Seafood Festival takes place earlier, at noon. For details about other events, lodging, restaurants, and attractions, call 361/972-2615; www.palacioschamber.com.



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