

Around the Texas Coastal Bend



by Terry Conway

When visitors arrive at the seaside village of Rockport, Texas, it's like taking a step back in time. Rockport boasts the friendliness of small-town life, a place where cowpokes rub elbows with shrimpers, artists and travelers. It's perched on the north end of the Laguna Madre Peninsula, where the muddy brown waters of the Gulf of Mexico begin to sparkle clear and green.

Thirty minutes northeast of Corpus Christi, Rockport and its neighbor Fulton are part of a string of small fishing communities that dot miles of preserved mid-Texas shoreline known as the Coastal Bend. Flanked by Aransas Bay and Copano Bay, Rockport is a short boat ride to the Gulf of Mexico, where anglers find some of the best redfish and speckled trout fishing in the country.

Nestled among ancient windswept oaks, easy-going Rockport (pop. 6,000) claims an impressive art colony, clunky antique shops and down-home restaurants, offering an escape to one and all from today's frenetic world as they take in its natural splendor and its close-knit feel.



Palm trees, oleanders and bougainvilleas envelop the seaside town, where herons, egrets and pelicans outnumber the human folks. Just down the road is the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge, where you'll find an untamed expanse of beach, grassy dunes and estuaries teeming with wildlife. During the winter months thousands of migratory fowl, about 75 species of birds and the world's only community of endangered whooping cranes turn up to nest and breed.

The Karankawa Indians were the Coastal Bend's earliest inhabitants. By 1519 the Spanish had landed, exploring and charting the region; still, for the next 200 years the Karankawas fiercely resisted any settlement attempts. Finally, in 1746, the

Spanish built their first fort – Aranzazu - near what today is the Copano Causeway. Farming was the first way of life, and then cattle ranching and meat-packing until the late 1800s, when fishing became the backbone of Rockport-Fulton's commerce.

The bays and gulf are famed for bountiful catches. Best advice: find a fishing guide, either a full-time charter captain or one licensed by the U. S. Coast Guard and the state of Texas. Stop by Rockport's Chamber of Commerce for a list. After a short walk and a quick launch on a 24-foot skiff, you're headed to premium fishing spots, some deep and some very shallow.

Bring your waders and stalk the flats near Mud Island. Northeast of Rockport proper, Mud Island's bottom is mostly sand and grass; what little mud exists is hard enough to walk on. Check out the southeast side of the island where the barb of your hook will surely end up in the jaw of a feisty redfish. With your casting rod flattened out, the fight is on as big red circles and circles you until it finally gives up. Pay sharp attention to bracing Texas coastal breezes, which seem at times to border on hurricane force. A strong northeast or northwest wind can blow a lot of water off the flats and create a hidden danger. Stay in the channels. Another top spot is near the California Hole Lighthouse, which is known as the Quarantine by locals. It's super drift fishing. A short distance away is Estes Flats, located between Traylor Island and the mainland. It's a favorite for speckled trout.

Back on land visitors discover a mix of accommodations including a string of charming Victorian homes and inns which have been gentrified over the past decade. Adjacent to the harbor is the Texas Maritime Museum. Here you'll find everything from the early days of Spanish and French exploration to the modern search for offshore oil and gas. There are displays of local paddle-wheelers and a dazzling array of fishing lures; there are huge illustrations of the sailing designs that helped create the Texas seafood industry and a history of the Texas Navy warships in action off the Yucatan coast.

Eating's big there. You'll also find that many of the eateries feature a relaxing pub atmosphere, with a few serving up live music. Stop by Fulton landmark Charlotte Plummer's with its cozy upstairs deck that overlooks the harbor. Scan its blackboard menu of grilled, blackened seafood served with Vera Cruz or crabmeat sauce.

Bring your catch cleaned and ready to cook

and they'll prepare it for you at Moose and Roses in Rockport, but the joint is probably best known for breakfast- dive into one of their jumbo omelets.

Steaks and burgers are the fare at Croaker's Bar & Grill - dine in or dine out! The setting is rustic and Texas-friendly and invites you to come and sit a spell. There's a covered patio seating area that's great for catching the soft southeast breeze. Open for lunch and dinner, the "Boudin Sausage" and the "Blues Burger" are

house favorites along with Croaker's special jalapeno bread.

If you're searching for fine dining and a coastal atmosphere, Hemingway's Bar & Grill is writing a new chapter. Try a delicious and unusual seafood hors d'oeuvre and for the entrée, fresh seafood or a house-cut steak prepared by Chef Morton. Quail, calamari, duck, and buffalo are just some of the specialty dishes you'll find. Sit underneath a slowly turning straw-bladed ceiling fan and relax in the rich elegance of the Piano Bar. It's Rockport's newest gathering place.

Located in the heart of historic Rockport, Latitude 2802 Coastal Cuisine features fresh local and global seafood, baked and sautéed with Mediterranean, Latin and European influences. You'll enjoy elegant dining in an art gallery atmos-



phere - many of the best local artists display their works on Latitude's walls. There's a broad array of domestic and imported wines and champagne.

Dorrado's at Key Allegro offers a great view of Little Bay, tropical atmosphere, waterfront dining, tasty seafood and steak entrées. There's a full bar out on the patio, Palapy, where the atmosphere is relaxed and time seems to move more slowly.

With its quirky towns, gorgeous beaches, world-class birding and great saltwater fishing, Texas' Coastal Bend area is a wonderful place to decompress. Just don't pass it on.

For more information on Rockport-Fulton and Texas's Coastal Bend area, call 800-242-0071 or visit www.rockport-fulton.com.