

TEXAS HIGHWAYS--CLEAR LAKE--MALLORY

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CLEAR LAKE

THE TEXAS CARIBBEAN

Bathed in the orange glow of sunset after a spirited day on Galveston Bay, Dallasites Jim and Karen McAnally maneuver their 41-foot sailing yacht into a lengthening row of boats. Single-masted sloops and double-masted schooners bob up and down in shallow emerald waters. Fishing boats, seaworthy cruisers, and sleek racers motor into line. Near shore, Lilliputian jet-skiers dart in and out.

The parade of boats (hundreds on a busy day) stretches almost as far as the eye can see, heading home to Clear Lake, one of the Texas coast's most protected bodies of water.

To reach safe harbor, however, the parade must funnel through narrow Clear Creek Channel, the only passage between lake and bay. The result: one of the state's best maritime spectacles.

At trendy eateries along the channel, sun-drenched throngs perch on open-air decks. Like "people watchers" at a watery sidewalk cafe, the landlubbers take in the colorful crafts and crews just yards away.

Across the channel, commercial shrimp boats off load at busy seafood markets. Gulls gossip overhead. The aroma of boiling shrimp and crawfish drifts by. From a dockside club live reggae music pulses on the salty breeze like a heartbeat.

"If you love the sea but want to live in Texas," beams avid sailor Karen McAnally, "Clear Lake is about as close to the Caribbean lifestyle as you can get."

Haven to 7,000-plus recreational boats (third largest concentration in the U.S.), the "Texas Caribbean" serves up a smorgasbord of seafaring sights, smells, and sounds only 25 miles from Houston.

Sample that exotic flavor on a short driving loop around Clear Lake. Excluding stops, plan on approximately half an hour for the loop.

Begin just east of Johnson Space Center and Space Center Houston on NASA Road One at the Nassau Bay Hilton and Marina.

Beside the high-rise resort, fun-seekers zig-zag in the water, hanging on to jetskis, water-skis, and, hovering over the lake, parasails. From the hotel's marina, the chartered "Morning Star," a 56-foot vintage sailboat, cuts a graceful line across the lake. The entire swirl of activity churns Clear Lake under the watchful eye of the old Jim West mansion, located across NASA Road One.

In 1961 (the same year Hurricane Carla hit the area) the U.S. government picked Houston oilman Jim West's 30,000-acre cattle ranch as the site for its manned space center. The choice launched a meteoric boom era for the nine communities of the Clear Lake area. Since the Seventies, local population has tripled to 150,000.

Past the West mansion, the road crosses the lower reaches of Armand Bayou that, along with Clear Creek and Taylor Bayou, feeds fresh water into Clear Lake. Spring rains "sweeten" the lake, which turns more brackish in drier seasons and when high tides carry in salt water from the bay.

Past the Armand Bayou bridge, look to the left for Clear Lake Park. Go around to the small, white turn-of-the-century Presbyterian Church that houses the Bay Area Museum. Restored in 1984 with funds raised from an annual Lunar Rendezvous Festival, the small museum displays festival and space center memorabilia, plus exhibits chronicling local history.

In the early 1800s, pirate Jean Lafitte patrolled the lake and, legend has it, buried plunder along the north shore. Early American settlers came to Clear Lake with Stephen F. Austin's original 300 Texas-bound colonists.

In 1830 settler Ritson Morris built a home near the mouth of Clear Lake. When Texas revolutionaries triumphed at the Battle of San Jacinto a few miles away, they brought the defeated Mexican general to Morris' home for the night. Next morning, Morris' cook Savannah prepared breakfast in the company of her pet parrot who had a habit of screaming her owner's name. When the bird belted out "Savannah," the stunned prisoner paled at what sounded like his own name: Santa Anna.

The railroad came in the mid-1800s, but sailing ships continued to haul most cargo and passengers for decades to come. Early on, ships docked at Clear Creek, as locals called the area, because water stood deeper and more protected than in Galveston Bay. Families built rooftop platforms called "widow's walks" on shoreline homes. From such a promontory a wife could spot her husband's arriving boat and send a buggy to pick him up at the dock.

By century's end, developers like James Webster, John C. League, and Seabrook Sydnor built thriving communities that still bear their names (Webster, League City, and Seabrook).

The 1900 hurricane which all but destroyed Galveston also raked across Clear Lake, yet the area rebuilt as an agricultural and fishing center. In 1903 a former member of the Japanese Diet, Seito Saibara, came to advise local farmers about rice growing. He found the area so suitable that he and son Kiyooki leased land at Clear Lake and grew rice seeds that helped spawn Texas' rice industry.

Outside the Bay Area Museum saunter down grassy slopes to the wide stretch of Armand Bayou known as Mud Lake. Year-round (especially early mornings on weekends), enthusiasts of the Bay Area Rowing Club ply the calm waters from inside sleek racing sculleys.

Mud Lake, like much of the Clear Lake watershed, has sunk several feet since the Fifties as towns, industries, and farms withdrew more and more ground water. The resulting "drowning" of marshes, swamps, and flood plain forests converted wet lowlands into unvegetated open water, says Linda R. Shead of the Galveston Bay Foundation (GBF).

To reverse that trend, a joint effort of GBF, business, and government, restored three acres of marsh in 1994 and will add six more by the end of 1995.

Technically a "tertiary bay," Clear Lake and its bayous and marshes serve an ancient role as breeding grounds for young marine creatures brought in by tidal pressure. In 1991 the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department designated Clear Lake as protected habitat for juvenile shrimp. Reviving Clear Lake's ecological mix, says Shead, will enhance fishing grounds for shrimp, fin fish, and other species in Galveston Bay, one of the largest estuaries on the Gulf Coast.

For a look at the most intact remnant of the area's original ecosystem, take a short detour off the Clear Lake loop to the 2,500-acre preserve of Armand Bayou Nature Center (for directions, see page ____).

Between Clear Lake Park and Texas Highway 146, NASA Road One reflects Clear Lake's maritime mentality. Boat slips lie under elevated condominiums and apartments like parking spots. Restaurants, marinas, and boat sales and service businesses crowd the waterfront. "Boat interior decorating," one shop advertises.

Turn right on Texas 146 into Seabrook, an eclectic neighborhood of 40 shops, restaurants, and galleries. Stroll several live oak-lined streets past a bayside park, bed and breakfasts, and establishments featuring everything from antiques to nursery stock and cappuccino to massage therapy.

On the bay side of Seabrook, along Clear Creek Channel, buy fresh seafood where shrimpers unload at dockside markets. On the lake side of Seabrook, near the markets, discover Seabrook Shipyard for a historic look at life on the water.

Built in the Thirties to repair small commercial boats, the shipyard gained notoriety during World War II by fabricating submarine chasers and rescue boats for the war effort. One of Clear Lake's few working marinas, the shipyard still repairs boats, while cultivating an easy-going neighborhood atmosphere.

"Every pier has its own personality," says harbormaster Walter Kidd. "We'll have Marina Night Outs with boat owners sharing covered dish suppers, then visiting friends at other piers."

Sounds of the sea abound at Seabrook Shipyard, as they do at more than a dozen other marinas scattered around Clear Lake. Sailboats of various sizes tug at the creaking lines that secure them to deep water slips. Boat owners hose down decks and scrub away corrosive sea water. Overhead looms a veritable forest of tall boat masts. Nylon halyards (ropes) tap against the metal masts making sounds like wind chimes echoing across the marina.

In summer's prevailing southerly winds, Seabrook sailors such as Stewart Stout head east across Upper Galveston Bay to popular anchorages at Double Bayou and the mouth of the Trinity River at Anahuac, a four-hour sail. "On the way, people fish for sea trout or redfish, or watch for bottle-nosed dolphins," Stout says. "Once you get there, you can motor up Double Bayou looking for alligators."

Another popular half-day outing skirts south to open waters in the Gulf of Mexico. Friends sailing together sometime "raft up," anchoring their boats side by side like one big floating party boat.

The loop around Clear Lake continues south on Texas 146 across the Kemah-Seabrook bridge, which climbs 70 feet in the air over Clear Creek Channel. The view from the bridge offers the best drive-by panorama of both lake and bay.

In Kemah hoist your gastronomic pursuits at Restaurant Row where a half-dozen waterside restaurants serve up "meals with a view"--fresh seafood, Tex-Mex,

Mediterranean, and Continental cuisine overlooking a parade of boats. Kemah (population 1,300) boasts more restaurant seating than residents.

Connected to the channel behind Restaurant Row sprawls the modern Lafayette Landing, a stone's throw from the bay. There, yachtsmen dock high-dollar boats, and any comer can learn to sail, secure overnight "boat and breakfast" lodging, or charter day or dinner cruises on powerboats or sailboats--including the stylish 53-foot "Ultra," one of the state's largest trimaran yachts.

Kemah, like Seabrook, brims with nautical gift shopping. Across the street from Lafayette Landing, Texas-made flags and whimsical wind socks flutter outside the Eagles' Nest Gallery. Inside, owner Patrick O'Brien sells unusual collectibles like carved wooden sea birds, statues of leaping dolphin, mailboxes disguised as sharks, and antique models of sea planes.

Next door at Kemah Ketch, Patti and John Hubbs specialize in English pond boats from the Twenties and Thirties, as well as a large selection of woven tapestry throws. More than a dozen other boutiques cluster along Sixth Street in revamped older homes.

A block away at the waterfront Captain's Quarters bed and breakfast, guests appreciate the low-key, wind-swept lifestyle of Kemah (an Indian word for "facing the breeze"). "Down here the world kind of winds down like slow motion," says repeat guest Ray Garza of Houston, gazing out across the bay at white billowed sails criss-crossing in the distance. (A sister B&B, the Crew's Quarters, offers a bayfront view on the Seabrook side of the channel.)

Continue south on Texas 146 and turn right on Farm Road 2094 to Clear Lake's laid-back south shore. Pass ship accessory stores, sail making shops, and a small wooden boat builder before coming to three of the lake's largest marinas: Watergate Yachting Center, Waterford Harbour, and South Shore Harbour Resort. With room for 1,182 boats (70 percent sailboats), Watergate looks like a little sailor's city--complete

with restaurants, laundry, showers, beauty salon and barber shop, and fitness facilities like tennis, swimming, and exercise room. "We've got just about everything you need except a grocery," says boatsman Don Bering of Houston aboard his classic 57-foot charter yacht, "Interlude." (Another vintage yacht, the "Sakonnet," also charters trips from Watergate.)

At Watergate not only can you dock your boat, you can buy, finance, insure, learn to sail, and repair it. You even can live aboard your boat, as you can at several marinas. To accommodate children of "live-aboards," Clear Lake schools even provide dockside bus service.

Live-aboards comprise almost a tenth of the 450 boat owners at plush Waterford Harbor. Tom and Carol Dayton's two teenagers take for granted life aboard the 60-foot, three-bedroom family cutter ketch. "They think it's normal," laughs Carol. "To some people, it's romantic, to others it's crazy," explains Tom, who plans to sail the South Pacific one day. "But to me it's living with something you love."

Neighbor live-aboards Steve and Lielie Wolfson, both trained ocean engineers, love the camaraderie of Clear Lake's large live-aboard community. "We all know each other," says Steve. "It's a tight-knit community that watches out for each other." Like many live-aboards, the Wolfsons take their small rubber dinghy out to eat or to simply cruise the lake.

Take a cruise and go out to eat at the same time from South Shore Harbour, just west of Waterford Harbor, aboard one of Clear Lake's largest boats, the elegant 100-foot Star Gazer, which serves dinner and brunch for 150.

One of the largest local marinas (1,000-boat capacity), South Shore Harbour Resort and Conference Center also sports a high-rise hotel with lake views, three restaurants, indoor and outdoor tennis, golf course, boat rentals, and 70,000-square-foot fitness center...not to mention its own working lighthouse.

From South Shore Harbour complete the loop around Clear Lake by following Farm Road 2094 until it junctions with Farm Road 270. Go right and continue back to NASA Road One. Without stops, the loop takes approximately half an hour.

Wherever you go, look for names painted on Clear Lake's 7,000-plus boats; they reflect the lively spirit of the area's "boat people." Names dripping with heroism, like "High Noon" and "Excaliber." Names with an attitude, like "Can Do" and "Tudalu." Comical names, like "Whim Sea" and "Sea Esta." Perhaps more often, the names suggest their captains' passion for the sea: "Second Love," "More Hours Alone," and "Linger Longer."

Stick your toes in the waters of Clear Lake--that great protected harbor at the edge of a grand bay--and you'll want to linger longer, too...in the boating paradise of the "Texas Caribbean."