

A photograph of a person in a red kayak on a bayou. The kayaker is wearing a blue tank top and a yellow cap. The water is calm, reflecting the surrounding dense green forest. A large, gnarled tree trunk stands in the water on the left side of the frame. The overall scene is peaceful and scenic.

# A Bayou Rendezvous

**Outdoor adventures, museums aplenty, and creative cuisine underscore Beaumont's resilient spirit.**

BY SHERMAKAYE BASS

PHOTOGRAPHS BY TOM WILLIAMSON

Shortly before we went to press in mid-September, Hurricane Ike barreled into the Texas Gulf Coast, leaving Beaumont down, but not out. Cleanup began immediately. Here, a kayaker enjoys an afternoon on Baird's Bayou.

## Slicing through the clear waters

of Village Creek in a canoe, I feel like I'm miles from civilization. At the helm is my guide for the next two hours, naturalist David Martin, owner of Piney Woods Outfitter. The diversity of life on this quiet, narrow creek astounds me. Under the canopy of willow, bald cypress, and tupelo, we hear the peep of a scarlet cardinal, the swoosh and splash of a kingfisher diving for dinner. Suddenly, Martin pauses, back-paddling to slow us down. "Look, an otter slide," he says, pointing to a steep, barren patch on the bank to our left. "Otters and beavers have been making a comeback here in the Big Thicket area."

It's primordial here, I think.

In reality, though, we're 10 miles north of Beaumont, a bustling little city best known for its oil refineries.

As Martin talked about the region's terrain, and how Native Americans have always revered the area for its fishing and hunting, it hit me: Here I was on the periphery of Petrol Central, but also within spitting distance of the wildest, woolliest woodlands in the state.

Relatively few people realize that Beaumont, founded in 1835 on the Neches River as a trapper's paradise, is neighbor to one of the most pristine preserves in

Texas: the Big Thicket National Preserve, 97,000 acres of dense pines, hardwoods, and swampland. Parts of the preserve adjoin Village Creek, which has been ranked among America's best canoeing destinations by magazines like *National Geographic Adventure*. Also surprising to Interstate-10 passersby is that this is big-time birding country: Audubon types flock here to see warblers, woodpeckers, water thrushes, sparrows, buntings, kingfishers, kites, vireos, owls, and water fowl from loons to terns. Who knew?

**Surprises abound in Beaumont**, which was transformed in 1901 with the discovery of oil at the famous Spindletop salt dome south of town. Life here now revolves as much around cuisine and culture as it does the oil industry.

I'd always heard that Beaumont was a study in contrasts. After all, it *is* home to Spindletop, the gusher that transformed this timber and farming settlement into an oil-fueled boomtown in 1901. But driving from Austin the evening before my canoe trip, I had to wonder just how beautiful the heart of Texas oil refining could be. I also wondered what might keep an avowed urbanite like myself happily distracted for

an entire weekend in a city of 115,000.

Upon checking into the nine-story MCM Elegante Hotel, I felt optimistic. My suite (it *was* elegant) included a sitting room, wet bar, and extremely comfy king-size bed. There was even an Aveda day-spa downstairs, in case I wanted a massage or manicure in a moment of leisure.

Relaxation would have to wait, though: I had arranged to meet people for happy hour at Easys Tapas & Martinis on Calder Street, the main artery going east from I-10 toward downtown. The hip

bistro buzzed, with hardly a place to sit on a Friday evening—understandable, considering what emerged from the kitchen: delicately fried artichokes; a tantalizing mix of crab, shrimp, and fish in a rich butter sauce; and savory bits of steak and mushrooms—with a tart Apple-tini on the side.

For dinner, we relocated to Suga's Deep South Cuisine & Jazz Bar on Crockett Street, where a resident ivory-tickler played name-that-tune with his audience. Beautifully arranged plates rolled out—crab cakes on a bed of fried green tomatoes, a lovely and tender buffalo *osso bucco*, succulent grilled beef tenderloin. Afterwards, we shared a luscious chocolate dessert and ... the next thing I knew, I was in a satisfied food coma back in my room.

**E**arly Saturday en route to the creek, I hit Rao's Bakery, a staple in Beaumont since 1941. Rao's is particularly famous for its specialty cakes, cookies, and cinnamon rolls (the latter gooey, pecan-coated bites of paradise). Sated, I headed up US 96 to meet Martin. We put in around 8:30 a.m., so I'd make landfall in time for a late lunch at Willy Ray's Bar-B-Q Co., then have a look-see at some historic sites downtown. (*Esquire* and *The New York Times* have given a nod to Willy Ray's slow-smoked brisket and ribs; my nod: carrot soufflé to die for.)



ABOVE: An expansive wine and cocktail menu, plus a wide range of culinary offerings (honey-saffron tilapia and ceviche shown here) draw a loyal crowd at Easys Tapas & Martinis. RIGHT: At the Spindletop/Gladys City Boomtown Museum, you can view a replica of the famous 1901 gusher at Spindletop.





More than a dozen museums in Beaumont delve into art, music, sports, natural science, energy, and cultural history. A 24-foot-tall "fire hydrant" marks the entrance to the city's compelling Fire Museum of Texas.

That's the odd thing about Beaumont—the good, odd thing. The contrast between oil town and the lush landscapes that surround it is almost jolting. But contrasts abound here: Barbecue and carrot soufflé, refineries and nature preserves, alligators and armadillos, Louisiana chutzpah sidled up to Texas pride.

"When people come here and explore the region, they usually go away with a different perspective," says internationally known photojournalist Keith Carter, a native who still calls Beaumont home. "The region has had the reputation of being just an oil refining area. That's unfortunate, because Beaumont has a *vibe* to it."

The city itself is a surprise to many visitors, including me.

My Saturday afternoon was packed. After lunch, I toured the 1905-06 McFaddin-Ward House, home to early civic leader W.P.H. McFaddin and his wife, Ida. A fine example of Beaux-Arts Colonial opulence, the manor showcases many of McFaddin's personal effects, plus a vast collection of tableware and period furnishings. The garden is lovely, but my favorite aspect was the

first-floor parlor, with its card-table nook and handsome Brunswick billiards table.

Beaumont excels at showcasing the city's cultural history. For example, the Spindletop/Gladys City Boomtown Museum nicely re-creates the community that grew around the mighty 1901 gusher. Here, you can view a replica of an oil gusher (which erupts on special occasions with faux "black gold"), along with an old-timey photography studio, a general

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store replica (complete with coffee mill and chick incubator), Broussard's Livery Stable (you can still smell horse's sweat on the leather items), and the restored Gladys City Drug building, which contains an antique apothecary case stocked with curios, tonics, and potions.

The jewel of my afternoon was St. Anthony's Cathedral Basilica, which was

modeled after the early 12th-Century Basilica di San Clemente in Rome. From the outside, only the restored copper dome indicates the splendor of what lies inside this spiritual and architectural gem—from its gilt pavilion above the main altar and the marble colonnades leading up to the presbytery, to the apse mural, where the towering figures of 11 Apostles and the Virgin Mary



A Big Hello to Big Al

I wasn't surprised to hear of an alligator park outside of Beaumont—it's a swampy region, after all. I was surprised to find a lot of fun, even conservation, at Gator Country, a 16-acre park set on a former alligator farm, with seven nicely murky ponds interlinked by piers, elevated walkways, and designated paths.

Co-owner Gary Saurage, a reformed alligator hunter, and his gator-handlers lead tours of the place, feeding mature gators and venturing into the adolescents' habitat to illustrate their "strike zone." Myself, I fell in love with a baby gator, which visitors are allowed to handle under supervision.

Throughout, a conservationist message is clear: This ancient species is critical to wetlands and swamplands and needs our protection. The handlers focus on education, discussing gator breeding habits, habitat, even their history. And it's obvious they're fond of their charges.

There's a bunch of 'em: 140-plus gators, plus

a healthy population of crocs, several endangered snapping turtles, and a python named Banana. Daily shows include feedings and gator-handler interaction. The indisputable star attraction here is

Big Al, a 70-year-old, 13-foot-plus gator topping 1,000 pounds. Everyone who deals with Big Al is extremely well trained—and wary. Still, I did fear for a young handler's fingers when he reached over a fence to tap the big kahuna's snout. Al snapped at him, then returned to sunning.

It is, after all, gator country.—SHERMAKAYE BASS

Gator Country Adventure Park is at 21159 FM 365. Hours: Daily 10-9. Admission: \$7, \$5 age 12 and younger. Call 409/794-9453; [www.gatorcountry.net](http://www.gatorcountry.net).

**\*webextra**  
See [www.texashighways.com](http://www.texashighways.com) for a Q&A with former alligator hunter Gary Saurage, the conservationist behind Beaumont's snappiest attraction.



Beaumont's beautiful St. Anthony's Cathedral Basilica opens to the public, free of charge. It was modeled after the 12th-Century Basilica di San Clemente in Rome.

preside over the clergy. Constructed in the early 1900s, and not colossal as "basilica" might imply, St. Anthony's is intimate and breathtaking in its beauty. Pope Benedict XVI declared it a basilica in 2006, making it one of four "minor basilicas" in Texas.

Later that evening, I convened with local friends at Bryan's 797, a chic restaurant in a historic home. The service was outstanding, and the food practically flawless—

perfect sea scallops, lump crab cakes, delectable lamb chops, and an award-winning wine list and inventive cocktail menu.

Next day, I meandered around town, which has a number of museums, including the Edison Museum (a local had collected Edison's inventions, now exhibited); the fascinatingly relevant Texas Energy Museum (kids and adults will enjoy learning how oil is created—and ultimately extracted); the Babe

Didrikson Zaharias Museum (honoring a Beaumont native and one of the best American athletes of all time); and the official Fire Museum of Texas (which boasts a 24-foot-tall, Dalmatian-spotted fire hydrant).

Yet the classic Texan braggadocio—traditional claims of having the "biggest" this or that—didn't surface much in this welcoming city, where you can enjoy the famous barbecue crabs at Sartin's, hear Keith Carter's rock/roots/blues band play at Logon Café some Saturday

nights, or take a guided tour through Blue Elbow Swamp near the Louisiana border.

"There's a lot happening in Beaumont right now," observed Jake Tortoise, owner of Rao's Bakery. "You've got a major push to revitalize downtown. Lamar University is bringing back its football program and marching band. ... And we've got more birds down here than we know what to do with."

As for Carter, his hometown turf is like a tonic when he returns from travel, no matter how exotic those destinations might have been.

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"Beaumont itself, I think, is one of the greener places on the planet—green, as in the flora and fauna. 'Course we were greener before we got whacked sideways by the hurricanes," he says, adding that things are getting back to normal. "I always feel comforted in some way when I hit that Piney Woods corridor and everything changes. This area is one of the best-kept secrets in the state."

I agree with Carter. And for a moment, in my mind I am back on Village Creek, caught in its primeval spell. ★

Writer SHERMAKAYE BASS had a blast in Beaumont. "The food is amazing, and the basilica truly magnificent," she says. "And I especially loved canoeing in Village Creek."

Austin photographer TOM WILLIAMSON enjoyed experiencing Beaumont's "flawless mix of the cultures of Texas and Louisiana."

## essentials LET THE BON TEMPS ROLL

**BEAUMONT** is off Interstate 10, about 85 miles east of Houston. For information about attractions, lodging, and restaurants, call the Beaumont Convention and Visitors Bureau at 800/392-4401; [www.beaumontcvb.com](http://www.beaumontcvb.com). Following are sites listed in the story.

### ACCOMMODATIONS

**MCM Elegante Hotel**, 2355 I-10 South. Call 409/842-3600.

### OUTDOOR ATTRACTIONS

**Village Creek State Park**, main office at 1101 Alma Dr., Lumberton. Call 409/755-7322; [www.tpwd.state.tx.us](http://www.tpwd.state.tx.us).

**Piney Woods Outfitter**, 921 S. Main St., Lumberton. Call 409/751-0911; [www.canoe-texas.com/pineywoods.htm](http://www.canoe-texas.com/pineywoods.htm).

**Big Thicket National Preserve**, 6044 FM 420, Kountze. Call 409/951-6802; [www.bigthicketdirectory.com/index.html](http://www.bigthicketdirectory.com/index.html) and [nps.gov/bith](http://nps.gov/bith).

**Great Texas Coastal Birding Trail**, [www.tpwd.state.tx.us/huntwild/wild/wildlife\\_trails/coastal](http://www.tpwd.state.tx.us/huntwild/wild/wildlife_trails/coastal).

### MUSEUMS AND OTHER SITES

**St. Anthony's Cathedral Basilica**, 700 Jefferson St. Call 409/833-6433; [www.stanthonycathedral.org](http://www.stanthonycathedral.org).

**Babe Didrikson Zaharias Museum**, 1750 I-10 East. Call 409/833-4622; [www.babedidriksonzaharias.org/museum.cfm](http://www.babedidriksonzaharias.org/museum.cfm).

**Edison Museum**, 350 Pine St. at Edison Plaza. Call 409/981-3089; [www.edisonmuseum.org](http://www.edisonmuseum.org).

**Fire Museum of Texas**, 400 Walnut St. Call 409/880-3927; [www.firemuseumoftexas.org](http://www.firemuseumoftexas.org).

**Lamar University** (houses the Dishman Art Museum), 4400 Martin Luther King Blvd. Call 409/880-7011; [www.lamar.edu](http://www.lamar.edu).

**McFaddin-Ward House Museum**, 1906 Calder

St. Call 409/832-2134; [www.mcfaddin-ward.org](http://www.mcfaddin-ward.org).

**Spindletop/Gladys City Boomtown Museum**, US 69 at University Dr. Call 409/835-0823; [www.spindletop.org](http://www.spindletop.org).

**Texas Energy Museum**, 600 Main St. Call 409/833-5100; [www.texasenergymuseum.org](http://www.texasenergymuseum.org).

### RESTAURANTS AND CLUBS

**Bryan's 797**, 797 North 5th St. Call 409/832-3900; [www.bryans797.com](http://www.bryans797.com).

**Easys Tapas & Martinis**, 2325 Calder St. Call 409/832-2699; [www.easysonline.com](http://www.easysonline.com).

**Logon Café**, 3805 Calder St. Call 409/832-1529; [www.logoncafe.net](http://www.logoncafe.net).

**Rao's Bakery**, 2596 Calder St. (plus 4 other locations). Call 409/832-4342; [www.raosbakery.com](http://www.raosbakery.com).

**Sartin's West**, 6680 Calder St. Call 409/861-3474.

**Suga's Deep South Cuisine & Jazz Bar**, 461 Bowie St. Call 409/813-1808; [www.sugasdeepsouth.com](http://www.sugasdeepsouth.com).

**Willy Ray's Bar-B-Q Co.**, 145 I-10 North at Laurel St. Call 409/832-7770; [www.willyraysbbq.com](http://www.willyraysbbq.com).

