

# Eye to Eye with the Texas Coast

A 367-mile road trip navigates the best of the state's bays, beaches, and bards

BY CLAYTON MAXWELL

PHOTOGRAPHS BY KENNY BRAUN





**I****T WAS A LOT TO ASK** of a 1984 Volkswagen Westfalia van, to cover the whole Texas coast from top to bottom, Louisiana to Mexico, boudin to *bis-tec*. But my friends Amy and Kenny and I wanted to see not just Port Aransas or South Padre, our usual haunts, but all 367 miles of coastline and the varied ecosystems contained within: RV parks and salty dog saloons, oil refineries and surf spots, shrimp-filled bays and shell-strewn beaches. We were after the big picture of this curvy shore where Texas ends and the Gulf begins—and we were grateful to see it from behind the wheel of a funky burnt orange VW van.

“The Texas coast is wild, wild like Texas,” says Jim Blackburn, the author and Rice

University environmental law professor I called before the trip, a man who knows the state’s seaboard—its beauty, its economy, and its environmental challenges—from top to bottom. His book, *A Texas Plan for the Texas Coast*, served as a kind of muse for our mission; it is rich with maps that show all facets of the coast—conserved land, bird rookeries, oil refineries—and includes poetry inspired by the coastal wildlife Blackburn has admired in his 50-plus years exploring these waters. “This coast is not like others where you look down upon it from cliffs above,” Blackburn says. “The Texas coast is right there at eye level. To understand it, you have to get up close to it.”

For Amy, Kenny, and me, getting up close meant drifting asleep to the rhythm of the waves and watching piping plovers scurry the beach over morning coffee. And



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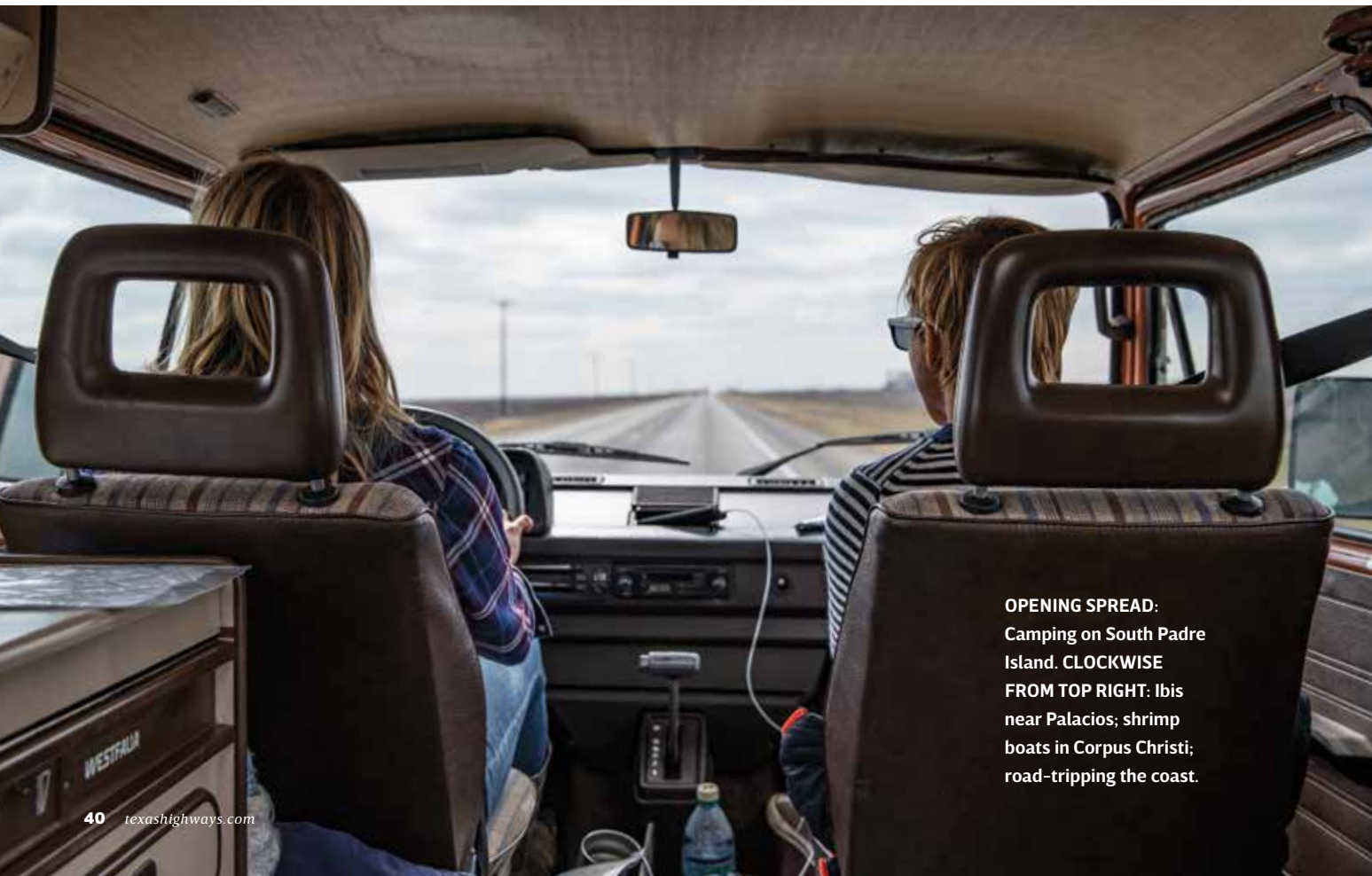
it meant Janis—this 35-year-old marvel of German design with a mini-fridge and bunk space so we could drive, eat, and sleep without getting sand in our breakfast tacos. Janis—named by Amy after a quick stop at the childhood home of Janis Joplin in Port Arthur—would be the ideal vessel for our mission.

“Her engine was rebuilt at roughly 95,000 miles,” says Janis’ owner, David Fuentes, who we connected with via Outdoorsy, a camper van rental website. “You can get her up to 70 miles an hour on the interstate. But you’ll feel it.” Fuentes, who restores vintage camper vans and travel trailers through his business, Tin Can Travel Co., is introducing us to Janis and her quirks on a November morning just before our departure. Yes, Janis is old: You must roll down her windows with a handle and lock her doors with an actual key; her heft and lack of technology impose a mandatory slowing down, one that feels just right for this journey.

### Sea Grass and Bayous

With a warm farewell to David and our families, we are off, eager to hit Sea Rim State Park, the uppermost Texas beach easily accessible to the public, before dark. After a five-hour drive, we pull into the check-in booth. “Honey, there is no place in this park that isn’t pretty,” a silver-haired ranger tells me when I ask where’s the best spot for the sunset. “But I’d just park there at the boardwalk by the ocean. Watch out; it’s going to rain soon.”

Who cares about rain? Like a South Padre sea turtle, we have our home with us. We park Janis just as the lowering sun sets the sea grass and bayous aglow. We almost run down to the beach, giddy to feel the waves, which are churning and reddish. But dinner is calling, and our next stop is the Stingaree Restaurant overlooking the Intracoastal Waterway on Bolivar’s East Bay. To get to the Bolivar Peninsula—which locals pronounce “BALL-i-ver”—we loop back past the oil refineries around Port Arthur, the juxtaposition of wild nature against steely industry reminding me of a comment from Blackburn: “The Texas



**OPENING SPREAD:** Camping on South Padre Island. **CLOCKWISE FROM TOP RIGHT:** Ibis near Palacios; shrimp boats in Corpus Christi; road-tripping the coast.







Read more about Clayton Maxwell's coastal road trip in an extended version of this story at [texashighways.com](http://texashighways.com)



**RIGHT:** Dusk on South Padre Island.  
**BOTTOM:** The cassette deck in Janis the van.

coast is a working coast.” From our window at the Stingaree, we can make out the shadowy images of tankers passing on the ship canal in the dark, giants on the water. Cody, our friendly waitress, brings us the gumbo and the boudin balls I’ve been craving since Port Arthur.

And finally, just as the park ranger had warned, the rain comes. Hard. Undeterred, we tell Cody that we’ll be sleeping on the beach anyway. She tells us about the time it rained so much that trucks parked on the beach floated away. OK, maybe not. We change course and head for Paula’s Vineyard RV Park, a haven on dry land. After huddling in the cozy van, rain pounding, we doze off—Kenny on the foldout bed below, Amy and me in the pop-up top angling from

Janis’ roof that shakes in the wind.

Waking up in an RV park on the Bolivar Peninsula is a far friendlier affair than I could have anticipated. As I fumble to find the French press, a smiling, boots-and-Wranglers-clad fellow approaches the open side door of the van. “Y’all just cruising around and sleeping in this thing?” he asks, a hint of envy in his voice. “I used to travel all over Texas, too. I am a retired rodeo man. Can I get you some coffee?”

Next thing I know, I’m having coffee in my pajamas with Jeff, who’d come to Bolivar for the slower pace after a hard-driving life on the rodeo circuit. He tells us that Bolivar is more his speed than Galveston, a short ferry ride away. “We follow island time around here,” he explains.

## Bottomlands and Brown Pelicans

We load Janis onto the Galveston-Port Bolivar Ferry, where we catch glimpses of smooth-gliding dolphins, a sight that makes you gasp no matter how often you see it. Once in Galveston, we steer Janis down the coast for a date with a marine ecologist named Bill Balboa in Palacios, a quiet town on Matagorda Bay and home of a burgeoning coastal conservation movement. From the Galveston Seawall to Surfside, the road is a graceful 40 miles of ocean on one side and sand flats and marsh on the other. Cruising the well-named Bluewater Highway, we race fat brown pelicans gliding low across the sky. We then turn inland and enter the Columbia Bottomlands

of Brazoria County. Green farmland and moss-draped oak trees make this country feel more Old South than sand and surf. Swoosh, a flock of slender birds rises like fluttering white sheets from a water-soaked field. Ibises maybe?

“Yes, those were ibises. You were driving past Herff Cornelius’ crawfish farm,” Balboa tells us later, sitting around a dining table at The Peaceful Pelican Waterfront Bed and Breakfast in Palacios. Apparently, ibises like crawfish. Balboa, director of the Matagorda Bay Foundation, ably translates the language of this rich landscape, one that he and an active group of bay-lovers, birders, and fishermen are working to keep alive. Balboa is pumped about what he found in his gill net this morning,





CLOCKWISE  
FROM TOP LEFT:  
Port Isabel town  
square; South  
Padre Island; Port  
Isabel Lighthouse;  
Padre Island  
National Seashore.



As part of an effort to count the fish population in the bay, he checks his nets daily. “Today we found two green sea turtles and a fish called a snook, which is a Florida game fish. You just don’t see them here often. When you’re a fish nerd, odd things make you happy.”

Fish nerdiness, we are finding, is widespread along the coast, and it’s the fish nerds who have the know-how and gumption to keep the sea creatures—and economies that depend upon them—happy. “Everywhere you look there are these little ecosystems,” Balboa says. “Like on the beach, the yellow seaweed that washes up in the spring? Sargassum. It ticks everybody off. But there’s a whole ecosystem that lives in it. I’m intrigued by how all these things link together to sustain the bay, the marsh, the oysters, the shrimp.”

Balboa also explains the reddish color I saw in the waves at Sea Rim: It’s the result

of north winds churning the blood-red silt washed down from East Texas rivers by recent rains. I will never again consider Texas’ rivers and its coast to be two separate geographies.

### A Delightful Melding

We motor down State Highway 35, an easy ribbon of road that crosses Lavaca and Copano Bays, and into Rockport—more specifically to the home art studio of Steve Russell, a painter who looks like a cross between Santa Claus and a grizzly, and greets us with big bear hugs. “He’s a Smithsonian-type guy,” local fishing guide JT Van Zandt had told me a few weeks earlier. “He used to build flat-bottom sailboats with his dad—that life that no longer exists; he lived it. On top of that, he is a world-renowned oil painter of the Gulf Coast—shrimp boats on rough seas with birds all around. He’s one of the last of his kind.”

Russell is the only surviving founder of the Rockport Center for the Arts, the bedrock of the thriving Rockport art scene, recently relocated after Hurricane Harvey blew its building away in 2017. Kenny, Amy, and I settle into Russell’s living room, its walls covered with his paintings, and Russell, a magnetic raconteur, takes us on a storytelling ride. His tales flow from a life worthy of a documentary, like his days in Mexico after the Vietnam War, painting “thousands of Jesus and Elvis” on black velvet. His studio—with stacks of books, his home-carved Texas mesquite-wood violins, and chandeliers made of glass he blew himself—is a physical manifestation of a mind that never stops churning out fresh wild ideas.

Russell and his wife, Sherol, are on a quest to show us Rockport before dark. They zip us along Aransas Bay, where we stop by a live oak grove, sideways-slanted



# Coastal Cruising

Texas' 367 miles of coastline are full of interesting places to drop anchor.

## TIN CAN TRAVEL COMPANY

Austin. [Tincantravel.com](http://Tincantravel.com)

## SEA RIM STATE PARK

19335 S. Gulfway Drive, Sabine Pass.  
409-971-2559; [tpwd.texas.gov/state-parks/sea-rim](http://tpwd.texas.gov/state-parks/sea-rim)

## STINGAREE RESTAURANT & MARINA

1295 N. Stingaree Road, Crystal Beach.  
409-684-2731; [stingaree.com](http://stingaree.com)

## PAULA'S VINEYARD RV PARK AND RESORT

1250 N. Crystal Beach Road, Crystal Beach.  
409-684-9970; [paulasvineyard.com](http://paulasvineyard.com)

## THE PEACEFUL PELICAN WATERFRONT BED AND BREAKFAST

317 East Bay Blvd., Palacios.  
361-972-0317; [thepeacefulpelican.com](http://thepeacefulpelican.com)

## STEVE RUSSELL

Rockport. 361-205-0118; [steверussellart.com](http://steверussellart.com)

## ROCKPORT CENTER FOR THE ARTS

106 S. Austin St., Rockport. 361-729-5519;  
[rockportartcenter.com](http://rockportartcenter.com)

## PADRE ISLAND NATIONAL SEASHORE

20420 Park Road 22, Corpus Christi  
361-949-8068; [nps.gov/pais](http://nps.gov/pais)

## SOUTH PADRE SURF CO.

956-772-7272; [southpadresurfcompany.com](http://southpadresurfcompany.com)

## MANUEL'S

313 E. Maxan St., Port Isabel. 956-943-1655

from the southeast winds, to watch an osprey wading in rainy puddles. We pause at a marina filled with trawlers and shrimpers, and I ask Russell what makes the Texas coast different from others. His reply is a reminder that, as Blackburn says, the Texas coast is a working coast, a place of shrimpers and hard-knock beer joints—not just a tourist attraction. “Also, the Texas coast is sort of like the Mediterranean with the different cultures,” he says. “Here we have the influence from Louisiana coming over with their own boats and seafood, and the Mexican influence, too. It’s a delightful melding.”

## Rays and Waves

Kenny, Amy, and I wake the next day in a place that feels far removed from shrimpers and beer joints: Padre Island National Seashore. It’s hard to imagine Janis could ever look better than she does right now, bathed in morning light on the longest undeveloped barrier island in the world—proof that

sometimes the best thing you can do is just leave a place alone. I sit on a blanket and watch the sunrise, coffee cup in hand, skin tingling as the first rays hit me. Five-inch clam shells, pinkish beige with gray ridged fans, blanket the sand and shimmer in the horizontal light.

From the seashore, we motor three hours down US 77 through the scrubby ranchlands of South Texas to our last stop: South Padre Island. Amy and I’d made a deal that we wouldn’t go home without catching a wave. As our final act in this four-night trip, we meet up for a lesson with Rachel and Gene Gore of South Padre Surf Co. These surfers have a singular perspective on the coast: In 2004, they paddled the state’s entire coastline over 19 days on surfboards.

Before our lesson at Isla Blanca Park, we watch Rachel and Gene’s golden retriever surf; he does it backwards, tail toward the beach. Now we try, and Amy and I both manage to pop up. Time stops as we are

caught in the rush of riding a wave. I can see why Rachel and Gene would build their lives around this.

Our last night in Janis is a beach bonfire celebration on a remote stretch of South Padre surrounded by wind-sculpted dunes and bright stars, a few streaking over the ocean as they fall. It’s an exquisite freedom. I wake early, stripes of light peeking through Janis’ curtains. Still in my sleeping bag, I watch a great blue heron high-stepping along the waves. It can hardly be better than this, I think, admiring the funny bird and grateful to Janis for letting us be eye to eye with this wild coastline.

We head to Manuel’s in Port Isabel for a breakfast feast of bistec and chorizo tacos, and talk to Manuel’s son, Frank, who looks out the window at Janis and asks, with a wistful tone much like Jeff the rodeo man back in Bolivar, “Are y’all driving around and sleeping in that thing?”

Yes, yes we are. 🐾



THIS PAGE: A surfing day on South Padre Island. RIGHT: Amy and Clayton in Janis the Volkswagen van.

