





# Galveston's

## Seaport and Seawinds

A growing Texas port opens new possibilities  
for holiday and cruise combinations

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PHOTOGRAPHY  
Courtesy  
Galveston CVB



If you live in Kansas, taking an ocean cruise used to require purchasing expensive flights to the east or west coasts before you even boarded a ship. No more. Lawrencians have the option of driving just under 12 hours to Galveston, the fourth-busiest cruise port in the United States. This Texas coastal town is both a practical launching site and a delightful destination in its own right.

### PORT CITY

Carnival launched the first cruise ship out of Galveston in September 2000. For several years, Galveston tended to be assigned smaller and older ships. But after \$85 million in port improvements, Carnival brought in newer, bigger ships. Then Royal Caribbean and Disney came on board about 2012. Galveston now launches 4-, 5- and 7-day cruises, 52 weeks a year, with ports of call in the Caribbean, Mexico, Central America, the Bahamas, and, in 2018, the Panama Canal. You can even take a Galveston-to-Barcelona 16-day repositioning cruise (a one-way journey) with outside cabins initially selling for under \$900.

The Port of Galveston now makes a family cruise vacation more feasible and economical, especially considering children's rates when kids share a cabin. So, as you plan this year's vacation, a cruise might just be the ticket.

### GALVESTON AS A DESTINATION

I can't say the name without Glen Campbell's voice filling my head ... *Galveston, oh Galveston / I still hear your seawinds blowing.*

Blow they did, but gently, a soft ocean breeze as I sat on a balcony overlooking the seaport at the Olympia Grill at Pier 21, a family-owned Greek and seafood restaurant. Lunch specials include Greek salad, entrée and side for \$11–14. My snapper was delectable, the mojito frosty. And that was just the start.

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## GETTING THERE

Galveston is 808 miles from Lawrence, an 11 1/2-hour drive down I-35 to I-45. If you aren't in a rush, you can knock off about 100 miles by driving directly south, through Oklahoma and east Texas, but, with the exception of the Indian Nation Turnpike in south-east Oklahoma (a toll road, minimal traffic and quite beautiful), there is no interstate highway. Splitting the drive into two days allows for more time to play in Galveston.

Cruise parking is convenient, with some lots just two blocks from the cruise check-in, with free car-to-cruise shuttles. Be sure to make a reservation as the closest lots fill quickly. I used EZCruiseParking.com (about \$10 a day) and found secure lots, helpful staff and easy access. Some hotels provide free parking and shuttles, but the hotels lots cost more.

If you are flying, Houston Hobby airport is only 41 miles from Galveston with shuttles available. Round-trip flights average \$250.

## BOOKING A CRUISE

I suggest going to GalvestonCruise.com (a division of VacationsToGo.com) for an overview. While I do not usually endorse a specific site, I've used the VacationsToGo.com site to book multiple times. You search online but then work directly with an agent who becomes your personal travel agent for future questions and helpful updates. Two days prior to our cruise out of Galveston, I got an email notifying me that there was roadwork on I-45 and that I should allow some extra time when driving down.

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I came to Galveston with few expectations, just wanting to enjoy what I could for a few days before boarding a ship to cruise down to Belize and Honduras. It was to be a prequel to the “real” vacation. But, in the end, it was Galveston that turned out to be my most memorable port of call.

The island architecture drew me in, and I spent hours exploring the East End Historic district, with its Greek Revivals, colorful Victorians and quaint beach cottages. While not a dedicated shopper, I enjoyed the diversity of shops, especially in The Strand, a downtown historic district. Galveston has 32 miles of beaches, palm trees, and a 10-mile seawall (which the city claims is the longest continuous sidewalk in the U.S.), perfect for walkers and runners.

And the food! On every block there is another family-owned restaurant with a different specialty. Galveston’s history of immigration is reflected in its ethnic cuisines and restaurants, Italian, Cajun, and Caribbean to name a few. Locals suggested Gaido’s, open since 1911 and known for seafood and pecan pie, as a favorite choice for a special dinner. Since this is Texas, you can also count on outstanding Mexican and Tex-Mex cuisine, with each restaurant having its own fan base. **lm**

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## PLENTY TO DO

Since Galveston is all on one island, seeing it all requires no long drives. Here are some of my top picks for a two- or three-day stay.

**MOODY GARDENS** is not a garden but a unique, mind-expanding, nonprofit, nature-focused destination, promoting conservation, rehabilitation, research and recreation. Imagine three massive glass pyramids, one mostly an aquarium (reopened in May 2017 after a \$37 million renovation), one a rainforest, and one a discovery center. There is also a private beach, a Lazy River, 3D theater, 4D special FX theater, paddlewheel boat cruise, zip-line, ropes course and golf. The onsite Moody Gardens Hotel, a full-service resort property, makes access easy and has a shuttle to the cruise port. All-day passes are the best deal, but ask about specials like the \$5-per-activity for seniors on Tuesdays.

**PIER 21** is a convenient 3-minute ride or 10-minute walk from the port piers. The **Texas Seaport Museum** features actual shipbuilding-in-progress, a history of seafaring and a chronicle of immigration through Galveston, films, and the chance to explore the **1877 Tall Ship Elissa**. After climbing all over the Elissa, I spent two lazy hours at an outdoor harbor-view table at **Willie G’s**, a seafood and steak place with the longest Happy Hour ever—11 a.m. to 7 p.m. The Shrimp Cabo—shrimp stuffed with cheese, wrapped in bacon, roasted with a pepper sauce—was wicked.

**HISTORIC STRAND DISTRICT** is only a few blocks from Pier 21, and you can stroll past galleries, trendy boutiques and cafes.

Before booking anything, check out the Galveston calendar for festivals and special events. That way, if you happen to love tall ships or jazz or Mardi Gras, then you can hear the Galveston winds blowing past you at the perfect time of year.

**BRYAN MUSEUM** is set in what was the Galveston Orphans Home for over 100 years. It’s packed with history and artifacts of the Southwest. The displays are engaging, and the setting itself is worth a visit.

**HISTORIC PLEASURE PIER** hails back to 1943 and reminded me of Coney Island. The 100-foot-tall **Ferris Wheel** at the end of the pier provides fabulous views of city and ocean. **The Texas Star Flyer**, which swings riders 230 feet above the gulf, is not for the faint of heart (which includes me). The Pier is old-fashioned fun, with plenty of rides, booths, restaurants and games.

**GALVESTON RAILROAD MUSEUM** is a chance to time-travel to a converted 1933 depot, plus the opportunity to explore more than 40 restored locomotives. On weekends, you can catch a 20-minute ride on the **Harborside Express**.

**OCEAN STAR DRILLING RIG AND MUSEUM**, at Pier 19, offers three stories of interactive models and displays about the technology and science involved, with a scary skywalk to the drilling rig floor.

**CHILDREN’S MUSEUM**, with its low-key activities and room to play, is a fun break for families with young kids.

## DIDN'T GALVESTON

### GET HIT HARD BY HARVEY?

On August 26, 2017, as Hurricane Harvey caused widespread evacuations all along the Texas Gulf Coast, Galveston residents knew from experience just how bad it could be. They remembered Hurricane Ike in 2008, and the devastation on their island in its wake. But hurricanes can be unpredictable.

Houston, just an hour's drive away, will take years to fully recover from Harvey.

In Galveston, however, all the beaches were open within days and tourist attractions, restaurants and hotels within two weeks. As one resident told me, "We got to be on the 'giving' instead of the 'receiving' side of help with this hurricane. And that feels a lot better."

