



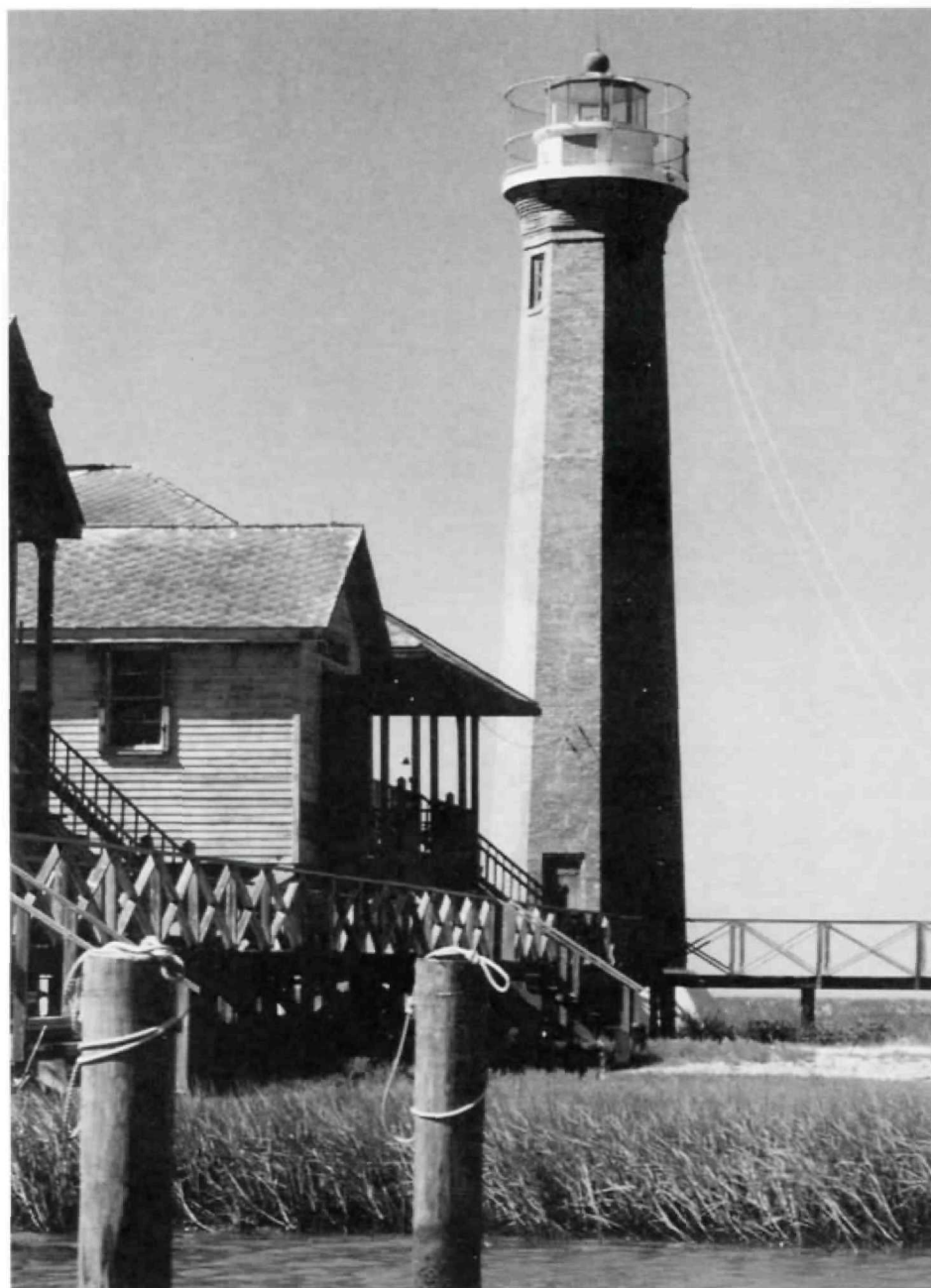
Freeport. Photo by Barrie Scardino, 1997

MOST OF THE COAST

Sabine Pass to Boca Chica



Boca Chica. Photo by Barrie Scardino, 1997



Aransas Pass Lighthouse. Photo by Barrie Scardino, 1997

Barrie Scardino

The coast of anywhere is easy to romanticize — the sounds of crashing waves and sea birds, the smell and taste of salty air, the sun setting across shimmering water. In perfect weather — when there hasn't been a recent oil spill — you can find such idyllic scenes on the Gulf Coast of Texas. But most of the coast is a different story.

My journey along the 367-mile (624, if you count the bays) Texas coastline began with the idea that I would proceed southward from an exotic Cajun/Confederate culture with genteel porticoed architecture to a lively Mexican culture with brightly colored, flat-roofed buildings, faded from the bleaching sun. While these stereotypes have some validity, far more striking was the sameness of it all — top to bottom.

The Texas coast has no equivalent of Newport or Palm Beach. Nor is there a five-star Ritz resort with swim-up pool bars and Fazio-designed golf courses. Texas's beaches and intracoastal waterways provide vacationing families with fresh air and space, birds and fish, and they provide coastal residents with a slow but generally satisfying living. Ethnically the coast does change, but culturally it is

all like a baseball game — a sea-level playing field.

Riding into Port Arthur behind the haunches of an oil truck, I felt like a Guelph (or was it a Ghibelline?) riding into San Gimignano when, around a wide bend in the forest-lined back road, a skyline of oil refinery towers suddenly loomed up in the distance. This was the first clue that the coast of Texas from Sabine Pass to Boca Chica is dominated as much by the oil and petrochemical industry as it is by salt water and sand. To reach Sabine Pass, I drove through a gigantic web of refinery pipes and catwalks on the edge of Port Arthur.

Across the causeway, I stopped at Big Earl's in Sabine Pass for iced tea. Aging Big Earl signs, like the old sequential Burma Shave roadside ads, led me there. Big Earl's was a sad case — the gas pumps were empty, and a 25-watt bulb lit the rickety wooden store, where the stock was pretty low. Miss Betty was frying up chicken while an ingénue with blue nail polish guarded the cash register. Conversation came easy; I learned that Sabine Pass was the victim of a storm seven or so years ago that washed out the road to the Bolivar Peninsula and

Galveston. A lot of vacationers used to come through, but now no one does. The houses and stores of Sabine Pass (pop. 1,500) are weathered and broken, many boarded up, and there was no evidence of new construction. Those who remained on the peninsula worked in the refineries and oil-related companies back toward Port Arthur, but the tourist industry is clearly dead, except for me. I got directions to the state park listed in the guide books and said good-bye.

At the foot of the Texas-Louisiana border, which follows the Sabine River through Sabine Lake and out to the Gulf of Mexico at Sabine Pass, sleepy marshes give way to the oil industry. There the Sabine Pass Battleground State Historical Park marks the site where 47 Confederates with only six cannons kept what seemed to have been the whole Union navy and army from invading Texas. The Dick Dowling Monument, the old Fort Griffin bunkers, and five historical markers looked inconsequential next to the offshore-rig construction site next door. The parking lot was empty, as were the RV hookup sites. A long, flat oil tanker, *Al Debaran*, glided eerily by on its way to the sea with no crew visible, as if the



Port Arthur. Photo by Barrie Scardino, 1997



Port Mansfield. Photo by Barrie Scardino, 1997

tall, still cranes on deck were running the ship. This close encounter created the only excitement I felt here, with the possible exception of reading the unlikely tale of the brave Kate Dorman and her Catfish Hotel, which stood on this site in 1847. The other history is military. This is the case all the way down the coast.

With few exceptions, historical markers along the coast tell stories of obscure heroes of the Mexican War (1840s), the Civil War (1860s), and the Spanish-American War (1890s). A lot of fighting took place on every part of the Texas shore, beginning, some say, with the cannibal Indians who ate interloping Spanish explorers. Jean Laffite and other notorious pirates also made bloodcurdling contributions to Texas coast lore. But all those ghosts were hard to feel, except perhaps among the draping live oaks around Matagorda Bay. Otherwise, the spirits of bloody marshes must have drifted away with nothing to hang onto in the empty, flat coastal plain that runs along the rest of the coast.

Highway 87 (the washed-out one), led to an almost deserted Sea Rim State Park. The chatty attendant confirmed that the beaten path had moved elsewhere. But because the park is uncrowded and has nice beaches with campsites, self-guided nature trails through the wetlands, plus hot showers, it would be a good place to come back to. The noisy airboat was not in service, so the advertised offshore tours had been canceled, but the Super Gator Airboat Swamp Tour is not too far away in Orange. I turned around at the impasse and retraced my steps to Big Earl's for a piece of fried chicken. On the way inside, I noticed the

boudin stand across the street where several locals were standing around speaking Cajun French. Here was proof of my original coastal thesis.

Although I had vowed to stay away from cities, I ventured into Port Arthur looking for evidence of Janis Joplin and Robert Rauschenberg, its two most famous natives. At the Museum of the Gulf Coast, where I discovered them both, I watched a movie about the natural and historical development of the coast, learning that millennia ago the broad Gulf stretched all the way to Canada, filling the Mississippi River basin from the Appalachians to the foothills of the Rockies. Exhibits such as "Jurassic to Janis Joplin" and "Buccaneers to the Big Bopper" are illustrated with artifacts, the 1905 Sabine Pass lighthouse lens, for example. The Rauschenberg room was not a history of Rauschenberg's Port Arthur life (he graduated from high school there in 1943), but an exhibition of a few of his smaller paintings. The museum's bizarre collection of decorative arts gathered by Port Arthur residents on travels to far-flung places like Taiwan, Japan, France, England, and Austria is a veritable antique shop. I followed the driving-tour brochure to make one great find — the Eddingston Court gates and wall, fashioned entirely out of 6,000 huge conch shells imported from the Cayman Islands in 1929.

I took the long cut around the McFaddin National Wildlife Refuge (one of many such nature sanctuaries on the coast) to High Island, where about 500 people live on a productive salt dome 45 feet above sea level, amid rusty oil and

gas storage tanks and bobbing pumps. Rich petroleum deposits were first discovered at High Island in 1916, but more recently it has become a famous bird-watching site promoted by the Houston Audubon Society. Like Sabine Pass, it seemed pretty weathered and worn.

Heading down the Bolivar Peninsula, I passed one dead armadillo, some poky-looking cows grazing in hot open fields, and a few more oil pumps. Bolivar is 27 miles long and between one-quarter and three-and-a-quarter miles wide. At the narrow spots, the flat treeless landscape is open to views of both East Bay and the Gulf of Mexico. Scattered stilt houses began to straggle along until they merged into developments with names such as Sand Castles, Copacabana, Holiday Beach, and Noisy Waves. Crystal Beach, about halfway to Port Bolivar, is practically a city, with an AARP Center and Library, a volunteer fire department, and a hospital complex among touristy bathing suit and beach ball boutiques. Passing Rancho Carribe and Kona Kai, I finally reached Port Bolivar, a fishing and cattle center. Like Galveston, its big sister across the bay, Port Bolivar is a substantial town, not just a tourist resort. Most of the 3,500 full-time residents commute to Galveston or Beaumont-Port Arthur; the rest catch and sell seafood or raise cattle and farm.

The highway department has constructed a complex system of traffic lanes leading to the Bolivar ferry landing, but they were empty, so I was happy to find instant passage. During the 20-minute boat ride most people stayed in their cars. I ventured up a narrow staircase to the top deck of the bow, where sailboats,

shrimpers, and huge oil tankers could be seen passing at the end of the day. It was hard not to notice the sandy, sun-burned young lovers in skimpy bathing suits standing next to me, obviously returning from a lazy day at the beach. On the Galveston side, cars were lined up for over a mile to take the ferry home after work.

Galveston is the most famous Texas coast city, and good guides are available, particularly Ellen Beasley and Stephen Fox's *Galveston Architecture Guidebook* (Rice University Press, 1999). The town is a mix of vacationers and old Texas families, world-class late-19th century architecture and tourist traps. The island evolved gracefully and had a promising economic future until September 1900, when a hurricane caused what is still remembered as the most deadly natural disaster in the history of the United States.

The whole coast of Texas has fallen prey, at one time or another, to fierce weather, and residents are ever mindful of the Great Storm of 1900. Warning systems today should prevent such loss of life; evacuation routes away from the coast are well marked from Sabine Pass to Boca Chica. But catastrophic property loss, not to mention constant salt corrosion and beach erosion, is an ever-present threat. The battered and rusty appearance of much of the coast is not necessarily the result of neglect; it happens when you take a long nap. The hurricane season coincides with summer vacation, giving thrill-seekers the possibility for surfer-scale waves and wild wind with dramatic lightning and thunder. But those who live on the coast are not amused. The eco-



Quintana Beach. Photo by Barrie Scardino, 1997



Port Aransas. Photo by Barrie Scardino, 1997

conomic reality of coastal living is always a catch-up game.

Communities around Galveston and Trinity bays are generally filled with refineries and neighborhoods for those who work in them. There are a few towns that still thrive on sport and commercial fishing. Kemah and Seabrook are such places, with seafood vendors and funky hangouts on the docks. Along Bay Ridge Road at Morgan's Point is a vestige of one of the few summer colonies built on the coast by wealthy Texans at the turn of the 20th century. Several of the large Victorian-era houses are extant, including the wood-frame, gingerbread-clad R. D. Gribble House (1894); the D. E. Kennedy House (1896), with corner towers and a centered turret; and the rambling J. T. Scott House (ca. 1900), with a full complement of screen porches and dormer windows. The Ross Sterling House (1924–27), designed by Alfred C. Finn as an imitation of the White House, is the grandest summer house built on the Texas coast.

Past Lake Jackson and Clute ("Home of the Great Texas Mosquito Festival"), an old two-lane, high arching bridge leads to Surfside — the site of Velasco, the first landfall for Stephen F. Austin's colonists in 1821. Velasco was destroyed completely by a hurricane in 1875. Stilted beach houses, including the requisite Bucky Fuller geodesic dome — of which there was an example in every beach community I investigated — are built up for views and breezes, but more importantly, as a precaution against rising waters, which is sometimes futile. A little farther south, an unsafe-looking old drawbridge leads to Quintana Beach,

where I drove right up onto the sand, which is often possible up and down the Texas coast. I left my car to wander in the waves and enjoy the day's end, but a radio-blaring pickup came barreling down the beach. So much for a moment of peace.

Freeport, just across the Brazos River, is distinguished only by better roads and petrochemical plants. The nearby town of Jones Creek is more satisfying. There I encountered the first of the moss-draped live oaks that give this mid section of the coast, as far south as Rockport, the aura of the Old South along the Atlantic coast. Now dotted with wildlife refuges, this part of the coast was first occupied by large cotton plantations, many owned by families who had migrated from the Southeast.

The intriguing Peach Point Wildlife Management Area portal leads onto a small road that runs beside a magical oak forest. At the head of the road, Peach Point was locked up tight, but directly across was the entrance to Arco's Seaway Jones Creek Tank Farm. I drove past no trespassing signs to find a huge secluded area with more large round oil tanks than I could count. Feeling like a spy, I took a lot of undercover photographs to document this horrific intrusion across from Peach Point.

Peach Point was the plantation of Stephen F. Austin's sister and brother-in-law from 1832, and Austin considered it his home. When he died in 1836, his body was returned to Peach Point and was buried nearby. I have since learned that Peach Point Management Area, with all those fake birds atop its entrance sign, is not a wildlife refuge but a

hunting preserve.

Palacios, at the head of Matagorda Bay, is famous for the Luther Hotel, built as the Palacios Hotel in 1905 with the "longest front porch in Texas." When the Luthers bought it in 1936, they spent five years on a renovation that included remodeling the porch and adding plumbing. Today, standard rooms with a view are \$70 to \$75 per night including peace and quiet, but not phones, faxes, or TVs. The Luther is a remnant of the simple seaside resort of another time. Landscaped grounds, porch rockers, and a fishing pier provide the only entertainment. Don't come here to rent jet skis.

The fishing and vacation grounds of the Coastal Bend begin in Port Lavaca ("cow port"), which rose on the site of Linnville, a town that disappeared after a Comanche raid that swept down from the Hill Country in 1840. Nearby is the site of another lost town — Indianola, a seaport that once rivaled Galveston. Wiped out by hurricanes and high seas in 1875 and 1887, Indianola is now a ghost town with only its legends and old cemetery.

On the way to Rockport via Highway 35, the preferred coastal route in these parts, I stopped in Tivoli (Tye-VOH-lee) anticipating a greasy lunch at Marie's, which had closed. Tivoli, like Sabine Pass, is not thriving. Rockport, on the other hand, is a mecca for snowbirds, who retire in substantial subdivisions with big lawns and brick houses (not on stilts). Rockport is therefore able to support an arts center, specialty shops, and other city-type amenities. But its two best sights are a 1,000-year-old live oak tree and the Fulton Mansion. The Big Oak

hasn't grown since it was calibrated in 1966 at 44 feet tall and 35 feet in circumference, with a crown diameter of 89 feet. The 30-room George Fulton House was built during the years 1874 to 1876 in the Second Empire style favored by wealthy American Victorians. The Texas Parks and Wildlife Department has restored the house, and it is now a museum open to the public. Like the tree, it is well worth a visit.

In a hurry to reach Port Aransas, I drove fast along the flat coastal plain to Aransas Pass. The ferry, exactly like the Bolivar ferry, provides a short ride to Port Aransas on the north tip of Mustang Island. Ferries and bridges are noteworthy coastal phenomena. The most impressive bridge I encountered was the new Baytown-Goose Creek Bridge; the oldest and ricketiest led to Quintana Beach; and the longest was the Queen Isabella Causeway between Port Isabel and South Padre Island. Bridges and ferryboats provide an important emotional space between leaving and arriving. The sounds and smells of the sea rush through open car windows more urgently on a causeway or ferry, heightening anticipation.

Leaving the Aransas ferry, my excitement about getting to the lighthouse made the refineries and docks I was beginning to accept as part of the Texas coastline seem less intrusive. The privately owned Aransas Pass lighthouse is where I have seen a triple rainbow after a truly frightening storm; it's where I have caught and grilled my supper; it's where I've made good friends; and it's where I find unmatched peacefulness and beauty. From the porch of one of the three houses connected by pierlike catwalks over the

marsh flat, I saw vivid roseate spoonbills and split-tail swallows this trip. There are always seagulls, pelicans, egrets, and great blue herons. These birds can be found up and down the coast, but this is where I find them. Historic lighthouses also dot the Texas coast, but I know this one.

David L. Cipra's recent book, *Lighthouses, Lightships, and the Gulf of Mexico*, is a treasury of old photographs and history that pays homage to these powerful forms, which like grain elevators have been rendered almost useless except for their ability to elegantly punctuate a flat landscape. The 50-foot-tall, red-brick Aransas Pass lighthouse tower was constructed in 1855. After a major shift in the Lydia Ann Channel, the lighthouse was decommissioned in 1952. The 1919 keepers' cottage, once a duplex for the keeper and his assistant, is a mottled adobe and frame building that needs constant attention.

Port Aransas, like other Texas coastal towns, has no frills, no glitz. It does have the 1895 Tarpon Inn and the newer Tortuga Flats, where you can come by boat to enjoy the salty crowd and margaritas. The townsfolk prefer Teulahu's, a less touristy, but expensive, small restaurant. For those willing to participate, St. Joseph's Island across the Lydia Ann Chanel has a nude beach. Playful dolphins are a common site, as is the Sargasso gulfweed — huge clumps of floating micro-life-infested seaweed that harbors critical food-chain-climbing plants and animals.

Culturally, Port Aransas is not as unsophisticated as it might look — just very accepting. Artists, writers, and other productive nonconformists gravitate here as they do to seacoast villages all over the world. The University of Texas Marine Science Institute employs scientists who study Texas coastal ecosystems, adding another element to the local fishing and industrial population.

Reluctantly leaving Port Aransas, I headed for North Padre Island. Field after field had been bulldozed to make way for new development stretching out south of Corpus Christi. One large cornfield with a "coming soon" sign had been sold even before the corn was harvested. North Padre was not too impressive: there are a few high-rise condos and a lot of people camped on the beach.

To get to South Padre Island, the more celebrated and populated end of this long, sandy barrier island, requires a circuitous route through Kingsville, which is not on the coast, but it is the headquarters of the King Ranch (of chicken casserole fame). On down Highway 77, the only place you can see the water until you reach Port Mansfield is at Riviera Beach, where, after a long drive on a dusty road, I found a bait camp, a boat yard, and the King's Inn restaurant. The big dining room was decorated not with stuffed fish on the walls (did you know that trophy fish are

really painted wooden replicas with only the bill or fin of the real fish?), but with a crystal chandelier hung from the center of the low acoustical-tile ceiling. The fried shrimp and special avocado salad were great.

Backtracking to 77, I saw my first javelina road kill, and blooming cacti were everywhere. Along this 60-mile desert stretch there is no access to the coast. First the King Ranch and then the Kenedy, Armstrong, and Yturria ranches cover Kenedy County, so private land lines the coast along most of the Laguna Madre, which separates Padre Island from the Texas mainland. This part of the drive was boring and hot, but it authenticated scenes from the movie *Giant*.

After Raymondville, where you turn off for Port Mansfield, the desert visibly gives way to the fertile Lower Rio Grande Valley. Fields of high cotton, corn, sugarcane, and acres of soybeans, looking ripe and lush, lined the highways. I arrived in Port Mansfield (which I have heard referred to as "Convict City," presumably because parolees have settled there) the last weekend in July to witness at least one big Texas fishing tournament.

The Port Mansfield Fishing Tournament was headquartered in an empty seafood warehouse filled for the weekend with stalls selling beer and souvenirs, along with weigh stations and finalist boards. Outside, bleachers were set up on the dock for spectators. Every time a boat came in, a couple of TV cameramen and folks who didn't mind the beating sun rushed over to assess the dead fish.

A fancy inboard with a mom, dad, and two boys pulled up, and I hurried over with the rest to see what they had caught. The bright-eyed oldest boy, about 11, with his baseball cap on backwards and a terribly dirty T-shirt, jumped up on the dock to heft the 45-pound cobia, passed up from his father on the boat deck below. Hardly able to carry the huge fish, he rushed it in to be weighed and measured. In a short few minutes he returned to the dock shouting at the top of his lungs, "Dad, we got it!" Having no idea what I was cheering for, I broke into whooping and yelling approval with the rest of the crowd.

As less fortunate fishermen came in, I wandered inside the dark, therefore cooler, warehouse. The nice lady selling T-shirts was from Nebraska, which she and her fish-loving husband had left to settle permanently in Port Mansfield. She gushed with enthusiasm over her adopted community and urged me to consider retiring there too. She didn't look like a convict, and neither did most of the tournament-going families. Seeing flat-bottom boats that glide the smooth shallows of the Laguna Madre in every driveway and an almost-European cluster of party-wall houses bunched up on the bay — old, weathered, and clearly not put up by one developer — I thought I might consider

her suggestion.

On the outskirts of Port Isabel, I found the best photo op since Port Arthur's conch-shell wall — a giant, grand, and grimy octopus lounging on the top of a building. The owner of Sea Caverns Souvenir Shop said the concrete octopus was constructed in the 1950s above an open-porch dance hall. Does the Society for the Preservation of Commercial Archaeology know about this?

I checked in the old Port Isabel Yacht Club (1926), which is now a hotel, after a long day of driving and cheering for fish. This quirky but civilized place had no screaming children, a good restaurant, and a lot of atmosphere in the Spanish-style building overlooking a private marina where respectably sized sailboats cast mast shadows from the setting sun. A small swimming pool surrounded with overgrown tropical plants was cool and deserted, plus it had a side door to the bar where the bartender was happy to put double margaritas in plastic glasses. Why would anyone venture across the bridge to the crowded condos of South Padre? For \$45 I had a glorious night's rest in a room with one of those old window air conditioners with no thermostat that hummed sweetly all night as it produced freezing cold air.

Up early, I loaded my courage and camera to assault South Padre Island, where I knew crowds would be filling the moderately priced hotels and motels stretched out along the fine beach. The place was hopping, new construction everywhere. Three flags hung in front of most serious places: Texas, U.S., and Mexico — a nice touch I hadn't seen before. Venturing along the road lined with tourist places to eat, stay, and spend money, nothing very interesting or surprising appeared until, pretty far up the island, I saw what looked like architecture.

The South Padre Island Convention Center has Barraganesque walls of splendid color and complicated glass and steel-frame awnings that jut out and up like the prow of a ship. To the south of the main building, a windowless 300-seat conference theater is covered on the exterior by a fanciful mural of underwater sea life titled *The Whaling Wall*. It was painted by the Hawaiian artist known only as Wyland. The Seattle architectural firm responsible for the San Diego Convention Center — Loschky, Marquardt & Nesholm — designed the complex, which opened in 1992.

A culture and perhaps a century away from Padre Island, Boca Chica is the southernmost point of the Texas Coast. At the "little mouth" of the Rio Grande, it is reached only by Highway 4, a long, narrow road that passes refineries and offshore-rig construction sites much like the ones in Sabine Pass, then scattered houses, trailer parks, fuchsia bougainvilleas, and banana trees, until it becomes an open

lonely road flanked by nothing but mesquite, cactus, and yucca. A few historical markers along the way tell tales of Civil War skirmishes and young men lost to the elements and disease while waiting in marshy hideouts to fight. The road finally runs right into the Gulf of Mexico across a beach lined with old cars and campers. A rusty red van selling suspicious-looking tacos was the only commerce I saw. The water is muddy and considerably warmer than the water off South Padre Island, due no doubt to the silt and sludge of the Rio Grande emptying into the Gulf down the way.

Turning right at the only intersection near the coast, I found a 1950s-looking three-street neighborhood. The flat houses were dry and dusty like the land, and many of them were empty or boarded up. One man was fixing a car in his front yard, and a few others were out doing nothing. It was pretty deserted. At the very end of the last two-block-long dirt street was a carefully constructed and maintained grotto sheltering a Madonna. She looked over the little neighborhood, not the water. This shrine was the only sweetness or softness I found in Boca Chica, where life is clearly dangerous and hard.

There are no roads over the dunes that separate the main road from the Rio Grande. But there are occasional paths. Venturing up one, I came to the river, which I was shocked to find isn't *grande* at all. It is no wider than a two-lane highway; Mexico is literally a stone's throw away. Over the next dune, I found a fisherman who spoke a little English; I asked if this was actually the Rio Grande. Without smiling he said yes and went back to his fishing. At my third and last lookout, the river seemed even narrower, and I noticed white plastic bags snagged on trees at the river's edge in Mexico. Then I noticed the same thing on my side. They had been tied there to shine in the dark, marking a safe crossing point. I decided it was time to go home. I had come to the end of my journey at a point where the coast is split by nature and politics, where the edge of Texas represents both a barrier and a new beginning. ■



Bolivar Peninsula. Photo by Barrie Scardino, 1997



Port Isabel. Photo by Barrie Scardino, 1997