

A person in a red shirt is silhouetted against a dark blue night sky, holding a smartphone to take a picture. The sky is filled with a large flock of birds, likely starlings, illuminated by a red light source, creating a striking contrast. The overall scene is a night-time bird release or migration event.

I Didn't Know That!

Some of Texas' most brag-worthy attractions may not be on your radar

BY CYNTHIA J. DRAKE

In a state where superlatives reign supreme and things are frequently described as “biggest” and “best,” Texas lays claim to many legitimately impressive attractions. In other words, we're not just “all hat and no cattle” around here. But in a state as large as ours, it can be hard to keep tabs on all the standout things to see and do. Some of the attractions we can brag about most may surprise you, and you'll be left wondering how they escaped your attention.

Here, discover 5 such standouts—along with insider tips on how best to enjoy them.

The world's largest ...

Bat colony

📍 BRACKEN CAVE, SAN ANTONIO

Everyone knows about the Congress Bridge Bats in Austin, but more than 15 million Mexican free-tailed bats—the world's largest bat colony—make their summer home just northeast of San Antonio at **Bracken Cave**, located on private land owned by Bat Conservation International. Mama bats give birth and raise their young here, so call it a maternity ward of sorts. Bats may have their detractors, but environmentalists and farmers praise their pest-eating prowess and welcome their presence. Every night, the bats fly out of the cave to dine on approximately 400,000 pounds of moths, mosquitoes, and other insects. On select nights from May through September, the public can watch the dramatic spectacle at sunset. Tickets (\$30) must be purchased in advance and go fast, so reserve early.



Insider Tip

Join Bat Conservation International as a member for additional opportunities to see the bats emerge on members-only nights.



Velasco's *The Immaculate Conception* (1695–1720)



One of the world's largest ... **Spanish art collections**

📍 MEADOWS MUSEUM, DALLAS

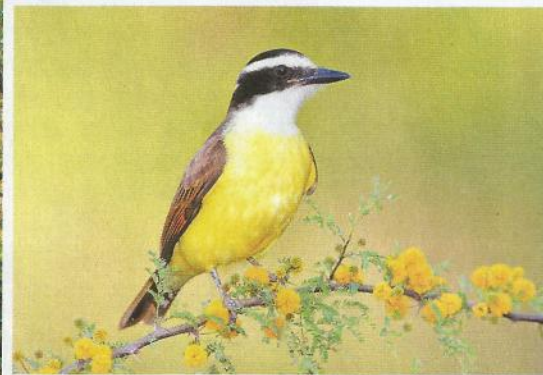
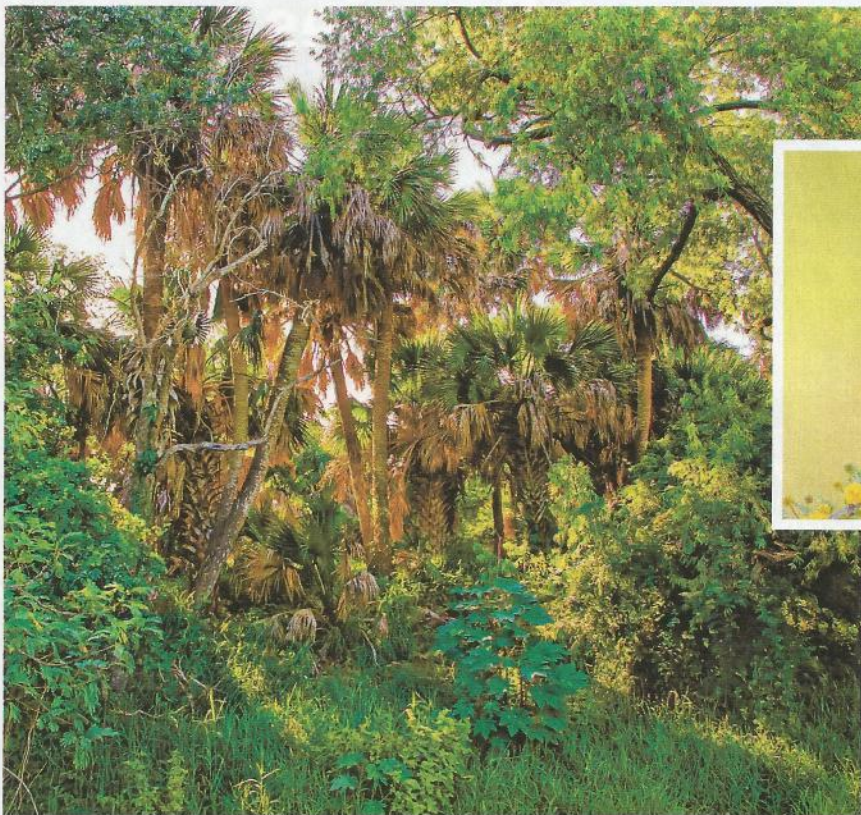
An admirer of the Museo del Prado in Madrid, oil tycoon Algur H. Meadows set out to establish a small Prado for Texas at Southern Methodist University in Dallas. The **Meadows Museum**, which opened in 1965, is now home to one of the largest and most comprehensive collections of Spanish art outside of Spain. See artwork dating from medieval times to present day, including works by Spanish masters such as El Greco, Goya, and Velasco. At the entryway, the massive, undulating Wave sculpture by storied Spanish architect Santiago Calatrava (inset) greets visitors. Made of bronze bars installed over a black-tiled pool, it's magnificent to view day or night. *Adults, \$12.*



Insider Tip

Periodically throughout the year, the museum hosts Drawing From the Masters, informal art classes led by artists and inspired by the museum's collections. Check the program calendar for upcoming sessions.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 20F >>>



The country's largest ...
**Old-growth
sabal palm
forest**

**📍 SABAL PALM SANCTUARY,
BROWNSVILLE**

The Rio Grande Valley is a treasure trove for birding enthusiasts on the lookout for species not seen anywhere else in the U.S., such as the great kiskadee (pictured). One of the best places to spot them is the 557-acre **Sabal Palm Sanctuary**. The sanctuary's approximately 30 acres of preserved forest make it the largest patch of old-growth sabals in the U.S. For a magical experience, walk along its 3 miles of nature trails, spotting feathery creatures from bird blinds and at a bird-feeding station. *Adults, \$5.*



Insider Tip

Through Airbnb, you can overnight on the sanctuary grounds at the historic Rabb Plantation House, a Queen Anne-style mansion built in 1892. *\$80 per night for a room with a queen bed and a private bathroom.*

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The world's largest ...
Spring-fed swimming pool

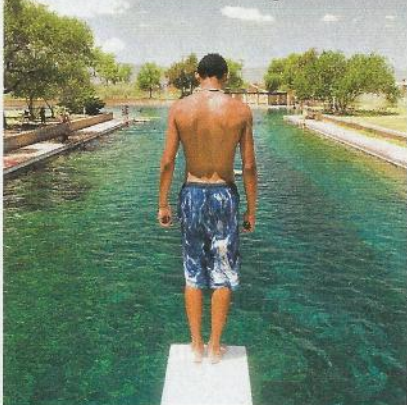
BALMORHEA STATE PARK, TOYAHVALE

In the eastern reaches of the Chihuahuan Desert in West Texas, you'll find the world's largest spring-fed swimming pool. Each day, San Solomon Springs feeds more than 15 million gallons of crystal-clear water into the 1.3-acre pool. The water stays a cool 72 to 76 degrees year-round, and swimmers share it with turtles and fish, including the small and endangered Comanche Springs pupfish, which you won't find anywhere else in the world. The pool is up to 25 feet deep, so you'll see scuba divers here, too. Speaking of diving, a high dive delivers plenty of thrills for those who take the leap. The park restricts the number of swimmers each day, so book online in advance. **Adults, \$7.**



Insider Tip

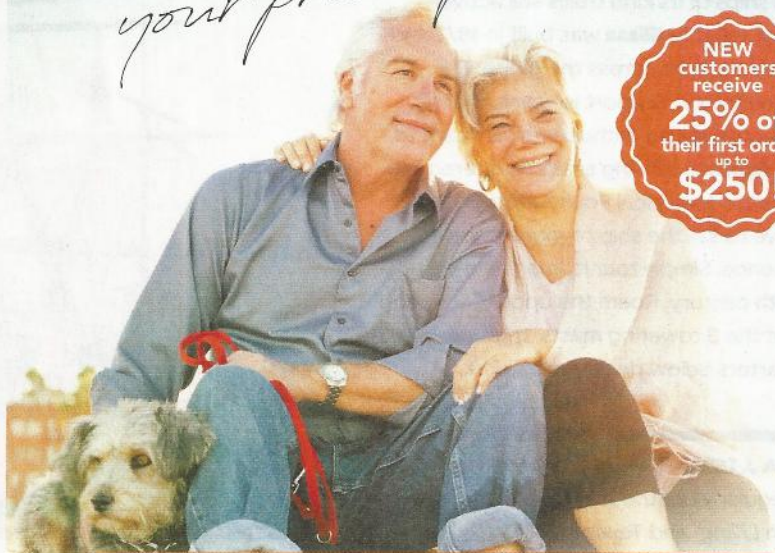
The park's campsites and lodge rooms are currently closed for renovation. The pool is open daily, although it will be closed for one week in early May for its annual cleaning.



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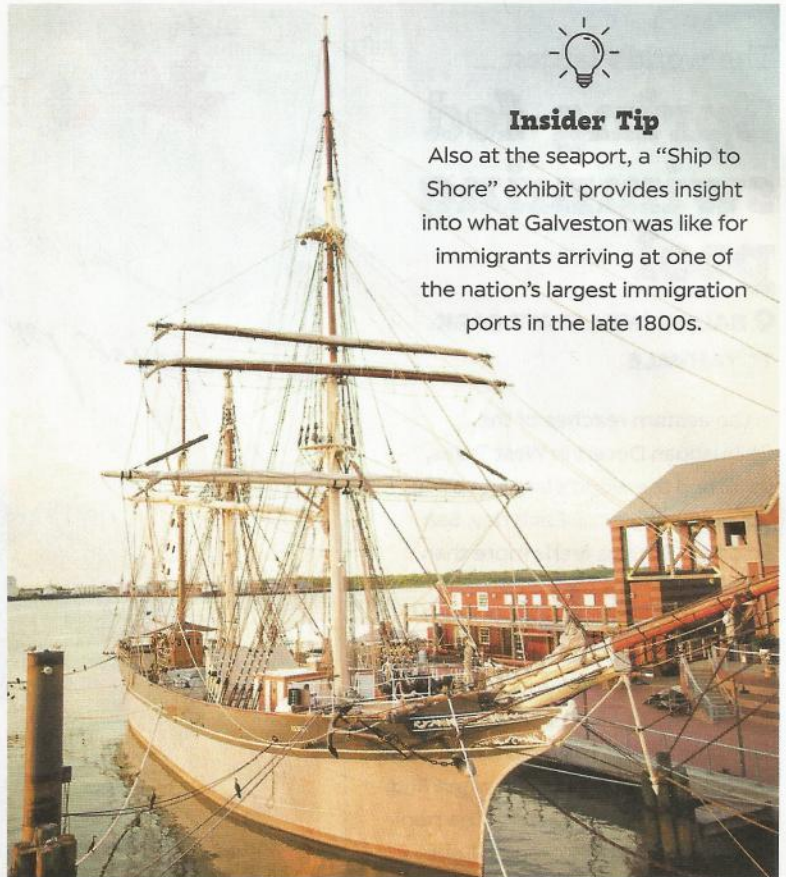
One of the world's oldest ...

Sailing ships

📍 GALVESTON HISTORIC SEAPORT

One of 3 ships of its kind that's still actively sailing, the tall ship **Elissa** was built in 1877 and once hauled freight across the globe. The Galveston Historic Seaport is now its home, and hard-core sailing enthusiasts can learn to sail it via rigorous training sessions offered by the Galveston Historical Foundation. But you don't have to sail the ship to experience its magnificence. Simply tour it, imagining life at sea in the 19th century. Roam the upper decks and marvel at the 3 towering masts, then explore the crew quarters below deck. *Adults, \$16.*

CYNTHIA J. DRAKE, an Austin-based travel writer, regularly contributes to *AAA Explorer*, *Southern Living*, and *Texas Monthly*.



Insider Tip

Also at the seaport, a "Ship to Shore" exhibit provides insight into what Galveston was like for immigrants arriving at one of the nation's largest immigration ports in the late 1800s.

KOBY BROWN PHOTOGRAPHY

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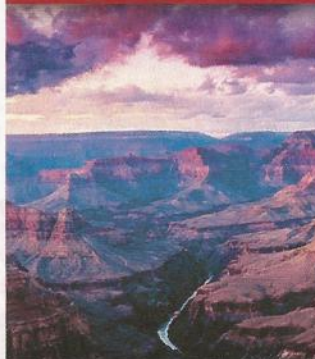
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