

Pining for Texas

The Lone Star State's eastern edge enjoys a setting graced by the Piney Woods region.

Texas is a place ingrained in the American psyche. When we think of it, certain images come to the mind. We think of its cowboy culture, football, giant cities and oil money. We also think of its natural side, but usually those thoughts are of the Rio Grande, Hill Country and the Gulf of Mexico.

It's time to add one more to the latter list – the Piney Woods – another locale like no other in a state full of them. Piney Woods encompasses hundreds of thousands of acres in Texas and adjoining states that are replete with pine, hardwood and cypress, as well as wetlands.

Piney Woods is so treed that all four of Texas' national forests are here, in addition to five state forests. Meanwhile, its wetland ecosystems are represented best by Big Thicket National Preserve. And across the region, 12 state parks give travelers the chance to touch everything that Piney Woods offers.

This scene of natural bounty, while perhaps not the first thing we think of today, was what newly arrived Texans first saw after emigrating from the United States. Not Surprisingly then, Piney Woods is called the Cradle of Texas. One can say the Americanization of Texas started here, a phenomenon that built upon the heritage of ancient people who once called the area home, too.

The Natural Way

With Piney Woods, the name says it all. With its assortment of elm, ash, oak, maple and more, the region had to make its first American settlers feel right at home. And like the spots back east these folks left behind, the Piney Woods shine during the fall. Indeed, the reds, oranges, yellows and purples create a palette that is hard to forget.

As with any outdoor wonderland, the activities during a Piney Woods getaway read like an outfitter's checklist. There are birding and wildlife viewing, as hundreds of winged wonders and other animals call the place home. There are a plethora of trails that let the adventurous and only mildly curious alike reach more deeply into their surroundings – on foot, on bicycles and on horseback. There are creeks, rivers and lakes that beckon to be plied by canoe, kayak and more. (Not to mention fished and swam.) And for those who want to linger, camping opportunities abound in the Piney Woods.

When exploring the region, folks will find the scenery changes in the southern reaches of the Piney Woods. This is where upland woods turn to lowland marsh, and it is where Big Thicket National Preserve lies. The 100,000-acre preserve is a maze of swamps, rivers and dense forests – a place that has the ability to make visitors feel as though they are first to be there.

Big Thicket's waterways are its big-ticket draw, bringing boaters from all over the country. There are two official canoeing trails in the preserve, but canoeing, kayaking, and other boating experiences abound throughout Big Thicket. Among the waterborne fun are wild-river experiences along the Neches River and primordial expeditions in cypress and tupelo swamps in Pine Island Bayou.

From the Cradle

The appeal of the Piney Woods presents immediately during even the most casual of explorations. The appeal is what makes many people stay. The first to leave behind evidence of residence were the Hasinai, who built a village and burial mounds 25 miles outside present-day Nacogdoches. The village is now a state historic site, where the lives and times of these early Texans can be discovered. Early Texan history is waiting at Nacogdoches, too, where the Spanish established a fort in the 1700s. The town, one of the oldest in the state, stood for centuries as the eastern entryway into Texas, meaning American settlers would've stopped here first before heading farther into the frontier. It was here, too, where the first volleys of the Texas Revolution were fired. The conflict that resulted in Texas becoming an independent nation ignited when local residents forced the Mexican garrison out of town.

With the revolution, Piney Woods was instrumental in the Texas of then, and with oil, it became instrumental in the Texas of now. Nowhere is this more prominent than on the grounds of the World's Richest Acre Park in downtown Kilgore. During the oil boom of the 1930s, the parkland hosted the greatest concentration of oil wells in the world. From those wells more than 2 million barrels of oil flowed. Today, one of the original derricks, 36 newer ones, a pumpjack and a monument to East Texas pioneers celebrate the region's halcyon days as the oil capital of the planet.

Another oil boom town, Marshall, embodies the Southern vibe emitted from portions of the Piney Woods, what with their dogwoods, cypress and magnolias. Plantation homes and mansions add resonance to this impression. In Marshall, which became the seat of Confederate government west of the Mississippi following the fall of Vicksburg, Miss., visitors can thrill to Wonderland of Lights. The festival, held from Thanksgiving to New Year's Day, is one of the biggest holiday shows in the country. Everyone gets in on the act – businesses decorate their buildings, neighborhoods undertake themed displays and more 125,000 lights deck the antebellum courthouse.

Similar holiday displays are played out in town squares throughout the Piney Woods, almost as if people are trying to catch up to the beauty nature shows all year long.

For more information about a Piney Woods adventure, visit www.traveltex.com.

From Jan. 1 through July 31, enter to win a Great Big Texas Adventure at www.thegreatbigtexasgetaway.com.

For trip-planning assistance, visit AAA.com/travel.