

Deep East Texas

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ADVENTURE lives HERE

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Just to give you a quick sense of Texas' wingspan, El Paso is closer to San Diego than it is to Houston. Within that wide reach are enough unique landscapes and biomes for an entire country, much less a state. When most people think of Texas, they probably think of either the Hill Country or the West Texas deserts, but perhaps the state's best-kept secret is the Piney Woods region of Deep East Texas. With a woodsy, storybook aesthetic, the area is like nowhere else in the state.

If you want to have the most authentic experience of this region, there are seven towns in the area that make the perfect road trip: Crockett, Henderson, Huntsville, Jasper, Lufkin, Nacodoches, and Rusk. Between them sit two national forests, one of the largest lakes in Texas, a working steam railroad, the oldest town in the state, a thousand-year-old Caddo settlement, and a 67-foot statue of Sam Houston watching over the interstate. Don't forget to wave!

Crockett

Few men are more synonymous with the Lone Star State than the Tennessean, Davy Crockett. Crockett takes its name from the "King of the Wild Frontier," who was said to have camped at a spring in the area on his way to the Alamo, where he laid down his life in the name of liberty. The town sits on the El Camino Real de los Tejas National Historic Trail, the old road that connected Texas cities long before the highways. One of the newer appeals of the city is that it reopened its original 1930s movie house, the Ritz Theatre, in 2025. It's once again showing films and live performances.

Born a little too late to have the town named after him, another important figure in the history of Crockett is legendary bluesman, Lightnin' Hopkins. If you're not familiar with Hopkins, just know that Rolling Stone listed him among their greatest guitarists of all time, so his legacy is firmly cemented in music history. The city does its part to keep his memory alive with Camp Street Blues, a Blues festival that takes over downtown, and the World Championship Old Time Fiddlers' Festival. When you're ready for some nature, the Davy Crockett National Forest is waiting just outside town with 160,000 acres of towering trees and serene fishing spots.

Henderson

Henderson's been around since 1843 and has held on tight to its timeless aesthetic. Its downtown has been fully restored, filling its storied buildings with new life without losing the town's character. There's a lot of to love about modernity, but seeing the same chain store on every corner isn't one of them. Henderson gets that. Strolling through its downtown, you'll come across antique shops, mom-and-pop restaurants, and boutiques. It's a place where you can buy things have a story attached—or, at least, a story better than "it was tossed on my doorstep."

It's also a town that keeps its traditions going. One of its biggest and most enduring is the Heritage Syrup Festival, which goes down every November. About 20,000 people show up to watch ribbon-cane syrup made the old-fashioned way, with folk art demonstrations and music to fill out the rest of the day. In spring, the East Texas Wildflower Trails turn the surrounding countryside into a driving route worth taking at an easy 15 miles per hour. When you're ready to stretch your legs, Lake Forest Park provides ample shade, open green space, and a lake that feels secluded despite being so close to downtown.

Huntsville

Before you even reach the exit for Huntsville, you'll see one of its headline attractions: the 67-foot tall concrete statue of Sam Houston. Called "A Tribute to Courage," the monument is the tallest statue in the world of an American hero.

Even though a certain larger city just south of Huntsville carries Houston's name, it's Huntsville where Houston lived, died, and is buried. The Sam Houston Memorial Museum and Republic of Texas Presidential Library preserves his home, his belongings, and his stories. Beyond the history angle, Huntsville State Park kindly provides miles of hiking and biking trails and a 210-acre lake just 20 minutes from downtown. Plus, the Sam Houston National Forest is right next to it. Back in town, you won't want to miss the Texas Prison Museum. The information about the prison rodeos is worth the visit on its own.

Jasper

Jasper bills itself as the heart of East Texas Forest Country, and it's hard to disagree. This is where the pine trees meet their match with Lake Sam Rayburn, one of the largest lakes in all of Texas. It carries a national reputation for bass fishing, drawing competitive anglers all year-round. As you might guess, it's also a popular spot for boating, paddling, and families wanting to spend the weekend on the water.

Aside from the lake, the historic Jasper town square is the centerpiece of a community that takes its annual traditions seriously. There's the Azalea Festival in spring, the Butterfly Festival that earned the city its nickname as the "Butterfly Capital of Texas," a Fourth of July celebration, and Christmas in the Park. When you factor in Sandy Creek Park, a robust golf scene, and the scenic drives in all directions, Jasper makes a strong case for the region's outdoor headquarters.

Lufkin

Of the seven towns, Lufkin is the most central. It sits where the Angelina and Davy Crockett National Forests nearly touch, which means top-notch hiking, fishing, kayaking, camping, birding, and golf are all just a short drive from your hotel in either direction.

Inside the city itself, Lufkin's got one of the most diverse lineups of attractions in the area. The Ellen Trout Zoo keeps close to 800 animals and has a miniature steam train, because what do kids love more than animals and trains? Dinosaurs, you say? Lufkin has them too at The Naranjo Museum of Natural History. And then there's the Texas Forestry Museum, the only museum in the state devoted to the industry that built this corner of it. We can't forget to mention the Museum of East Texas, either, which handles the art and cultural history of the region. Historic Downtown Lufkin ties it all together with local shops and the restored Pines Theater.

Nacogdoches

Make no mistake about it: Nacogdoches is the oldest city in Texas. But it doesn't look a day over 45, partially thanks to its equally important status as the Garden Capital of Texas. If you don't believe us, just pay a visit to the Ruby M. Mize Azalea Garden, the largest azalea garden in the state. In the spring, the garden blooms so abundantly, the flowers start to spill out into the nearby neighborhoods.

Nacogdoches' distinguished downtown is built on century-old brick streets and lined with small businesses that have that homemade touch. Get to town at the right time and you just might stumble into the Texas Blueberry Festival on the second Saturday in June. Take a walk on the Lanana Creek Trail, tour Millard's Crossing Historic Village, and then let the afternoon go long at Fredonia Brewery. If the name of the brewery sounds familiar, it's because Fredonia is the fictional country from the Marx Brothers' greatest film, *Duck Soup*. What's the connection between Nacogdoches and the Marx Brothers? We're glad you asked! Way back in 1909—20 years before the brothers made their first movie—they performed at Nacogdoches's Opera House as a musical act with some comedy sprinkled in. After the audience got distracted when a runaway mule started causing havoc outside, Groucho got peeved and started roasting the crowd. Instead of getting angry, the crowd laughed. It's this moment that's often attributed to the Marx Brothers fully committing to comedy.

Rusk

Rusk is where you can climb aboard the Texas State Railroad and take an old-school ride through the Piney Woods, seeing corners than no road can reach. Better yet, the railroad has themed trips all year long, such as the Piney Woods Dinner Train, the Fall Harvest Lunch Train, and the Polar Express at Christmas.

Out on Highway 21, about 90 minutes southeast, is where you'll find Caddo Mounds State Historic Site, which preserves the earthen mounds raised by a Caddo civilization that flourished in East Texas more than a thousand years ago. You read that right. One...thousand. The mounds are actually right in-between Nacogdoches and Rusk, which makes it the perfect stop on a road trip between the two. Of all the human stories in this part of Texas, the story of the Caddo Mounds is the oldest. Without spoilers, we'll just say the mounds are not what you think they are. Back in town, you won't to miss Rusk's annual events like Scare on the Square, Fair on the Square, Hometown Christmas, and the Rusk Christmas Parade.