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Taking it to the beach

Dozens of new projects aim at Texans who want a place of their own on the coast

By **M.B. Taboada**
AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF

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The Texas coast has plenty of lures: sandy beaches, scenic dunes, historic lighthouses and rich fishing grounds.

And it offers a wide range of options for vacation or retirement living, from modest beach houses in low-key Rockport, with its pristine beach, to luxury condominiums on South Padre Island, where new high-rises are reinventing the skyline.



Brad Doherty FOR AMERICAN-STATESMAN

[\(enlarge photo\)](#)

Ernie and Mary Gale Stomberger of Austin have been vacationing on South Padre Island for 40 years and now own a condominium in Sadia Towers. The couple enjoy the view of the beach and the Gulf of Mexico from their sixth-floor condo, where their children and grandchildren often join them.



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Additionally, properties on the coast are affordable compared with the higher prices for oceanfront property in other parts of the country, according to real estate economists and brokers.

"Our coast in Texas is the only affordable coast in the nation," said Jim Gaines, research economist at the Real Estate Center at Texas A&M University.

"You can't touch a place on the East or West Coast for what you can get a nice place for on the Texas coast," said Ron Binkley, a broker with ReMax Austin/Skyline who bought a beach house of his own in Galveston in 2005. "Even with all the construction and growth, the Texas coast is still a bargain." Across the county, the market for second homes has been strong. The National Association of Realtors' annual Investment and Vacation Home Buyers Survey found that sales of vacation homes rose nearly five percent from 2005 to 2006, even though primary residence sales fell 4.1 percent during the same period.

In Texas, buyers include a steady stream of families looking for vacation getaways and a rising tide of baby boomers seeking retirement havens. To meet demand, developers are launching dozens of new residential projects up and down the coast.

Just a sampling: On the Bolivar Peninsula, a partnership is developing Avocet Beachfront Resort Community, 148 acres that will include more than 400 single-family lots, costing from \$79,000 for a back lot and up to \$325,000 for a beachfront site.

In Galveston, Pointe West, a \$500 million development by Centex Destination Properties, a division of Centex Homes, has 900 condominiums, 300 home sites plus a marina. On the east end of the beach, Beach-town Galveston is going up, a 125-acre development with several hundred condominiums and townhomes plus more than 300 homesites.

In the Rockport area, the 200-acre Preserve will include a wetland for waterbirds and a provision that 25 percent of each home site be left in a natural state.

Cinnamon Shore, a 64-acre New Urbanist community, recently broke ground on Mustang Island. The development will include 82 homes and a community center with shops on the ground floor and living spaces upstairs. Amenities will range from meeting rooms and workout facilities to entertainment and recreational options — all within the development's gates.

Cinnamon Shore developer Jeff Lamkin is also planning Wild Sands, a smaller project at the north end of South Padre Island, an area recently opened to development. Interior lots start at \$169,000 and beach front lots go for \$899,000.

Lamkin adds that he loves the fact that the Texas coast "is so affordable to a large percentage of the population. If there is a safe investment in real estate, the Texas coast is at the top of my list."

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David Birdsall, developer of Avocet, which will have a Polynesian flair, lives in Hawaii and grew up in California. But he said the Texas coast has plenty to brag about on its own.

"It's a really beautiful place," said Birdsall, who plans to eventually develop 450 more acres. "It grows on you. I like it more and more the more I get down there. It offers so much in terms of birds and fishing and the kids playing on the beach — all the things that the locals really love."

Birdsall, whose biologist father wrote papers on the Texas Gulf coast for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, said the coast has "one of the most diverse and populated ecosystems in the world," including a large population of migratory birds.

"The fishing is outstanding, world-class," he said. "There are a lot of people who go just for those reasons. There are so many species that are everyday occurrences. We don't have the same diversity in Hawaii."

The majority of buyers for coastal properties are Texans who want a second home for the weekend, said Alice Donahue, a broker who co-owns with her husband the Texas Gulf Coast Online Web site. In addition, investors are buying potential rental properties, although that market has slowed slightly in the past two years, following the national pattern.

But local buyers provide a steady market.

"We're getting so many of the baby boomers. . . . They are finding they can get a lot more bang for their buck in Texas," Donahue said. "And it's really pretty. We have beautiful water."

When potential buyers see the plans, they buy early. For example, almost all the 100 condominiums have been presold at Los Corales at the Shores on South Padre, even though the two 16-story towers won't be completed until 2009.

In Galveston, the demand for waterfront living has created a growth curve that hasn't been seen since the rebuilding period after the infamous 1900 hurricane that ravaged the city and killed more than 6,000.

Currently, more than \$2.4 billion in residential, commercial and public projects are under way, with 6,600 new housing units and more than 3 million square feet of new or remodeled commercial space, said Jeffrey Sjoström, president of the private nonprofit Galveston Economic Development Partnership.

"Galveston truly went from rags to riches overnight," says Binkley, the Austin broker. "The condo market has mushroomed. They range in price from the high \$200s to about \$1.4 million. It all depends on how close you are to the water and how close to the beach."

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