



It's the last gasp of Summer

GET OUT & ENJOY!



Surfing in Central Texas? Certainly. At NLand Surf Park, the waves never stop

By Ed Crowell

Let's go surfin' now
Everybody's learning how
Come on and safari with me
— "Surfin' Safari" by the Beach Boys

Land-locked surfers and anyone who's ever wanted to try the summertime sport no longer need drive to the coast. Now surfing safaris can start anywhere in Central Texas and wind up with guaranteed perfect waves breaking just east of Austin.

What once was dry brush land along Texas 71 has been transformed into a beach-ringed, tropical-like park with an 11-million-gallon lagoon the size of nine football fields. The lagoon's wave machine generates surfing breaks every five minutes of every day.

For both novice and experienced surfers, the new NLand Surf Park — a commercial member of Bluebonnet Electric Cooperative — offers a range of wave sizes at hourly rates. The park provides surfboards or riders can bring their own.

I couldn't wait to grab my surfboard and give the place a try when it opened. I booked an hour and then realized the 40-year-old board hanging on my back porch might be a bit brittle with age. Like me.

So I hit the gym to get in shape for my "pop-ups." I repeatedly stretched out on the floor, face down, and then quickly pushed myself up to standing position. That's what I would need to do on a surfboard once I paddled out and caught a wave.

I used to surf regularly when growing up in a small north Florida beach town. After moving to Central Texas, I occasionally surfed at Port Aransas on the Texas Gulf coast. The years passed and my board yellowed into a decoration.

No problem. I would use one of the park's surfboards. Once I got on a wave, I would find my surfing groove again. At least that was the plan.

The park is barely visible from the highway just a few miles east of Austin-Bergstrom International Airport and the Texas 130 toll road. American, Texas and NLand flags flutter at the entrance on the south side of Texas 71. There is plentiful parking in front of a plaza area with a restaurant and ticket windows.

Behind the plaza I could see water. A long pier divides the massive lagoon into two wave-riding areas. Underneath the pier, a submerged, snowplow-like contraption on a cable zips from end to end with a loud, whirring noise, creating the waves. The water, about the same temperature as the average daily temperature, is the color of wading water along

Continued on page 23

Addison Abernathy gets the hang of surfing in a class for kids at NLand Surf Park. The park has all sizes of waves in its 11-million-gallon lagoon.



From exhilarating activities to take-your-time tours, the Bluebonnet region has fun for everyone

Hot enough for you? If summer's steaming heat has forced you to retreat to the dark, air-conditioned corners of your home, it's time to emerge into the great outdoors and experience something new.

School may be just around the corner, but there is plenty of summer left to try out attractions across Bluebonnet Electric Cooperative's service territory. Some are as adventurous as surfing, skydiving, ziplining or intense canoeing. Others require little more than walking, looking, eating and learning. From Texas history to car races, there are a variety of activities the whole family can enjoy.

In the next few pages you'll find a story about the biggest new attraction around — a surf park that churns up waves big enough to satisfy any beach bum — and a few other suggestions for outings. Get started on page 20. Our list just scratches the surface. A quick web search or phone call to city or county offices will turn up a treasure trove of other fun things to do.

Bonus points: Turn up the thermostat to 80 or higher when you leave the house and you'll save some money on your electric bill.

— Ed Crowell

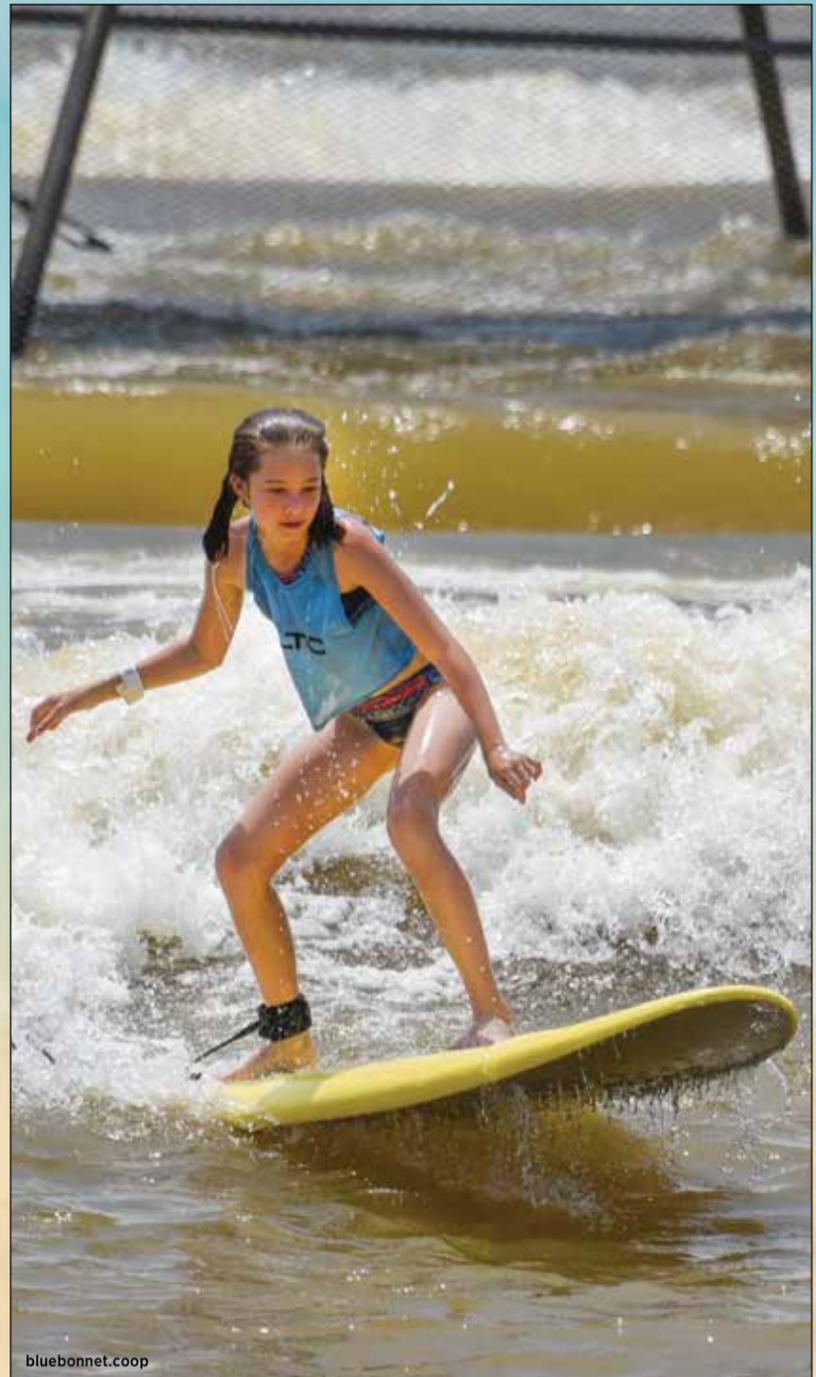


Sarah Beal photos

Jeff Adams, above, is about to fly fast above the trees at Zip Lost Pines near Bastrop. At right, a moment of free falling with Texas Skydiving in Lee County. They, along with Skydive San Marcos, let patrons take a big leap of faith.



Texas Skydiving photo



bluebonnet.coop

SKYDIVE OR ZIPLINE, HIKE OR EXPLORE

A mini-guide to some exciting — or peaceful — things to do in the Bluebonnet area

WASHINGTON COUNTY

Star of the Republic Museum

The state's best place to learn what it was like when Texas was its own nation (1836-1846) is in the historic burg of Washington-on-the-Brazos, a pretty half-hour drive north of Brenham. Wander through exhibits inside the star-shaped museum and visit the pioneer homestead nearby. Free hands-on walk-up events for children: Aug. 19, corn-husk dolls; Sept. 16, rope making. Family Home-school Days let families experience mid-19th century farm life: Sept. 6, 8, 13, 15, 22, 27 and 29 (registration online and fee required).

936-878-2461 • starmuseum.org



Star of the Republic Museum photo



Sarah Beal photo

Texas Cotton Gin Museum

The legacy of what once was one of the most important crops in Texas is told with tours of the country's oldest (1914) still-operating cotton gin. The museum is just off U.S. 290 in Burton.

979-289-3378 • cottonginmuseum.org

Texas Basketball Museum

Bob Springer grew up playing and loving basketball. He played college basketball, coached at Houston schools for 30 years and opened the museum in 2009. The collection includes trophies, jerseys and photos from Texas high school basketball teams. Learn which teams won state championships and who went on to the pros. Open in Carmine, a half-hour west of Brenham, by appointment only.

713-898-7667 • texasbasketballmuseum.com



Texas Basketball Museum photo

LEE COUNTY

Wendish Fest

If you haven't yet discovered the niche culture of the Wendish who settled the town of Serbin southwest of Giddings, go to the 29th annual Wendish Fest on Sept. 24. The TubaMeisters from San Antonio will perform, you can sample "what good coffeecake is supposed to taste like" from the coffeecake bake-off and you can learn the story of the 1850s migration from Germany at the Texas Wendish Heritage Museum.

979-366-2441 • texaswendish.org/tag/festivals

Texas Skydiving

A different way to experience the wide-open spaces of northern Lee County is from high above the ground after jumping out of an airplane. Texas Skydiving is a 20-year-old Lexington company that can introduce you to skydiving in tandem with a trainer harnessed above you or in solo free fall with an instructor beside you. Friends are welcome to watch from the airfield. Reservations required.

979-540-8336 • texas-skydiving.com



Texas Skydiving photo

BURLESON COUNTY

Kolache Fest

Who doesn't like kolaches? There's no better place to sample the Czech treats than on the town square of Caldwell at the 33rd annual Kolache Festival. The Sept. 9 event features a bake-off, a kolache eating contest, a car show and music, plus food and arts and crafts vendors.

979-567-0000 • burlesoncountytexas.com/kolache-fest

Lake Somerville State Park and Trailway

Despite flood damage at Lake Somerville in recent years, visitors to the park can enjoy plenty of places to walk, camp and boat. Large portions of the park's 20 miles of trails around the lake are open again, so hikers and bikers can choose their levels of exercise. Visitors can picnic, swim, fish, boat or camp. This state park is on two separate tracts — Birch Creek Unit on the north shore and Nails Creek Unit on the south shore. Nails Creek trails are open to foot traffic only, but the trail from that unit to the Nails Creek Bridge is closed. Choose what you want to do from the maps and information online. Then enjoy summer's closing months at this beautiful lake that shares its shorelines with Burleson, Washington and Lee counties.

979-535-7763 • tpwd.texas.gov/state-parks/lake-somerville

Texas Parks & Wildlife magazine photo



HAYS COUNTY

Meadows Center

You can always explore the 75-mile-long San Marcos River by canoe, boat or tube as it courses through the town of San Marcos and beyond, but you might learn more at the river's source. Formerly



Meadows Center photo

known as the Aquarena Springs attraction, the Meadows Center for Water and the Environment is now an oasis of natural calm and charm on Spring Lake. Operated by Texas State University, the center offers glass-bottom boat and paddling tours and wetlands tours. Discovery Hall on the lakeshore helps people understand the fragile springs and aquifer environment and the importance of endangered species that survive in the springs.

512-245-9200 • meadowscenter.txstate.edu

Texas Junior Water Safari

This newer, less-grueling version of the early summer Texas Water Safari is scheduled for Sept. 16. Instead of four days of paddling 260 miles from San Marcos to the Texas coast, the one-day junior event is 16 miles from San Marcos to Staples in northeastern Guadalupe County. Minimum age is 13 and anyone younger than 18 must have an adult in the boat. See the junior safari website for other rules and registration information or email texaswatersafari@yahoo.com.

texaswatersafari.org



Texas Water Safari photo



Sarah Beal photo

Rachea' Adams lands on the platform at Zip Lost Pines.

BASTROP COUNTY

Zip Lost Pines

Get hooked onto a cable and speed over some very tall trees at a zip lines facility on the east end of McKinney Roughs, the Lower Colorado River Authority park off Texas 71. Six cables range in length from 146 feet to 1,316 feet. Zip Lost Pines boasts that it is the only dual zip line in the state, which means you and a friend or relative can zip side by side on two sets of lines. Race to the end or enjoy the treetops and canyon scenery on your own. You must be at least 4-foot, 6-inches tall to ride and those under age 16 must ride with an adult. Reservations recommended.

512-761-2323 • ziplostpines.com

Cotton Bowl Speedway

Never been to the races on a dirt-track oval on a Saturday night in rural Texas? Then it's time to check it out. Cars and drivers come from many miles away to this racetrack in Paige to pit their engines and skills against one another. Several classes of race cars run under the lights every Saturday night in August and on Sept. 2. Stadium seats are general admission and a pit pass is extra.



Cotton Bowl Speedway photo

512-995-0230 • cottonbowl Speedway.com

CALDWELL COUNTY

Skydive San Marcos

This facility in the community of Fentress can introduce you to skydiving over the fields east of San Marcos if you are at least 18 years old. The company has been in business for 30 years, and current owners Paul and Jen Illingworth have decades of jumping and piloting experience. Tandem jumping is available for first-timers, and the aircraft can accommodate up to 18 jumpers. Reservations recommended.

512-488-2214 • skydivesanmarcos.com



Sarah Beal photos

Writer Ed Crowell, above, watching for waves at NLand Surf Park, called on the surfing skills of his youth: 'Once I was up, the wave felt like the real thing. I was stoked, happy to be surfing Central Texas!' At right, professional surfer Josh Kerr of Australia made it look easy when he visited the surf park to test the waters. Below, Peyton Eitel of Austin heads for land after a day of surf camp for kids.



NLand Surf Park photo



NLand Surf Park

4836 E. Texas 71, Del Valle

Hours: 8 a.m. to 9 p.m. daily

Cost: \$60 per hour for Bay section (white water for beginners); \$72 for Inside (knee to waist-high waves); \$90 for Reef (head-high waves). Soft-surfaced surfboards included for Bay or Inside waves. Boogie boards allowed with fins and leashes — bring or rent. Reef waves require hard boards — bring your own or rent for \$25 per session.

Youth requirements: Ages 5-7 can surf only with one of the park's private coaches. Ages 8-13 must enroll in a coaching session or surf beside a parent or legal guardian. Anyone under 18 must have a waiver signed by a parent or legal guardian.

Coaching sessions: \$85 for 90-minute land and surf training.

Reservations: Online booking for surf and coaching time slots is recommended: nlandsurfpark.com or call 512-806-1900.

Visitors: Eat, shop and watch the surf action in and around the covered overlook area of picnic tables. For a closer look and access to the lagoon pier, a \$5 shore pass is available.

Extras: Blue Prairie Café at the park offers burgers, Hawaiian poke and more. A juice bar mixes fresh drinks. Clothing and surf gear sold at the Surf Shop.

Contact: 512-806-1900; questions@nlandsurfpark.com

Continued from page 19

Texas beaches — brownish blue.

The lagoon is filled entirely from a nearby rainwater catchment area, filtered and lightly chlorinated. Travis County officials had sued the park before it opened because it didn't meet health and safety regulations for public pools. But an agreement with NLand allowed the park to open with weekly water-quality reports sent to the county.

Before heading into the lagoon, I talked to Chris Jones, then the park's spokesman. I wanted to know where this bold idea of inland surfing came from and how the waves are made. I wanted a peek into the building at the end of the pier that holds the wave-producing mechanical and electrical works.

"Not going to happen," said Jones when I asked to see what makes the waves. "That is proprietary information."

The wave technology was developed by the engineering company Wavegarden, based in Spain. Wavegarden licensed it to NLand after developing a prototype in Spain and opening its first surf park in Wales in 2015.

The idea caught the attention of longtime surfer and technology entrepreneur Doug Coors, a descendant of one of the Coors Brewing Co. founders. With a reported \$20 million investment, the Colorado resident and part-time Austinite purchased the site in eastern Travis County and built the largest surf park to date. (Smaller pools with a different technology that bumps up modest waves by pumping in a column of water have existed at an Arizona water park, at Disney World and in other locations.)

On the sunny day I visited NLand several months ago, I was among a few dozen surfers there to try out the waves. Like every customer, I had to watch a short safety video first. It explained the basics of how to line up to paddle,

catch a wave and get off the board. Falling backward into the shallow water at ride's end was emphasized rather than diving head first.

Next I picked out a red, soft-surfaced board. My group of 10 surfers was assigned to a numbered "launch pad" area where lifeguards keep watch. We paddled out to meet a surf guide on his board. The guide's job was to arrange us in a lineup order separated by a few feet so we would not collide when we rode the same wave.

As the first wave peeled toward us I watched the surfer next to me catch it. I hurriedly paddled and pushed myself into a standing position as the board glided toward shore.

Once I was up, the wave felt like the real thing. I was stoked, happy to be surfing Central Texas!

Less than a minute later, I neared the lagoon's shore and fell backward in a couple of feet of water. (The steeper Reef section waves are in much deeper water.)

It was strange to then see a wave now coming toward me from the opposite direction. Every five minutes the wave machine zipped under the pier north to south. Then it reversed itself and zipped south to north.

The visible part of the wave mechanism that runs under the lagoon's pier is a large concrete box with a cable attached to its top. The underwater plow part is hidden beneath several feet of water.

What's most noticeable is the sound of the wave crashing at a 45-degree angle. When the wave crests and leaves a trail of bubbling white water the roaring noise is just like an ocean wave breaking.

At a real beach, the waves always come from the same general direction. It was a weird feeling to surf one way, then another. But it was good to see waves appear on a regular basis, always with the same height and speed.

After an hour, I was beat. I had plenty of rides

in my allotted surf time, even though I missed several because I paddled too slowly to catch the wave.

I would come back in a few weeks and do better, I told myself. Then, last fall, NLand announced it was closing to repair its leaking liner after just a month in business. The thick, polyethylene liner in the excavated lagoon had come apart at the seams. The park reopened in May, after reconfiguration work on the bottom of the lagoon and installation of a thicker liner.

I talked to Coors about his disappointment in watching the park go from big crowds to a sudden closing. "The hardest part was shutting it down after seeing all the people enjoying themselves and excited to have the park there," Coors said.

"There are a lot of difficult variables with the technology of water retention where you have ocean-type waves," he said. The fixes included creating a sandbar-like ridge near the shore to keep the liner in place.

Today the surf park is open for business, offering a one-of-a-kind way to be cool in the last days of Central Texas' summer. Coors said he has plans for similar surf parks in other locations, but he declined to say where.

On the day I surfed the park, another surfer of a certain age was in my waves lineup group.

Isabella Cepelcha said as soon as she heard about the park's opening she was eager to give it a try. The Elgin-area resident and Bluebonnet Electric Cooperative member is an emergency room nurse in Temple. She learned to surf when she lived in Los Angeles for 10 years before moving to Texas in 2009.

"I loved it," she said after an hour of catching waves. "I'd definitely do it again."

Like me, she enjoyed riding waves close to home. A safari to the Texas coast can be a bummer if the seas are flat when you get there. Now the waves are nearby and the surf's always up, minus the beach grit and jellyfish. ■