

Kemah Boardwalk

Houston dwellers adore the Kemah Boardwalk. The attraction boasts rides for kids of all ages, including an old-fashioned wooden roller coaster and the “Dancing Fountain,” a kids’ water-play area. Several fine restaurants line the boardwalk, as well as numerous places just to grab a quick bite. Among local musicians, the Boardwalk is a highly coveted gig: you can see live music from some of the best bands in the area at the main concert stage, as well as at the Cadillac Bar. In fact, the Boardwalk is one of the few places where kids

can see a professional live rock band up close—and for free, no less: the main concert stage is right next to the Dancing Fountain.

The boardwalk itself is small compared to classic boardwalks like Long Beach or Coney Island. Sunny summer weekends can get crowded; you may face long lines for the rides and restaurants. But keep in mind that the Boardwalk is open year-round, including the rides; on weekdays and during the offseason, you might have the place practically to yourself. The Boardwalk is also a great place to watch boats, especially sailboats. Several regattas are held each year in Galveston Bay, just beyond the channel to Clear Lake.



Want to hold a special event at the Kemah Boardwalk? The Nautilus Ballroom is on the third floor of the Aquarium Restaurant overlooking Galveston Bay. Landry's also has a bay-overlook ballroom and banquet room. The Boardwalk Inn offers a ballroom and boardroom.

Stingray Reef

Among the primo attractions at the Kemah Boardwalk is Stingray Reef, downstairs from the Aquarium Restaurant. It's an impressive exhibit, with separate freshwater tanks containing fish from the rivers of Africa, Asia, and Texas. Another tank contains three black stingrays with bright-white polka dots—freshwater stingrays from South America, whose sting is lethal to humans.

The main feature at Stingray Reef is the stingray petting tank. The petting tank is a big hit with kids, and a unique opportunity to interact directly with aquatic wildlife.

The tank's stingrays are mostly rescues, animals that couldn't survive in the wild. As you approach the side of the shallow tank, the stingrays casually swim up to greet you. Don't worry—their stingers have been removed, so they can't bite. You can place your hand in the water and stroke them as they slowly swim by; their demeanor towards people is almost feline. Their skin is soft and completely



Getting around the Kemah Boardwalk

If you're planning to visit the Kemah Boardwalk on a summer weekend, or during any other peak time, it may be a good idea to avoid the SH 146 Bridge over the channel into Galveston Bay. The intersection at SH 146 and Marina Bay Drive (FM 2094) is a major choke point for traffic crossing south over the bridge. It's usually better to turn right onto Old Galveston Road (SH 3) from NASA 1, turn left onto FM 518, then veer left onto Marina Bay Drive to SH 146. Or you can just take the FM 518 exit from I-45 South. Parking on the surface lots on Bradford Ave approaching the Boardwalk complex cost \$6 to \$7 on weekends and during special events. The parking garage costs \$7. On most weekdays, the surface lots are free. Most people don't know about the overflow parking area on Texas Ave just off 6th Street. The overflow parking area is always open and always free. A free ferry boat will take you across the 65-foot channel, though it only runs on certain days. A yearly schedule is posted on the side of the covered waiting area, but not online, so it's best to call ahead to see when the ferry is running.

smooth, though the texture of the skin on their top sides is distinctly different from that of their white undersides. Flapping rapidly like birds, they can actually lift themselves a ways out of the water and look over the side of the tank. They take turns placing their mouths against your open hand, hoping to find a fish. It's hard not to be charmed by these engaging and sociable creatures.

Tourists with a sense of adventure will find a number of enriching outdoor activities in the Clear Lake area, all just a few minutes away from Kemah. Clear Lake itself is about as "clear" as Greenland is "green." Though too murky for swimming or diving, it's one of the most popular places in the country for fishing and boating; in fact, more recreational boat slips populate Clear Lake than Galveston, Freeport, or Corpus Christi.

Its brackish waters are home to speckled trout, seatrout, redfish, and flounder. Though less than a mile across at its widest point, from Kemah to the far shore at Nassau Bay is almost four miles.

Kemah is the gateway from Clear Lake to Galveston Bay and beyond. Large enough to give you the feel of "big water," Galveston Bay is shallow, protected by Galveston Island from the rough waves and the salinity of the Gulf's open waters. The smell of the ocean is not as strong here, and you're not covered with a thin film of salt, as you are on Galveston Island.

Water Excursions

Clear Lake connects to the more aptly named Mud Lake, and further upstream to Armand Bayou. Canoers and kayakers who paddle a mile up Mud Lake from the public boat ramp at Clear Creek Park, just across from the West Mansion, are treated to a view of lush, marshy shores teeming with birds, turtles, and alligators. At several places on Clear Lake, and at the adjoining Taylor Lake, you can rent kayaks and standup paddle boards by the hour or take guided tours. Some include a drop-off or pickup from designated locations.

The Armand Bayou Nature Center offers canoe rentals and other water excursions. Just a few minutes from the Kemah Boardwalk, this 2,500-acre nature reserve is one of the area's little-known gems. The canoe rentals and pontoon excursions are surprisingly cheap—just about the same price as a daylong ride pass at Kemah Boardwalk. You can access these pontoon excursions and guided trail tours mornings, days, and sometimes even at night.

ABNS

ABNS has something going on nearly every day, year-round. The entrance into the park—a mix of forest, wetland, and prairie habitats—is on Bay Area Boulevard just west of Red Bluff Road. Three separate circular nature trails loop the area, each of them over a mile long. The Martyn Farm gives visitors a picture of what farm life was like in the early 1900s, with an annual Harvest Festival where visitors can learn about blacksmithing, making home-made soap, cane-syrup production, quilting, square dancing, and more. In a pen adjacent to the farm live a pair of bison. The forest and the prairie grasses



space program, especially for those too young to remember the Gemini and Apollo programs. It's amazing to consider what was achieved in the 1960s and '70s with the technology of the day, which was at once primitive and advanced: don't forget that your phone has far more processing power than the computers on the Apollo lunar landers! The shuttle *Independence* may be a replica, but the carrier

aircraft is an original. Unlike shuttle exhibits elsewhere, the public is free to tour both. The combination of exhibits, activities, and artifacts at Space Center Houston makes it the most educational and awe-inspiring destination in the Clear Lake area. **N**

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change with the seasons. Most guided trail tours are offered during daytime hours, but special events like the 'Owl Prowl' are held at night. Native animal inhabitants at ABNS include coyotes, bobcats, alligators, deer, raccoons, and possums. Be aware that in summer, mosquitoes are relentless, so remember to bring plenty of repellent.

Sailing Excursions

If you've never been on a sailboat, there are a number of sailing excursions to choose from originating on Clear Lake. If you're a complete novice, you might enjoy the stability of a catamaran. Feeling adventurous and don't mind getting closer to the water? You can take a cruise on a single-hulled keel boat. If you prefer sailing, there are several sailing schools where you can learn the skills you'll need to enjoy sailing safely. Experienced sailors can even charter their own boats.

Space Center Houston

Every Houstonian should see Space Center Houston at least once. Just don't visit on a weekend, and don't go there hungry! The best times to visit are off-season weekday mornings, when lines are shortest. Spot school buses in the parking lot? Give it a miss and try another day. Kids love this place, and most of the activities are geared toward kids. But Space Center Houston is more than just an attempt to pull tomorrow's voters and taxpayers behind NASA's plans for the future. There is no better place (in Texas, at least) to get a visual sense of the history of America's manned