

Paddling *and* Painting

GALVESTON'S ARTIST BOAT ADVENTURES BRINGS
NEW MEANING TO "WATER COLOR"

text by **Melissa Gaskill**



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A

PLEASANT BREEZE ROCKED MY KAYAK AND rustled pale green and brown marsh grasses around me. Overhead, a few wispy clouds drifted across a blue sky. A heron squawked nearby, and the faint growl of a motorboat carried from the distance. Nary a peep came from the group of paddlers scattered around me, each of us clutching paintbrushes and thick watercolor paper fastened to cardboard with masking tape.

Welcome to Artist Boat Adventures in Galveston, an unexpected pairing of art-making and kayaking. My sister Janet Wray, who has created many a work of art but never kayaked before, and myself, an avid kayaker but certainly no artist, represented a definite test of Artist Boat's claim of "no experience necessary." The nonprofit organization integrates art and science to promote awareness and preservation of coastal habitats, including Galveston Bay. It offers guided "eco-art" tours at nearly a dozen locations from the lower Trinity River to Drum Bay.

For this program, we gathered with a half-dozen other participants at a kiosk on Oak Bayou, an inlet on the bay side of Galveston Island State Park, where a row of brightly colored kayaks and our Artist Boat guide, biologist Kari Howard, awaited. After a quick lesson in paddling technique, we slathered

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TEXAS WILD

“Galveston Island’s bay side is often overlooked, but it’s an ecological jewel, with more than 600 species of birds.”

on sunscreen, snapped on life jackets, loaded up with water and snacks, and launched our boats off the end of a boardwalk.

For more than an hour, we wandered the shallow bay, circumnavigating islands of marsh grass that sheltered white egrets, great blue herons, pelicans, and roseate spoonbills. Kari pointed out the various birds and gave us updates about restoration efforts in the bay. We paddled over a recently planted seagrass bed, the primary food for green sea turtles, and past restored plats of marsh grasses, which help create wetlands. Kari filled us in on the important functions of the wetlands, including reducing flooding, holding sediment together to maintain land mass for the island, filtering pollutants from the water, and providing a safe haven for the young of such commercially important marine species as shrimp, blue crab, and many varieties of fish.

Then, with all of our boats pulled up against a small island, we unloaded the art supplies from boxes strapped to each kayak. These included paper, paintbrushes, a set of watercolors, and a plastic tray with little wells for mixing. Kari talked us through the process, suggesting we first cover our paper with a background color and then place a horizon line two-thirds of the way up the page. She pointed out how subtly the color changed from water to shore to sky, and showed us how to mix those shades from our paints.

Once back on shore, we shared our finished creations. In less than an hour, working on moving boats, the group had produced surprisingly beautiful images. I’d heard that being in nature makes people more creative, and here was

tangible evidence right in front of me.

“I haven’t painted with watercolors since high school, and it’s probably the most difficult medium I’ve ever worked with, but I found Kari’s tips helpful,” Janet told me. “At first, I was somewhat uninspired by the limited color in the terrain, but that forced me to stretch creatively.”

Kari hopes that Artist Boat will serve to educate more people about the less-famous side of the island. “Galveston Island’s bay side is often overlooked, but it’s an ecological jewel, with more than 600 species of birds,” she said. “The Galveston Bay watershed begins in the Dallas-Fort Worth area with the Trinity River and covers 33,000 square miles. More than half the population of Texas lives within this watershed.”

She referenced a famous 1968 quote by Baba Dioum, a former agriculture minister in Senegal who served on the executive committee of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature: “In the end, we will conserve only what we love, we will love only what we understand, and we will understand only what we are taught.”

“The work we’re doing is important because it ties back to conservation—an issue that’s certainly timely in light of the recent oil spill here in the bay,” said Kari. “If enough people care about these environments, they will be protected and conserved. A big component of Artist Boat is educating the public about these coastal margins and making the connection between human actions and wildlife. We want ordinary people to rally for their own small parts on this big planet.” ★



ARTIST BOAT ADVENTURES

also leads tours at other Galveston Bay locations, as well as Armand Bayou Coastal Preserve, Smith Point, and Cypress Swamps. Tours range in price from \$10-\$50 per person, depending on trip length and destination. Call 409/770-0722; www.artistboat.org.

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SOUVENIR

Penguin *Picassos*

AVIAN ARTISTRY AT MOODY GARDENS

text by Melissa Gaskill



A FREQUENT VISITOR TO GALVESTON, I'm used to sighting sea turtles, dolphins, wading birds, pelicans, and even penguins. Penguins? Yes, these birds from the Southern Hemisphere are part of conservation efforts at the Aquarium at Moody Gardens, which has 105 individual penguins representing six different species: King, Gentoo, Chinstrap, Northern Rockhopper, Southern Rockhopper, and Macaroni penguins.

I recently booked one of the aquarium's penguin encounters, a chance to go behind the scenes and learn more about these birds and their care here. I got even more excited when I learned that the experience includes someone winning a piece of penguin artwork.

The event starts in front of the penguin exhibit, where penguins waddle about on a faux-rock landscape behind a glass wall. On land, they're comically awkward, but zipping around underwater, they appear quite graceful. After a brief

A quick switch of colors and the penguin repeats the process, creating a multicolored pattern of chicken-like feet on the canvas.

introduction from biologist and tour guide Jessica Raeke, we follow her through double doors and down a hallway lined with placards bearing information on all 18 penguin species and a large world map showing where each lives—from the shores of far-south South America to Antarctica, the bottom of the African continent, and the southern tip of New Zealand. We stop in the kitchen, where aproned and booted workers busily measure and weigh fish for each animal in the facility, 200 pounds a day in all. (That's nearly two pounds per bird.)

Ascending a short flight of stairs, we gather around the gated doorway into the back of the penguin habitat. A small group of birds begins vocalizing when they spot us. Jessica explains that some of the birds really like the penguin encounters and will jostle each other in hopes of having a turn.

We get to meet our penguin in a small room lined with benches. Because people loom so tall relative to a knee-high penguin, we must sit before the lucky bird comes in. The room is chilly; the resident penguin species like it between 36 and 45 degrees, and the room is the latter. Blankets are provided so everyone remains comfortable.

"The birds come here because they want to," Jessica assures us. "They enjoy the painting, and it is all up to them. If the penguin isn't in the mood, there will be no artwork that day."

A Southern Rockhopper named Hendrix waddles into the room (all the rockhoppers here are, fittingly, named after rock stars). Hendrix lifts his head, shakes his feathers, and lets loose with raucous squawking. This, Jessica says, is his happy sound, and it's hard not to smile. Hendrix is nine years old and will likely live into his 30s.

Jessica spreads out a towel and he hops onto it, doing his happy dance again and waiting expectantly, nibbling at the towel. Next, Jessica spreads different colors of paint onto squares of foam, sets the squares next to the towel, and, next to them, two white canvases.

PHOTO: Courtesy Moody Gardens

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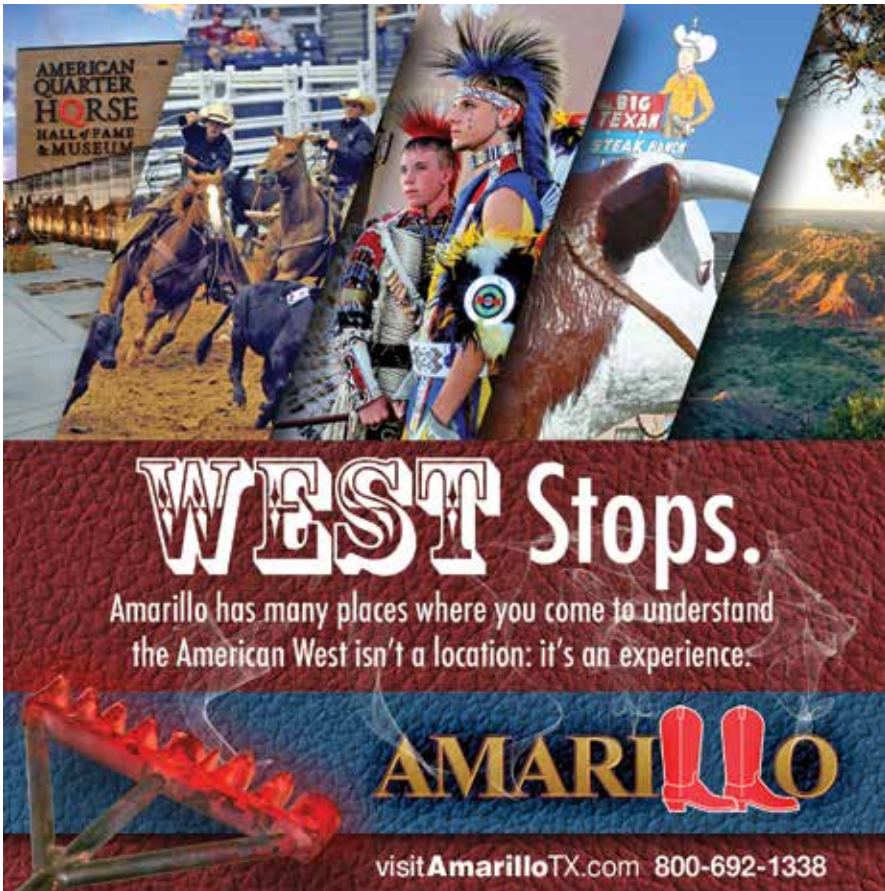
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SOUVENIR

With a little gentle encouragement, Hendrix walks onto one of the foam squares, where he pauses before walking across the two canvases, chortling as he does so. A quick switch of colors and the penguin repeats the process, creating a multicolored pattern of chicken-like feet on the canvas.

Each bird has his or her own style, Jessica says. Hendrix, for example, "paints" calmly, crossing the canvas in a straight line. His sister Marley takes a freestyle approach, quickly zigging and zagging across the canvas. The aquarium uses non-toxic, water-based paints so that no harm is done if some ends up on the bird, or if one of them decides to taste it.

At the end, the small artist walks around the room, pausing so each of us can gently pet his back. A penguin's one-inch-long feathers pack tightly to create a sort of wet suit, waterproof and airtight. We're only seeing, and feeling, the top layer. I must admit penguins are rather odd looking, especially Rockhoppers, with their wild hairdo of yellow feathers sticking out from both sides of their heads. That squawk isn't something you'd want to hear in the dark without knowing who made it, either.

We then number off, and Jessica draws a number and awards one of Hendrix's creations to the lucky winner. The other one, along with a stack of previous works of art, is for sale in the gift shop, with all the money supporting penguin enrichment, aka toys for the birds. Changing up their environment on a regular basis is a good way to stimulate and keep them happy. I buy a souvenir and support a good cause. Not bad for 10 bucks. ★



PENGUIN ENCOUNTERS

(\$50 per person) take place at 1 p.m. Private tours are also available (\$350 for four people).

For more details, and for information on general visits to Moody Gardens, call 800/582-4673; www.moodygardens.com.