

AUSTIN, TEXAS FOR PADDLERS? (Are You Kidding?)

Texas for boaters?

It has always been very gratifying for Nancy and me to visit our four kids and their families - the closer they live to the old homestead in Maine, the better. Living near water, helps: the ocean that is, like Portland, Maine on Casco Bay (Atlantic) or Bellingham, Washington, near the San Juan Islands (Pacific).

We get down to Portland quite often, but our last visit to Bellingham was 5 years ago, and the three boys have shot up like weeds in the meantime. "We've got to make the effort to see them again", Nancy reminded me. "Gladly", was my answer. I had loved paddling our son's sleek solo Hawaiian outrigger canoe on Bellingham Bay and beyond, as well as having a fast 16-knot sail on his home-built 23-foot carbon fiber sailing trimaran. But why did he have to move to Austin, Texas, which I pictured as dry as a sandbox. OK, there might be some grassland for raising longhorn cattle, but I could not picture the old salt (that's me) paddling in sun-parched Texas. It sounded like a bad joke. Images of T.S. Eliot's "Wasteland" came to mind.

Well, it was not Mark's choice either, I have to say in his defense; his move was job related. I remember writing in my article about "Paddling Pacific" in 2011: "Fortunately for me, they (our son's family) do not live just anywhere, worst of all in a big city or barren, wide open country with no water around." Bite your tongue, Dad! And I did, and then decided to make the best of the situation. (And that advice goes for all of you boaters out there: make the best of where you're at.) And when our son Mark invited and urged us to visit in Texas this spring, sounding very settled and happy to be there, we decided the time had come.

Making the best of the situation

So this is what Nancy and I came up with for our one-week Texas stint. The flight down to Austin was long, and May was already mighty hot for us

snow-birds from Maine. But my "Wasteland" image quickly changed for the better. Austin is not only the capital of Texas, and a very pretty and vivacious city with interesting architecture, and a renowned music and arts scene, but it is also green. It has lots of trees, parks and even a sizable river flowing through its center, alternately labeled as "Austin Lake", "Town Lake" and the "Colorado River" on maps. (Yes, Texas has its own Colorado River, flowing from south of Lubbock to the Gulf of Mexico.) The suburb of Pflugerville, where we were located, even had a "pfantastic, pfrivolous, pfancy, pfine" little man-made lake, Lake Pflugerville – how original! (Around Pflugerville, everything turns into a celebration of the German initial "PF" sound, literally a "p" followed by an "f", though in Texas the "p" is silent). With a smile, they talk about a beerpfest, spring-, summer-, fall- and winterpfest. Even the kids' school sports teams are the "Pflugerville Pfire Ants". On the map I even "pfound" some bigger lakes, like Lake Georgetown and Lake Travis. So you see, there was hope for my exploring, while the three kids were in school, and the parents at work.

Mark still had his sleek 21-foot solo Kaimana outrigger canoe and a second car with roof rack. Great! Even though Lake Pflugerville was small and shallow (only about 2 miles around) and did not really provide the open vistas I am used to, paddling on the ocean, it was perfectly paddle-able. Just change the direction of travel with each 30 minute loop. There were longhorns grazing in one field, but mostly groomed, expensive houses all around. At the lake marina I noticed two man-made steel "trees", each with two dozen purple martin houses attached, with happily chirping birds swirling all around them, catching bugs. I had not seen those big swallow-like birds for years. I had three outings on that lake. My last one turned quite windy when a sudden thunderstorm blew up out of nowhere.

Other lakes and local attractions

Then on my birthday, the entire family drove to a large park on Lake Georgetown, many times the size of Lake Pflugerville. There were yellowish, dry-looking sandstone hills and woods all around, no house anywhere – very remote, and oh so different from our New England lakes. The park also sported a sizable sand beach for swimming for the three boys, which they did for almost 2 hours, till I returned from my outrigger paddle. At that point, a thunderstorm had blown up, again, out of nowhere,

which I understand happens quite often in this part of the country. I had to hustle home, but could not avoid being hit by the front coming through, with imminent thunder and lightning, but with plenty of large, yet warm raindrops. Everything is BIGGER in Texas. But you already know that.

Lake Travis lies in the so-called Hill Country of Texas, WNW of Austin. Spring rains had nicely filled this very large lake. It is man-made also, dam-controlled, a rain catch-basin, like almost every lake in Texas. In this case the Colorado River flows through it also, adding some extra water. Dinner out in the fancy "Oasis" restaurant, a spectacular setting high above the lake, took precedence over my paddling time. But it was worth it, for the scrumptious Texas ribs. I had to be content taking a "virtual paddle" around this very pretty, steep-sided lake.

Another day, sun-down was planned for bat-watching at the Congress Ave. bridge over Town Lake in Austin. We had read that under this bridge, over a million small Mexican free-tailed bats hang out during the day, only to shoot out from under the rafters at dusk like shotgun pellets. People also come by the hundreds/thousands to witness this spectacle of nature, crowding along the riverbanks, or even looking up at the wild mayhem from below, from river tour boats and kayaks. (I would suggest wearing eye protection for this.) It is a real event, every evening, from spring to fall. It was on the top of Nancy's wish-list of what to do in Austin. Her other top request was seeing a field of bluebonnets (wildflowers), but they were already too far gone - sorry my dear!

"Pfam'ly pfun and good pfood in Pflugerville"

"Meanwhile back at the ranch/home", Mark showed us his new carbon fiber trimaran sailboat he is building, a smaller version of the bigger 23-foot Osprey that he sailed in the Bellingham, Washington area. (See my 2013 article "You Lose Some, Only to Win Some" about our race together off Vancouver Island, Canada.) I was fascinated with the design and can't wait to test sail it on Lake Travis. It should fly!

On several evenings the three boys, now already 11, 9 and almost 5 years old, clicked onto my website (www.zollitschcanoeadventures.com) and wanted to hear all about my trips, especially those in the Everglades with gators, crocs and hammerhead sharks. They were impressed and decided to come along on my next "expotition/expedition" in the Glades. A very

gratifying moment for a Grandpa.

Another bonding moment between the youngest almost 5-year old (whom I had only seen as a baby) and Grandpa (me) happened when we were left home alone one morning. So how do you bridge the 72 year age difference and keep the young one from hiding in his room watching videos? We needed action, projects with visible results, and there were plenty of opportunities in the house, with three boisterous boys, two dogs, and two over-worked, tired parents.

We found the tool chest in the garage and geared up like professionals. Since I am good at fixing things, we first put 3 doors back on their hinges. Swinging on them did not become them. The kitchen cabinet door was drooping, snapped in half. This needed Elmer's glue and Dad's boat straps. The next "patient" was the the long dining table. It shimmied madly and quivered like aspen leaves – all screws and bolts holding together table top, apron and legs were about to fall out. We needed to play car mechanic, lying on two exercise pads underneath it and screwing and ratcheting everything tight. The youngster started each job, while Grandpa gave it the last spin. That done, we tackled the six dining chairs, a forest of legs, 24 to be exact. We shook hands on a job well done and beamed from ear to ear, just as the rest of the family appeared at the front door. What's next?

A family trip to German Country around the Fredericksburg area. That sounded great, only I had succumbed to a bad cold and opted to stay home with the dogs – I felt like one also. The constant air conditioning and ceiling fans had done me in, and probably some local germs too, who knows. I felt really wiped out. But Nancy tells me I would have liked seeing the German "Fachwerk" architecture, tasting the baked yeast goods and sampling some real German "Bier". (No Bud Lite please!). They even climbed magnificent Enchanted Rock in the Hill Country. I admit, I missed that. But what can you do - we'll have to do it next time!

So as you can see, fun was had by all. I even tasted some of the finest smoked/barbecued ribs with a local Shiner Bock beer, both well-known nation-wide. On my birthday, Mark grilled some hefty Texas-sized steaks for our dinner, while Nancy made my favorite chocolate-rum-pineapple layer cake, with lots of help from the three boys.

Parting was "such sweet sorrow", and believe me, I came away with a totally new picture of Texas - Austin, Texas that is. I cannot speak for the rest of it. As you know, Texas is just TOO BIG to do justice to all facets of this BIG Lone Star State. But getting to paddle a sleek solo Hawaiian outrigger canoe four times in one week, "deep in the heart of Texas", is not too shabby, wouldn't you say? Not to mention the quality visiting time with the family, and all the great food. Thanks for inviting us, Mark and Amber! But please, son, do not move your family to the Sahara or Gobi desert next...

With lots of love,
Reinhard/Dad/Grandpa

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PS: As a going-away present, we grandparents promised to give each of the older boys his first boat to paddle, as we had done for Mark when he was little. After careful selection, Mark chose two 13-foot Australian-built entry-level surf-skis (ocean-style kayaks), with light carbon fiber wing paddles. If that is not cool, I don't know what is. The youngest will have to wait a while and may get the boat from the oldest brother when he moves up into a different boat.
