

1258

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



Padre Island National Seashore Traveling Down Island



NPS PHOTO

Sunrise over the Gulf of Mexico

Padre Island National Seashore has 65.5 miles of Gulf beach. Of this, 4.5 miles (Malaquite Beach) are closed to vehicles, 6 miles (North and South Beaches) are open to both two-wheel and four-wheel-drive vehicles, and the remaining 55 miles (Big Shell and Little Shell Beaches) are open only to four-wheel drive vehicles. The four-wheel drive area begins at the end of South Beach near the 5-mile marker and its start is marked by a large sign stating:

WARNING!
4 Wheel Drive Vehicles Only
Soft sand and large debris ahead.
No driving in dunes,
grasslands or mudflats.

Although north of the 4-wheel drive area beach conditions usually change little, in the 4-wheel drive area the beach can change dramatically from day to day depending upon variables such as tides, currents, wind, and weather.

Normally, the beach from the 5-mile marker south for the next one or two miles is fairly firm. However, patches of soft sand can

develop at irregular intervals and times making what was solid one day, soft and deep the next. From about the 7-mile marker the sand becomes continually softer and deeper reaching its deepest at Big Shell beach in the area from about the 18 mile marker to the 38 mile marker. Here the sand is several inches deep and extends from the dunes to the water's edge when the tides are high. Normally at low tide, a strip of hard packed sand is exposed that is wide enough for vehicles. The striking of the surf against the soft sand creates a berm of around a foot in height and forces drivers to choose whether to drive above it in the soft sand or below it on the hard packed sand. Switching between the two may be tricky. From approximately the 40-mile marker south, the beach begins to harden and is similar to South Beach by the time one reaches the 45- or 50-mile marker.

Unfortunately, an additional hazard to travelers is posed by the massive amount of trash

and natural debris that washes ashore. This can vary from glass bottles to boards with nails to televisions to abandoned boats to large trees. Furthermore, the debris is sometimes covered with sand or sargassum making it difficult to see, especially at twilight or night. Sometimes sand will blow against one side of a tree trunk making it appear as if it were only an inch or two high, while on the other side the top of the trunk is five or six inches above the sand, making an unexpectedly violent speed bump.

As stated, the above conditions are normal for the beach. Sometimes storms, even ones far out in the Gulf, will raise tides higher than normal. If there is a danger of travelers being cut off down island by rising tides, the park will send a ranger to warn everyone to evacuate. The good side of this is that after the tides have receded, the sand may be hard-packed in normally soft areas for a long time making driving down island as easy as driving through a parking lot.

Driving conditions may be changed radically for better or worse by a hurricane. The hurricane may bring lots of trash ashore to hamper driving. However, the high tides will pack the sand over much of the beach to an asphalt-like firmness.

Hurricanes will also cut washover channels in less than 48 hours. Washover channels are like small rivers that cut completely across the island and often join together to form deltas. On the Gulf side, the channels may be over a hundred feet wide and three or more feet deep. These will, of course, cut off all access to lower portions of the island by vehicles. Sometimes drivers try to circumvent the channels cutting through the beach by driving through the shallower portions of the channels in the grasslands. They then discover that the sand in the shallower portions is generally unstable and has developed into spots of quicksand, in which vehicles become stuck or even buried. ***Please note that driving in the dunes or grasslands is illegal, even if driving along or through a washover channel, and violators may be fined heavily and assessed the costs of repairing the damage caused by off-road driving, which could total \$10,000 or more.***

Everyone traveling down island should remember above all else that they will be in an isolated area many miles from the nearest facilities and possibly from the nearest person. Everyone should be well prepared for any emergency and take the necessary precautions to have a safe and enjoyable trip.

First, take plenty of drinking water. The intense summer heat and sun can cause rapid dehydration. However, please note that dehydration can also occur in winter during cold weather. If your vehicle should break down or become stuck you may need the water to wait until help arrives.

Second, take plenty of extra gasoline, especially if this is your first trip down island. Driving in deep sand burns up fuel at a much faster rate (perhaps two or three times faster) than on a highway.

Third, take tools to dig yourself out if you become stuck. These should include a shovel with a long handle (for reaching far under your vehicle), a car jack, a tow rope or chain, and a few wooden planks or carpet. A bucket comes in handy for carrying seawater to wet the sand around sunken tires to provide traction.

Next, consider taking a cellular telephone in case of emergency. Be aware, however, that cellular coverage over the island is spotty at best and may vary depending upon

your brand of cell phone, service provider, terrain, weather, or other factors. To enhance your cell phone's capability, use it on top of the tallest nearby dune. Also be aware that the National Park Service does not monitor CB radios and they may be of little use.

Finally, stop by or call the visitor center before your trip to check on weather, tides, beach conditions, and so forth. The telephone number is (361) 949-8068. A recording of weather and beach conditions is available 24 hours at (361) 949-8175. Local and marine forecasts for the next 2-7 days are available from the National Weather Service at (361) 289-1861.

In any case, do not plan on waiting until a ranger arrives if you find yourself in trouble. Patrols down island may be irregular and you may have to wait a long time. It is definitely best to plan on avoiding trouble altogether and, failing that, have the means to extricate yourself. This will also help you avoid unnecessary expense. ***The National Park Service does not tow vehicles and the cost for a private wrecker to come down island may cost from several hundred to over a thousand dollars.***

Although the hazards to be encountered down island may sound intimidating, there are some simple driving guidelines that will help avoid most trouble.

1. ***Remember that on the National Seashore northbound vehicles have the right of way.***
2. ***Travel in the tracks of those that have gone before you.*** This will not only help avoid areas of very deep sand, but also most debris.
3. ***Keep moving in deep sand.*** It may be difficult to pull out if you stop.
4. Although it may be easier to drive on the hard sand at the water's edge, ***bear in mind that in some areas a steep shell embankment may exist, which may make leaving the hard sand difficult.*** If water is seen puddling in your tracks, do not stop. Move to drier ground.
5. ***Do not attempt to drive off the beach and into areas of vegetation.*** In addition to being prohibited, it is also unwise, because the grass often conceals large areas of standing water and very soft mud.
6. ***Stay within the posted speed limits.*** In addition to being the safest way to drive, this is the most comfortable. Often the beach has a washboard texture, which makes driving over it at high speed like hitting a series of speed bumps. In addition, this will lessen damage to your vehicle should you encounter any unseen debris.
7. ***If you do get stuck, use your shovel to dig yourself out or place your planks or carpet in front of or in back of your tires and try to drive out.*** Use buckets of seawater to wet the sand for more traction.
8. ***Watch for pedestrians, especially near tents and parked vehicles and especially at night.*** Watch for small children near the surf, where they cannot hear approaching vehicles.
9. ***During the sea turtle nesting season of April to August, be alert for nesting sea turtles crawling across the beach--both during the day and at night.*** Do not disturb any you see and direct passing motorists around the

nesting turtle or emerging hatchlings. Mark the location and immediately report the sighting to the nearest ranger as soon as possible. If no rangers are nearby, call the park sea turtle biologist at (361) 949-8173, extension 226.

Remember that in Texas all beaches are public highways and all traffic laws apply, including seat belt regulations. All vehicles traveling on Padre Island National Seashore must be street legal and licensed. Please note that, with rare exception, Texas will not license all-terrain-vehicles (ATVs) for use on highways (the National Seashore has one of the few exceptions, because it uses ATVs in its program to save endangered sea turtles from extinction).

For more information call the Malaquite Visitor Center at (361) 949-8068. The Malaquite Visitor Center is open seven days per week, 364 days per year (closed only on Christmas), from 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. between Labor Day and Memorial Day, and from 8:30 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. from Memorial Day to Labor Day.

**Did You Know?**

The Laguna Madre is one of only six lagoons in the world termed "hypersaline" (i.e. saltier than the ocean)?

more...

Last Updated: August 02, 2007 at 11:46 EST