

# Dive In!

## THE SWEET SIDE OF TEXAS SUMMERS? SWIMMING-HOLE SATISFACTION

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**G**linting pools of blue-green water. Rugged limestone bluffs, fuzzy with moss. A rope swing, knotted for better grip, looped over the branch of a towering tree.

In Texas, we love our swimming holes as much as we love barbecue and country music.

We've got plenty of them worth bragging about, too. From east to west and north to south, shimmering natural ponds and river respites abound, beckoning us to kick off our sandals and take a flying leap.

Our advice? Give in to the temptation. To help you plot your adventure, we've rounded up a few of our favorites.

But nature has a way of taking away what she gives, and swimming holes are fickle things. What you see today could shrink like a grape into a raisin in a few short weeks. If you're itching to dangle your toes in some glorious, nature-made aquariums, do it while you can.

Just remember to take some precautions.

Lifeguards aren't on duty in many of these spots. Make sure you know how to swim, and don't dive into shallow water or anywhere you can't see the bottom. Never swim alone. Wear appropriate footwear—many of our picks require short but sometimes tricky hikes.

And while some of these places close just after a heavy rain because of flooding or runoff pollution, recent rainy seasons have also recharged many Texas swimming holes with cool, refreshing water.



**DAINGERFIELD STATE PARK**  
Daingerfield

The perfect place to perfect a cannonball? It's hard to argue against the wooden swim platform 30 yards offshore from the pine-rimmed lake at Daingerfield State Park.

The woody, 506-acre park in far northeast Texas opened in 1938. The Civilian Conservation Corps built an earthen dam in the Cypress Creek drainage to create the lake, then added a combination bathhouse and concession building, a boathouse, and a small fishing lodge. Three smaller cabins were added later, and they're available for rental.

In the 1940s and '50s, teenagers flocked here to swim in the lake and dance to music from a jukebox on hot summer nights. Pine trees tower high over the campsites, swaying in the wind and dropping cones and needles that create a springy carpet.

But the lake remains the focus. On warm days, kids drape themselves over the floating deck like turtles on a log. Visitors can rent canoes, kayaks, or paddleboats from the old boathouse, or buy a candy bar or rent horseshoes from the park store.

Also popular is fishing for chain pickerel, largemouth bass, catfish, brim, and crappie. Motorboats are permitted, but they can only putter; no wakes are allowed.

Daingerfield State Park is at 455 Park Rd. 17, two miles east of Daingerfield. Call 903/645-2921; [www.tpwd.state.tx.us/state-parks/daingerfield](http://www.tpwd.state.tx.us/state-parks/daingerfield).

**FORT CLARK SPRINGS**  
Brackettville



A sign greets visitors as they cross a stream of water on their way to the shimmering pool tucked amid shady live oak, pecan, cypress, and mulberry trees at Fort Clark Springs: "When you cross Las Moras Creek, your sins are washed away."

In case that doesn't work out, count on a dip in the expansive pool for an equally cleansing experience. Fort Clark bills the 1-million gallon, can't-believe-it's-in-the-middle-of-the-southwest-Texas-scrubland oasis as the third-largest spring-fed swimming pool in the state. It has a cement bottom, plus a bathhouse for changing and benches and picnic tables for lingering.

Some contend the water temperature stays a constant 68 degrees year-round, but it often feels a few degrees warmer, which makes it perfect for lollygagging, and there's ample room for logging long, leisurely laps.

It's got history, too. George S. Patton Jr. probably once swished his toes in these waters. Long before he became a general, he served briefly as regimental commander of the Fifth Cavalry at this old frontier fort, which dates to the 1850s.

The homeowners association that manages Fort Clark recently discontinued day passes for the swimming pool, but visitors who stay in the fort's RV park or the old cavalry barracks, now converted to a motel, are allowed pool access.

Fort Clark Springs is on US 90 in Brackettville. Call 830/563-2493; [www.fortclark.com](http://www.fortclark.com).

**SAN FELIPE SPRINGS**  
Del Rio

Ten separate springs percolate along San Felipe Creek, just upstream from its confluence with the Rio Grande in Del Rio. The clear water that gurgles forth supplies the city of Del Rio and nearby Laughlin Air Force Base—and feeds a more-than-a-mile-long strip of urban parkland with pools and streams perfect for escaping the South Texas heat.

Stone walking bridges crisscross the creek's three tributaries, which twist like braids but

ultimately merge into one main flow, bordered by a paved hike-and-bike trail that leads from Horseshoe Park to Lions Park. Perch on rocks scattered in the main fork in the shadow of an old metal railroad bridge, or climb on an inner tube (bring your own) for a lazy, water-fueled ride downstream. Locals call another section that's popular with children the Pig Pen. Those who like their swimming a little less wild can drop by the spring-fed, cement-bottom Moore Park Pool (\$1.50 for entry).

Access Horseshoe Park from US 90 in east Del Rio. The springs are free and open to the public. Call 830/774-8541; [www.cityofdelrio.com/parks](http://www.cityofdelrio.com/parks).



INDEPENDENCE  
CREEK  
PRESERVE  
Sheffield

The water sparkles so clearly in this magical desert swimming hole you could be in the Bahamas.

But you won't find crowds of sunbathers or swaying palms here. Instead you'll see deep-cut canyons and scrub-covered mesas, and just out of eyesight lies a prairie-dog village with fat little pups that pop up their heads and chirp an alert when anyone strolls past.

It's all part of a 20,000-acre chunk of West Texas purchased by the Nature Conservancy for water quality protection and habitat conservation. The land lies in the transition zone between the Edwards Plateau and the Chihuahuan Desert, near the town of Sheffield.

Caroline Spring, located at the preserve's headquarters, produces 3,000 to 5,000 gallons of water per minute. That water, held in check by a small dam, forms two lakes—a three-acre pool with a stone retaining wall along one side and a more natural 11-acre one. You'll have to fight the ducks for space on the wooden dock on the larger lake, which provides the perfect place to stage a diving competition.

Water that passes through the lakes washes into Independence Creek, which flows into the Pecos River less than a mile downstream.

The preserve opens only during occasional public weekends, held a few times per year. The next is set for September 10. On those days, there's no charge to camp, fish, hike, or swim. Call 432/345-6773; [www.nature.org/texas](http://www.nature.org/texas).



A small dam 11 miles downstream from the headwaters of the Sabinal River creates a wide, tempting swim spot in the aptly named Hill Country town of Utopia.

Arrive early to nab a picnic table nestled in the thick oaks next to the parking area. Then scramble down the riverside slope, where a row of towering old cypress trees lines the banks.

Brave souls climb a makeshift ladder nailed to the tallest one and plunge into the cool waters far below. Less daring visitors float like otters in the tranquil, emerald-green bliss. When they need a break from swimming, they can wander over to

the bird blind at the end of the park's circle drive.

The main draw? Besides enough trees to please a county's worth of woodpeckers, it's all about that broad, glistening expanse of water. It's not just for dipping toes—swim-a-holics can get in a real workout stroking up and down the length of the pool.

Public restrooms are available, and tent camping and fishing are allowed. Rustic screened shelters are available for rental.

Utopia Park is at 241 Utopia Park Rd. Admission is \$5 per day per car (free to area residents). Call 830/966-3643; [www.utopiapark.org](http://www.utopiapark.org).

UTOPIA  
PARK  
Utopia





## TONKAWA FALLS

Crawford

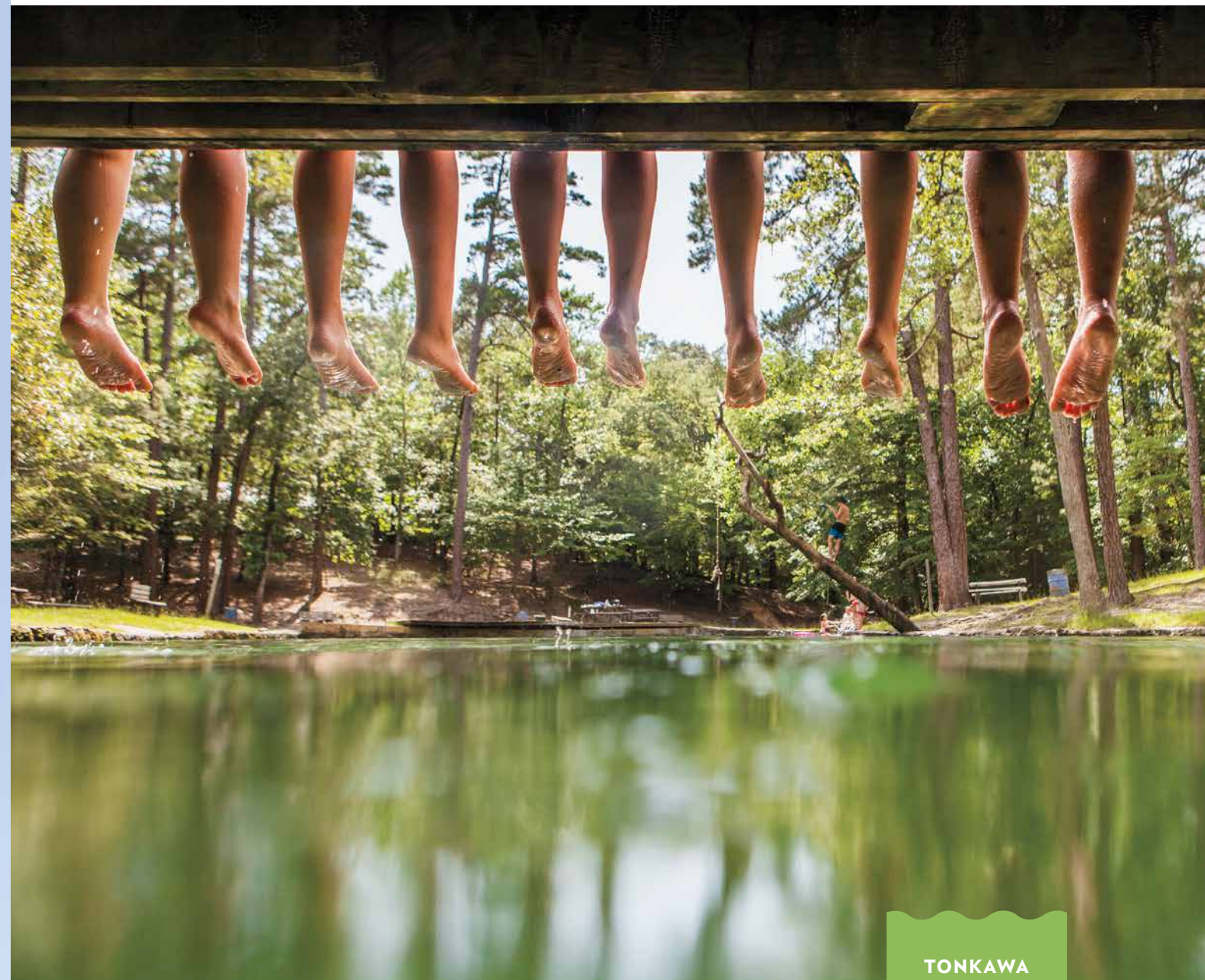
A half-mile east of the tiny town of Crawford, a two-lane bridge crosses Tonk Creek. From there, you can just glimpse Tonk Park, the lush city park below, where water spills over a 15-foot limestone embankment and forms a pool perfect for frolicking.

Above the falls, hikers hop rock to rock or wade in ankle-deep water. On the other side of the road, they gather in an old rock clubhouse or meander down stone steps constructed by the Works Progress Administration in 1934. There, a rock overhang provides a cool respite from the sun.

Some bathers spread towels on the grassy expanse next to the water, where they can watch daring teenagers jump from the surrounding bluffs. Others drift further downstream.

Tonkawa Indians once inhabited the area, and excavations have turned up hundreds of artifacts. In dry years, the swimming hole evaporates by late summer. When the water vanishes, petroglyphs carved into the rock bed of the creek appear.

Tonkawa Falls is at 8540 E. Fifth St. in Crawford. Admission is free. Call Crawford City Hall, 254/486-2125.



## TONKAWA SPRINGS

Garrison



This idyllic spring-fed pond, nestled within the East Texas Piney Woods, draws visitors who can't resist the lure of ice-cold water, a white sandy bottom, and a good rope swing.

That swing, by the way? Notches in a tree that slants over the water serve as steps, making it easy to grab the rope and launch into water that hovers around 68 degrees. From there, you may as well kick back a while and contemplate this place's colorful history.

In the early 1900s, the springs turned a wheel that operated a gristmill here. The Civilian Conservation Corps built stone retaining walls around the spring in the 1930s, which was when the Boy Scouts began leasing the property. Troops flocked to the site for campouts until the 1960s. When they left, organized fox hunts took place at the site. Then, in the 1980s, the Ozarka Water Company pumped water from the springs.

The spring's owners opened the pool as a park in 2001, complete with a campground and RV hookups, and a new generation is lazing away summer days playing Marco Polo in its waters.

Camp Tonkawa Springs is at 4675 County Rd. 153 in Garrison. Entry costs \$10 per person age six and older; \$5 on Wednesdays, family day. Call 936/564-8888; [www.camptonkawa.com](http://www.camptonkawa.com).



**SAN SOLOMON SPRINGS**  
Balmorhea State Park

Edging your way along the high dive above San Solomon Springs at Balmorhea State Park, you'll feel like a pirate walking a plank. Fear not, though, the crisp waters of San Solomon Springs provide the perfect landing spot.

Gliding across this huge V-shaped pool with a natural bottom is like swimming in a giant aquarium. Ducks bob on the surface, then plunge like submarines into waters that are home to two thumb-sized species of endangered fish—the Comanche Springs pupfish and the Pecos Gambusia. Look closely and you'll also see catfish swirling 20 feet below.

The site has long attracted people. American Indians, Spanish explorers, and U.S. soldiers watered up here well before the Civilian Conservation Corps turned a desert wetland into a swimming pool in the 1930s. Private concessionaires operated the park until the 1960s, when the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department took over. On hot summer weekends, the park fills to capacity by noon and cars are turned away.

The springs that form the pool pump out about 15.5 million gallons of water a day; the spring water is diverted by three-foot canals to Balmorhea Lake, two miles away, and used to irrigate alfalfa and watermelon fields.

Visitors can stay in the adjacent, 18-unit San Solomon Springs Courts motel, also built by the CCC, or pitch a tent in the nearby campground (RV hookups available).

Balmorhea State Park is at 9207 Texas 17 in Toyahvale. Admission costs \$7 for visitors age 13 and older. Call 432/375-2370; [www.tpwd.texas.gov/state-parks/balmorhea](http://www.tpwd.texas.gov/state-parks/balmorhea). ★



**JACOB'S WELL**

Wimberley

With its vibrant, deep-blue hue and circular shape, the namesake artesian well at this popular Wimberley swimming hole looks a little like the Texas version of one of Yellowstone National Park's colorful thermal pools.

It's pure Texas, though.

The spring feeds Cypress Creek and the Blanco River, and the goosebump-inducing, clear-as-glass water draws big crowds on warm summer days.

Some sunbathe on limestone cliffs that surround the swimming hole. Though it's against park rules, the bravest fling themselves off those rocks toward the cave opening, a 12-foot gap so deep and dark you can't see the bottom. The rest sit in a foot of water around the perimeter or try to see how far into the abyss they can swim.

Jacob's Well is part of one of the deepest underwater cave systems in Texas. The main shaft plunges down 137 feet, with branches that twist off in every direction. (Scuba diving is prohibited in Jacob's Well. At least eight people died while trying to explore the underground network before Hays County took over the property in 2010, tearing down condominiums and the remains of an old RV park that once stood a stone's throw from the creek.)

Jacob's Well Natural Area is at 1699 Mount Sharp Rd. in Wimberley. To control crowds, the county requires online reservations, available at [jwna.checkfront.com/reserve](http://jwna.checkfront.com/reserve). Entry costs \$9 for adults and \$5 for Hays County residents, children, seniors, and military. Call 512/214-4593; [www.co.hays.tx.us/jwna.aspx](http://www.co.hays.tx.us/jwna.aspx).

*Pam LeBlanc writes about adventure travel and fitness for the Austin American-Statesman. She swims laps in a pool almost every day, but prefers rope swings and limestone bluffs. Austin photographer Kenny Braun drove 2,000 miles in two weeks to shoot pictures for this story.*

**Web Extra**

Explore more beautiful Texas swimming holes, including Austin's Barton Creek and Lampasas' Hancock Springs, at [texashighways.com/webextra](http://texashighways.com/webextra).