

Piney Woods High & Low, See & Do

Story and photographs by Randy Mallory

Caddo Lake

Certain About Uncertain

Twilight fades to night on the lane winding through Caddo Lake State Park. Tall pines seem to close around me the way water lilies close up at day's end. By the time I reach the park's cabins, only the glow of walkway lights illuminates my deepwoods hideaway, a cozy red-rock cottage built in the 1930s.

Early next morning—after a sleep lulled by serenading whippoorwills—I remember why waking up at Caddo Lake is magical. A symphony of bird songs echoes along the glistening water's edge, where baldcypress trees wear cloaks of Spanish moss and blue herons fly low to the water. Dawn's angular rays hit mist dancing on the water. A splash breaks the stillness as a fish gobbles a hovering insect. The plunk of an angler's hook and bobber marks the same spot—the act of a piscine breakfast followed by the hope of a fried fish lunch.

Wake up to the magic of Caddo Lake at the end of the road in Uncertain, a low-budget, low-key getaway on Texas' most famous natural lake.

One thing's certain at Uncertain—water is topic number one.

Just eavesdrop at Crip's Camp, a 1940s waterfront fishing camp, where locals and visitors hover over plates of eggs, sausage, biscuits, and mayhaw jelly. Chit-chat discusses the day ahead on the lake's marked and unmarked "boat roads," bayous, and sloughs.

Boy, that rain sure brought up lake levels! What's biting at Alligator Bayou and Stumpy Slough? Are they done with dredging at Starr Ditch?

Similar talk unfolds at Shady Glade Resort, a motel, marina, and cafe where waitresses call you “Baby” or “Honey,” and anglers launch in search of crappie, bream, bass, and catfish.

I launch from Taylor Island with fishing, hunting, and tour guide Billy Carter in his low-draft “Go-Devil” boat. “This goes anywhere a canoe can...just faster,” Billy brags as we zip along a passage through a sea of American lotus. We veer into a more open area called Turtle Shell that’s blanketed with lily pads and dotted with five story-tall baldcypress. Billy shuts off the motor, and we revel in the quiet of the primeval place.

Kerr-plop! A gigantic frog leaps from a lily pad into the water. “I’ll catch *him* tonight,” Billy says. “I’ve got Caddo first-timers on my full moon tour. They’ll get a kick out of that!”

We hear the steady chug-chug of a wood-fired steamboat, a rare sound most places but common at Caddo. From behind a cypress grove appears the *Graceful Ghost*, a replica 1890’s paddle-wheeled riverboat. Captain Lexie McMillen, who once piloted famous Mississippi riverboats, blows the horn and plumes of white steam billow into the sky. As the steamboat passes, we overhear Lexie’s husband and fellow pilot, Jim, tell the tour group that a logjam on the Red River formed Caddo Lake by backing water into this lowland of the Cypress Bayou watershed. (A modern dam maintains the 30,000-acre lake, half in Texas and half in Louisiana.) He adds that steamboats hauled cotton and goods through Caddo Lake during most of the 19th century.

Caddo Lake is best enjoyed by boat, but Uncertain’s many waterfront venues make a fine second best. Most of the two dozen or so bed and breakfasts are on the water. So is Johnson’s Ranch, a 1920s fishing camp, marina, and lodging where Henry Lewis, a guide for 60 years, regales visitors with stories of big catches and Caddo’s booze-running Prohibition days. Another great option is on Big Cypress Bayou, an eatery called Big Pines Lodge, where patrons drive up or boat up for cold beer, hot catfish, and jalapeño hushpuppies.

At another waterside hangout, Caddo Grocery, I down a spicy barbecue sandwich and hear from proprietress Betty Holder about the new 8,400-acre Caddo Lake National Wildlife Refuge.

Refuge manager Mark Williams later tells me the refuge should offer limited public access by October 2006. “We’ll manage the refuge to encourage migratory neotropical birds, so this will be a great birdwatching site,” he says. “Some day, this place will look like it did during the Texas Republic.”

DURING the Texas Republic, the riverboat town of Port Caddo served briefly an official port of entry. Nothing remains of the ghost town, now located inside Caddo Lake State Park. But park concessionaires Cindy and Robert Speight honor history by calling their boat service Old Port Caddo Rentals and Tours, poised beside Mill Pond.

Cindy and I watch canoeists meander across the historic sawmill pond and agree that few of life’s pleasures rival a lazy float on Caddo Lake.

Kiepersol Estates

Wine and Dine in the Pines

In 1984 Pierre de Wet immigrated from South Africa to the U.S. with two small daughters in tow. Immigration meant looking forward not backward, he recalls. Leaving his Old World heritage proved a daunting experience, but it left him determined to create a new American heritage for himself and his children.

Pierre grew up on his family’s South African tropical fruit farm, a place called Kiepersol. After moving to East Texas to work in the Tyler-area rose industry, he bought 1,000 rolling acres south of Tyler to create his New World heritage—Kiepersol Estates. The pastoral estate

features a vineyard and winery, upscale restaurant, bed and breakfast lodging, plus cattle ranching and a residential development.

Seven years ago, Pierre used his farming expertise (he oversees large nut and grape farms on the West Coast and orange operations in Florida) to start a vineyard at Kiepersol.

“I wanted my daughters to decide their own future,” Pierre recalls. One daughter, Marnelle Durrett, chose grapes, apprenticing at Trefethen Vineyards in Napa, California, before becoming Kiepersol’s winemaker. His other daughter, Velmay de Wet, manages Kiepersol’s herd of Polled Hereford and Black Angus breeding cattle.

The estate’s 33-acre vineyard grows mostly red varieties—including Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, and Syrah—but also two whites, Semillon and Muscat de Alexandria (only Semillon is currently bottled). After the August harvest, some 8,000 gallons of grape juice go to the winery’s 18 stainless steel fermentation, filtering, and blending tanks. Then it’s into some 400 French and American oak barrels for aging. Current production stands at 3,000 cases per year.

Retailers across the eastern half of Texas and northwestern Louisiana carry the Kiepersol label. But it’s most fun to sample the label at the winery’s stylish tasting room. An added attraction—a guided tour of the vineyard, winery, and estate—promises pastoral views from the blue velvet seat of a white vis-à-vis carriage pulled by two behemoth Clydesdales.

Sips of several red wines in the tasting room and a tour of the winery convince me of Marnelle’s viticultural moxie. “Half of the love of wine is the total experience,” she explains as we step onto a covered deck overlooking the vineyards. “What you’re eating while drinking wine and who you’re with determines your enjoyment, as well as the setting. We create a serene setting for enjoying food and wine with family and friends.”

No surprise that Kiepersol focuses on red varietals, because the restaurant focuses on beef, a fine companion of red wine. “A top-notch steak makes your soul feel well,” says Pierre, who oversees the restaurant, “and if your soul feels well, then that’s healthy food.”

My wife, Sallie, and I sample Kiepersol’s soul food from a window table at the restaurant overlooking woods and a small lake. Across the elegant dining room rises a 15-foot-high glass wall showcasing 200 or more wine selections from around the world.

With glasses of Syrah and Chardonnay securely in hand, we begin with an appetizer of prosciutto and grated parmesan rolled in a thin puff pastry. After a classic Caesar salad (me) and a warm spinach salad (her), we proceed to entrees and more wine. The pistachio-crust sea bass and grilled duck and quail with peppercorn sauce sound intriguing. But I remember Pierre’s words, so we go for the beef. Sallie picks a fork-tender filet of mignon, and I select a fine rib-eye. We finish up sharing a scrumptious slice of chocolate cake with brandy caramel sauce.

Feeling aglow with fine food and wine, we wish we were staying the night at one of Kiepersol’s five Victorian-decor suites located next to the restaurant...especially when we see that two suites have their own hot tub and private screened porch.

DURING the Boer War of 1900, so the story goes, a lion once chased some British soldiers into a huge tree as they shouted, “We hope the tree will keep us all.” Dutch-descendent Boers watching the scene thought they said “Kiepersol,” so that’s what they called the tree that saved them.

For Pierre de Wet and daughters, Kiepersol Estates has become the safe haven of their developing New World heritage. And for guests, Pierre hopes, “this will be a place of Old World charm that everyone can be proud of.”

essentials **Piney Woods High & Low****CADDO LAKE**

Uncertain and Caddo Lake are on FM 2198, six miles east of TX 43 near Karnack. Typical fees for fishing guide services are \$200-\$250 for two persons for eight hours.

Caddo Lake State Park offers cabins (\$75-\$95 per night), campsites (\$8-\$20 per night), group recreation hall (\$150 per day), boat launch (free), picnicking, interpretive exhibits, playground, and hiking. Entrance is \$2 for adults, \$1 for 65 and older, free for 12 and under. Call 903/679-3351 for park information or 512/389-8900 for reservations (www.tpwd.state.tx.us). In the park

Old Port Caddo Rentals and Tours offers canoes (\$30 per day) and guided lake tours (\$15 for adults, \$12 for seniors and students, \$8 for five and older, free under five); 903/679-3073 or 903/930-0075 (www.oldportcaddo.com).

Crip's Camp has cabins (\$44-\$77 per night), boat and motor (\$65 per day), canoes (\$20 per day), breakfast (\$4.75), and guide service; 903-789-3233 (www.cripscamp.com).

Caddo Grocery has groceries, barbecue sandwiches (\$3.50) and lake tours (\$20 for adults, \$10 for 12 and under); 903/789-3495.

Billy Carter's Caddo Guide Service offers lake tours (\$20 per person daytime and \$25 night; half-price for under 12) and guide service; 903/789-3268 (www.caddoguideservice.com).

Johnson's Ranch offers covered shore fishing (\$1 per person), boat launch (\$4), cabins (\$45-\$100 per night), canoes (\$20 per day), boat and motor (\$35-\$50 per day), and guide service; 903/789-3213 (www.johnsonsranch.com).

Shady Glade Resort offers breakfast (\$5-\$7) and lunch (\$5-\$7), lodging (\$55-\$90 per night), boat launch (\$2), and guide service; 877 GO CADDO or 903/789-3295 (www.shadygladeresort.com).

Caddo Lake Steamboat Company offers steamboat tours, March to November (weekends for \$16 adults, \$13 seniors and students, \$8 children, with reduced weekday rates), 888/325-5459 or 903/789-3978 (www.caddolake.com/steamboat).

Big Pines Lodge (747 Pine Island Rd., 903/679-3466) offers catfish and fixings (\$10-\$12) on Big Cypress Bayou.

For more Caddo Lake attractions, lodging, and eateries, contact the **Caddo Lake Area Chamber of Commerce & Tourism**, 866 AT CADDO or 903/679-3500 (www.caddolake.org).

KIEPERSOL ESTATES

Kiepersol Estates is 11 miles south of Tyler. Take US 69 south to FM 344 and go east two miles. Kiepersol offers a winery and tasting room (\$10.50-\$35 per bottle), restaurant (lunch \$8-10 per person; dinner average \$40 per person, plus drinks), and bed & breakfast (\$130-\$185 weekdays, \$145-\$200 weekends). Also available are reservation-only winery tours (free for under 10 people, \$5 each for 10 or more), estate tour by horse-drawn carriage (\$60) or estate van tour (\$8 per person, \$32 minimum). Half-day culinary workshops are \$75 per person. Monthly Vintner's Dinners feature a four-course meal with wine (\$90 per person). For restaurant, workshops, vintner's dinner, and B&B, call 903/894-3300. For winery and tours call 903/894-8995 (www.kiepersol.com). In mid-August (call for exact date) Kiepersol hosts its annual **Harvest Grape Stomp**, with free music, grape stomping, and wine tastings.

RESOURCES

- Venues listed in Essentials
- Handbook of Texas online for historical info
- Mark Williams, USFWS, Caddo Lake Wildlife Refuge
- Marnelle Durrett, Kiepersol Estates
- Pierre deWet