

E.T. in the Lone Star State Long before Roswell — long before airplanes, actually — something abnormal happened over Aurora, Texas

The Virtuoso of Los Angeles If classical music conductors were treated like rock stars, the paparazzi would never leave Gustavo Dudamel alone

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A full-page photograph of Tyra Banks. She is wearing a black, long-sleeved, knee-length suit with a flared skirt. She is also wearing black high-heeled shoes. Her hair is voluminous and styled in a way that makes it appear to be blowing in the wind. She is looking over her shoulder towards the camera.

STILL AMERICA'S TOP MODEL

TYRA BANKS IS NOT JUST A PRETTY FACE: SHE'S A SAVVY BUSINESSWOMAN WITH THE MIDAS TOUCH

National Pitluk's Padre Vacation

I LOVE MY COUSIN RONNIE. We're a generation apart, as he grew up with my father in Cleveland Heights, Ohio, before I was even a zygote. But over the years, we've become more than just family; we've become good friends. Our paths have serendipitously crossed, yet they've done so with Ronnie Wish standing still. He continues to reside in a century home in Nyack, N.Y., and that home has been my refuge ever since I was 21. After college, I twice showed up on his doorstep, homeless. Generation gap or not, he never asked questions. He just smiled, greeted me with a hug and opened his door. I definitely owe Ronnie, but Ronnie's not the type of guy who keeps score. I, on the other hand, am.

Ronnie's children, Moriya, 8, and Auriel, 6, aren't much older than my own. Over the past year, we'd contemplated bringing the Wish and Pitluk families together for a vacation. The desire has been there, and so have the conditional votes from my wife, Kimberly, and Ronnie's wife, Beth. The only hang-up was deciding on a location. Having once been a resident of Fort Lauderdale, Fla., I had no desire to vacation in what was my old stomping ground, but that's where Ronnie likes to go. And being the quintessential New Yorker, Ronnie had no desire to vacation anywhere other than Miami-Dade/Broward/Palm Beach counties.

"Ronnie, I'm asking you to put your faith in me on this one," I said to my cousin. "I'm going to get us a house, and I'm going to line up some activities. I just need you to open your mind and go with my energy."

Kind of hokey words, I know, but Ronnie is a holistic healer, and not only does he understand this sort of new age speak, but he

brokers in it. Whatever the case, I somehow managed to get four New Yorkers to spend their vacation in Texas, a land that, to them, is more foreign than Costa Rica. After all, they've been to Costa Rica more than a dozen times, yet they've never so much as set foot outside of DFW airport.

With them onboard, I needed to find an exceptional Lone Star retreat. The choices were limitless, but my own knowledge was limited. You see, the sort of Texas-style vacation I've done involves a break from spring studies, a lot of dudes, a lot of gals and a lot of beer. One would hope this trip would be different.

South Padre Island would be the location, of that I was sure. I'll put the beaches and amenities of South Texas up against those of Hollywood, Fla., any day. But the clock was ticking: The Wish family had booked their tickets. Now I not only needed to make this memorable, but I needed to be an ambassador for the state.

After hours of Web searching, I realized I was out of my league. There's too much going on down on the island for a piker like me to set up a trip for the ages. So I made some inroads and found my saving grace. I happened upon Coastal Lifestyles (www.vacationpadre.com), the Cadillac of turnkey, cost-effective luxury on South Padre Island. I called down there and leveled with Arnie Creinin, the company's president.

"Arnie, Adam Pitluk here in Dallas. I've got a problem. I'm trying to prove to New Yorkers that South Padre Island beats Broward County for sheer family fun. Problem is, I don't actually know that for a fact. This trip is sort of off the grid for both of us. Help me!"

With steady directness, Arnie assured me that this trip would be the best one we've ever had. And he delivered. The house we rented, for starters, had an untrammelled view of the beach, complete with floor-to-ceiling windows and doors that made the sounds of the Gulf of Mexico never more than a turn of the key away. I opened the fridge, and it had already been stocked for us with crackers and fruit and milk and soda and juice boxes (and some daddy juice for the daddies). That said nothing for the events Arnie planned for us. The kids and adults alike raved about the Black Dragon pirate-ship cruise. Picture *Pirates of the Caribbean* on steroids and add top-shelf

professional actors who sword-fight, shoot the cannon at passing skiffs, let the kids bop them on the head with foam swords — but not until after all the kids are sporting tattoos and all the parents have had mustaches drawn on them. Après cruise, I called Arnie. "We'd like to keep this pirate motif going for dinner. Any suggestions?"

"Go next door to Pirate's Landing. Best shrimp in the Gulf."

And it was. The next morning, the New Yorkers were content, but like any good New Yorkers, they were hungry again. I called Arnie. "My cousins sure could go for some bagels and lox. It is, after all, Saturday."

"You have to eat at the Palms Café. I'll put the Atlantic smoked salmon up against anything they get in Manhattan."

Right again. But now the cousins (and my kids) wanted to see some dolphins. I called Arnie. "What are the chances we'll see Flipper down here?"

"Head over to Pier 19 for the dolphin cruise. You'll see Flipper and his relatives, and the kids will handle puffer fish and starfish and everything else that crawls around down there."

And they did. Finally, it was time to play in the sand. But I didn't have any toys. I called Arnie. "You got any shovels over there at Coastal Lifestyles?"

"Better yet," he said, "I'm sending over Andy Hancock [seen in the green shirt, standing with our vacationing crew] from Sandcastlelessons.com. He's a pro and will teach the kids a skill they'll use every time they visit the beach from here on out."

Just look at the picture to see if Arnie and his staff delivered on this one.

I didn't want to bug Ronnie with "Are you having fun?" questions. Instead, I got my answer as I watched him and Beth strolling down the beach, arm in arm, with sand-eating grins on their faces. This may not have been an off-the-grid vacation like the ones you'll read about on page 38, but this was as off the grid as these New Yorkers get. And I get the feeling that it was their best. **AW**



To view Adam and Ronnie's complete South Padre Island itinerary, visit www.americanwaymag.com/itinerary.

