



SOUTHWEST PADDLER

**Outdoor Recreation Guide for
Texas, Oklahoma, Arkansas, Missouri, New Mexico, Arizona, Colorado and Utah**



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San Marcos River

Report by Marc W. McCord



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Old City Park to Luling ~ 43.5 Miles

General Description

The San Marcos River bubbles to life from the San Marcos Springs at Aquarena Center (formerly Aquarena Springs) on the campus of Texas State University (formerly Southwest Texas State University) in Hays County and flows about 85.5 miles through Guadalupe and Caldwell Counties to the confluence of the Guadalupe River in Gonzales County. In practical terms, recreational use of the river is usually limited to about the upper 16.5 miles between Old City Park in San Marcos down to FM 1977, just above Staples Dam, but can be paddled all the way to the Guadalupe River. The river has many dams and low-water bridges that must be portaged, coupled with rough terrain, making casual recreational paddling for less experienced boaters not all that much fun and more than a little dangerous. However, experience paddlers capable of recognizing and avoiding hazards can paddle the entire river to Luling and beyond. This report will cover the full 43.5 miles from Old City Park in San Marcos down to Luling City Park.

The San Marcos River is a tree-lined, beautiful river that is rich in aquatic life including birds, turtles and numerous species of fish. It is noted for many small dams, some of

Technical Data	
Class Rating	I to II+ (II to III > 500 cfs)
Length	43.5 miles
Minimum Flow	100 cfs
Optimum Flow	200-350 cfs
Maximum Flow	3,000 cfs
First Put-in	Old City Park in San Marcos
Lat. / Long.	97.56132 / 29.53200
Last Take-out	Luling City Park
Lat. / Long.	
Elevation	msl
Gradient	fpm
USGS Gauge	Web: 08170500 (San Marcos)
Boats	Canoes, Kayaks
Season	Year-round, weather permitting
Permits	No

which are runnable and others that require safe portage. Beware of strong hydraulic currents immediately below most of the dams on the San Marcos, and avoid them whenever possible. When in doubt **ALWAYS SCOUT!** While the river is generally shallow it will get deep in front of most dams. The water flows at a constant temperature around 72° F and at about 155 cfs minimum, making it good for paddling and floating almost year around. All property adjacent to the river is privately owned, so stay in the river channel and do NOT trespass on private land. Fishermen have placed drop lines along the river in many places, so take care to avoid getting tangled and hooked in them.

There are several small rapids and low-water bridges that either will or may required portages at flows near or above about 500 feet on average (the actual level depends upon the bridge), as well as some dams that **MUST** be portaged at any flow if you want to survive the trip. Portages are not along nicely manicured paths, and will require some skill sets of goats, pack mules, and rock climbers. Tubing is popular on the upper stretch of the San Marcos, giving way to canoeists and kayakers on downriver. There are numerous access points for put-ins and take-outs, making San Marcos River trips accessible and very interesting.

Location

Hays, Guadalupe, Caldwell and Gonzales Counties in the Southwest Texas Hill Country, near New Braunfels and Austin. The river flows from Aquarena Center on the campus of Texas State University in San Marcos down to the confluence of the Guadalupe River near Gonzales about 87 miles below its headwaters. This reach starts at Old City Park in San Marcos and ends at Luling City Park about 43.5 miles downriver.

Distance from Major Cities

New Braunfels 15 miles; San Antonio 60 miles; Austin 35 miles; Houston 200 miles; Dallas 230 miles; Oklahoma City 435 miles; Little Rock 555 miles; Kansas City 735 miles; (all distances are approximate and depend upon starting point and destination point on the river.)

Water Quality and Flow

The water quality in the San Marcos River is generally very good, running clean and clear most of the time, but getting murkier as you move downriver. However, it will become muddy after recent local rainfall, and may become cluttered with debris during flood stage conditions. At a near constant 72 degrees the San Marcos is very pleasant for paddling year around. The springs at the headwaters generally provide adequate flow for a river trip most of the time.

Best Times to Go

The San Marcos is not as seasonal as most Texas rivers, and can generally be enjoyed anytime of year. Proper winter

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Old City Park Public Access in San Marcos

wear is recommended for cold weather paddling and you can expect hot temperatures from June through September, so dress accordingly and take along sunscreen and plenty of liquid refreshments during hot summer months.

Hazards to Navigation

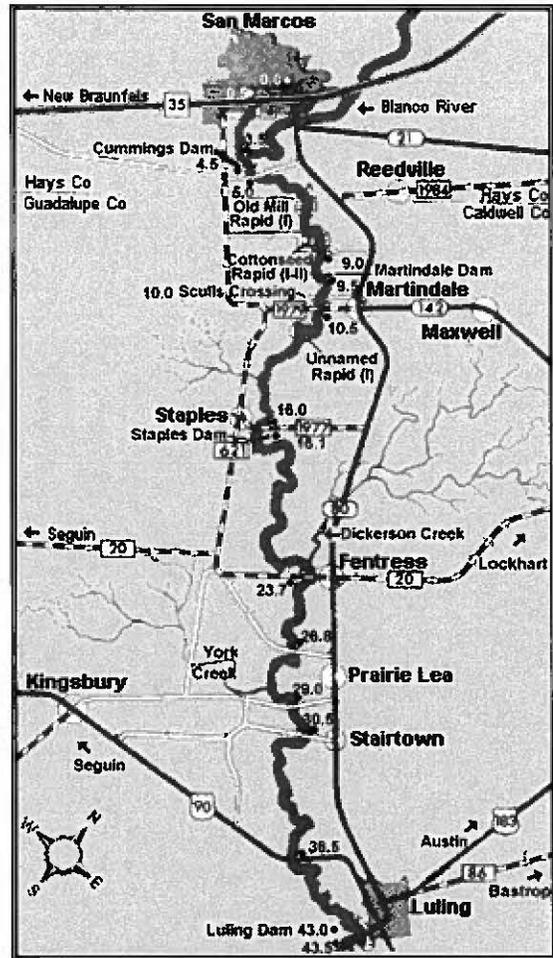
The San Marcos River is characterized by numerous small to medium sized dams, most of which must be portaged. Strong hydraulic currents are at the bottoms of most drops over dams, and these should generally be avoided. Downed trees in the river channel also mandate careful maneuvering to avoid, especially after a flood. When in doubt - ALWAYS SCOUT! Summer temperatures should be considered a hazard if proper precautions are not taken. Always have protective clothing, sunscreen and plenty of non-alcoholic liquids to prevent dehydration.

Rio Vista Dam, at 1 mile below Old City Park, can be portaged on the left or run through the slots just right of center, though you WILL get wet doing it. The NEW and improved Rio Vista Dam is now three successive drops, the first of which is about 4-5 feet into a huge standing wave with strong eddylines on either side. The second drop is about 2-2.5 feet, and comes about thirty yards below the first drop. The last drop is about 1 foot, and is about thirty yards below the second drop. The REAL hazard is avoiding hitting kids and adults that play in the river at and below those drops, especially on tubes or swimming the drops.

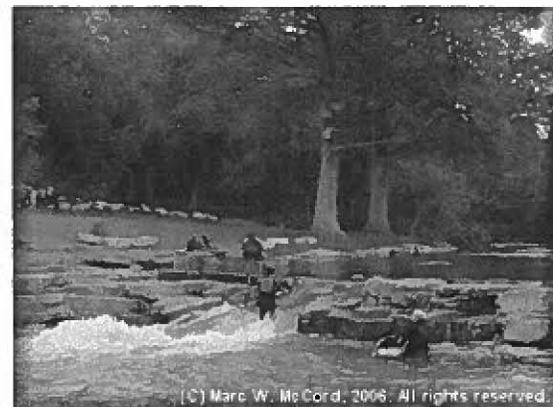
Cape Falls on river right at the top of Thompson's Island, just above the concrete diversion channel about 2 miles below Old City Park, is a drop of about 5 feet that can be run by experience boaters with great care, or portaged. There are two options: either portage just below the waterall on river right, or paddle to the concrete channel then portage across CR 299 (Cape Road) to the right of the diversion channel in Stokes City Park. The waterfall drop is at the site of an old stone and wood dam. Cummings Dam (4.7 miles below Old City Park) can be portaged on the right side. Take out on the dam on the extreme right side. Canoes can be lined down the concrete buttresses on the right downriver side of the dam.

Westerfield Crossing low-water bridge on CR 266/CR 101 can be a very dangerous place in high-water conditions. If there is less than 2.5 feet of air between the surface of the river and the bottom of the bridge, then portage right across CR 266/CR 101. Below CR 101 are Old Mill Rapid, Broken Bone Rapid and Cottonseed Rapid, none of which is too treacherous at normal water levels, but all of which can cause personal injury or damage to boats and gear if not negotiated properly any any flow condition. Cottonseed is a solid Class II rapid at flows over about 500 cfs, and can pin and wrap boats at any flow. Run Cottonseed with caution after scouting, or portage on river right.

Sculls Crossing, a low-water bridge at about 9.2 miles, is very dangerous at moderately high water levels, and should be portaged on the right, or run if flows are adequate after



San Marcos River map courtesy Texas Parks & Wildlife Department



The new Rio Vista Dam - First Drop

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scouting to find the best line. There may be tree trunks, boulders or other debris trapped under the bridge, and possibly just under the surface that requires great caution to avoid. Scout carefully before running under Sculls Crossing, and portage on river right if there is less than 2.5 feet of air between the surface of the river and the bottom of the bridge. Just below Sculls Crossing is Martindale Dam (10.5 miles), a mandatory portage on the right. Do NOT attempt to run Martindale Dam. Take out just above the dam and carry boats and gear along the earth and concrete abutment area on river right. At about 10.8 miles there is another low-water bridge that is very dangerous at moderately high water levels, and should be portaged on the right, or run if flows are adequate after scouting to find the best line. Currently, part of a washed out tree is blocking the channel in the middle of the natural flow. Start far left, move to the middle as you pass under the bridge, then turn back to the left as you exit the bridge.

At about 12.0 miles you will pass under the FM 1979 high bridge, and Shady Grove Campground, home of Spencer Canoes, is on the right bank (Shady Grove Campground is an excellent facility owned and operated by knowledgeable and friendly people) immediately below the bridge. At about 12.25 miles the water divides around a small island that can be a hazard if not negotiated properly. Depending on water levels, you may be able to go around either side, but the right side is almost always navigable. Staples Dam, at 16.5 miles below Old City Park, requires a mandatory portage on the left or right, though the right side portage is across private property. Most trips for inexperienced river runners end at or above Staples Dam, with the next take-out some 9 miles below the dam. Decide carefully before proceeding below Staples Dam.

A small dam at about 25.1 miles can usually be run without problems by competent canoeists and kayakers, but it can tip, swamp, pin and/or warp a boat at moderately high flows if not negotiated correctly. At about 25.5 miles is the Fentress low-water bridge, which usually should be portaged on river right, and which can be very dangerous at above normal flows. Prairie Lea Crossing # 1 sits at about 28.5 miles and Prairies Lea #2, at about 31.5 miles are dangerous at above normal flows, and usually should be portaged. Luling Dam, at about 44.5 miles, cannot be survivably run at any flow. Take out well above the dam on river right and portage before continuing about one half mile to the take-out at Luling City Park on river left just below US Highway 183.

River Access Points

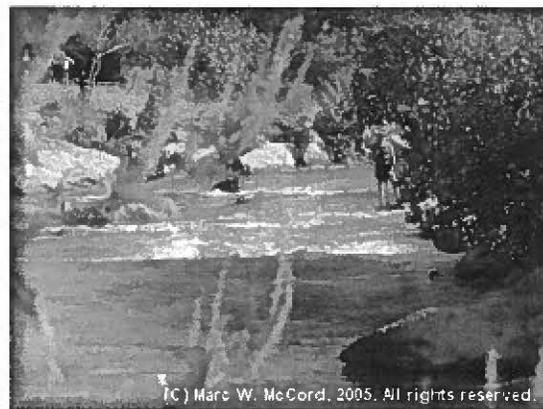
Concrete walkway adjacent to the Lions Club tube rental facility in Old City Park at 0.0 miles; Rio Vista Dam at 1.0 mile; CR 299 at 2.0 miles; CR 266 / CR 101 at 5.5 miles; Pecan Park Retreat (Private campground) at 6.0 miles; Sculls Crossing (off CR 103) at 9.2 miles; FM 1979 at 11.5 miles; FM 1977 (just above Staples Dam) at 16.5 miles - this is the usual end of trips for less experienced paddlers; Fentress (SH 20) low-water crossing at about 25.5 miles; Prairie Lea (CR 280) low-water crossing # 1 at about 28.5 miles; Prairie Lea (CR



Marc McCord running the 5-foot Cape Falls waterfall drop



Negotiating the mandatory portage at Cummings Dam



Looking downriver into Cottonseed Rapid

116) low-water crossing # 2 at about 31.5 miles; Stairtown (CR 119) crossing at about 32.5 miles; US Highway 90 crossing at about 39.0 miles; and Luling City Park on river left at about 45.0 miles. Access is adequate at most crossings, but the availability of public parking is very limited. Please be considerate of others when accessing the river, and always park your vehicles where they do not block river access for others. Never park on or enter private property without securing permission from landowners.

NOTE: Illegal barbed wire fences, erected without permission from the Texas General Land Office, are blocking public access on all four corners of the San Marcos River at US Highway 90A in Gonzales County. Similar fences are restructuring public access at the Slayden Cemetery Road bridge and at some locations near Luling. Actions that will hopefully result in removal of the illegal fences have been undertaken. Read more about this issue and what you can do to help in the "Environment" section by clicking [HERE](#).

Campgrounds and Accommodations

Shady Grove Campground (512-357-6113), located at FM 1979 and the San Marcos River in Guadalupe County, offers riverside tent and RV camping, restrooms with hot showers, a camp store and other amenities including water and electricity on the banks of the San Marcos River. Shady Grove Campground is a riverside facility situated among giant oak and pecan trees with plenty of shade and easy river access. Potable water is accessible from campsites. A cabin and pavilion are available for rent. Canoes and kayaks can be rented from Spencer Canoes located in the campground office. Shuttle services are also available for those bringing their own boats. Palmetto State Park (reservations through [Texas Parks and Wildlife Dept.](#)). There is at least one other commercial campground available along the San Marcos River at Martindale.

Riveries, Outfitters & Shuttle Services

TG Canoe & Kayak (512-353-3946), located at 402 Pecan Park Drive, San Marcos, offers canoe and kayak rentals and sales, gear and accessories sales, repairs and outfitting, and private boat shuttle services on the San Marcos River in Martindale. TGCK also offers canoe, kayak and tube rentals on the San Marcos River in Luling. **Spencer Canoes** (512-357-6113), located at FM 1979 and the San Marcos River in Caldwell County, offers canoe rentals and sales, shuttles, custom boat building and rigging (including Texas Water Safari boatworks), repairs, certified canoe instruction and other services on the San Marcos River. **TG Canoe & Kayak - Austin** (512-473-2644) offers canoe and kayak sales, accessories and gear sales, and custom outfitting. There are other commercial outfitters offering canoe, kayak and tube rentals, shuttles and river information located along or near the San Marcos River between the Town of San Marcos and the Town of Martindale.

Reviewer's Comments



Martindale Dam - another good place to portage



Luling US Highway 90 access



Between Luling US Highway 90 access and Zedler Mill access



Luling Zedler Mill access

The San Marcos River is a favorite place to play for many Texas boaters. It is close to places to stay and eat, easy to paddle for any experience level, offers spectacular sightings of birds, turtles and animals and has a water temperature that almost anybody can appreciate. It is not a crowded river, though it does get some traffic during summer months. The rapids are interesting, though not particularly challenging for experienced boaters. Best of all, it almost always has adequate water for a good trip, even when other Hill Country rivers are running dry. There are some hazards to be encountered including the perilous Cummings Dam, which **MUST** be portaged, and the infamous Cottonseed Rapid, a small but technically difficult hazard that has pinned and wrapped many boats. Good access points and an absolutely gorgeous river make this a great paddling destination. If you are around San Marcos the second Saturday in June, then be sure to catch the start of the Texas Water Safari...the World's Toughest Boat Race. If you are into marathon paddling, then enter that 260-mile gruelathon.

The San Marcos has recently undergone some major changes that make it a better river for experienced boaters and novices alike. The crumbling Rio Vista Dam has been completely restructured and an architectural wonder has been created that changed the landscape, retained the drop at the dam and added two additional small drops, all with surfing holes at the bottom. Below each drop is a nice eddy pool, and some new boulders have been placed in the river above and below the original drop. Recently, some paddlers have cleaned up and partially repaired Cape Falls, the small waterfall drop above Thompson's Island, making it runnable for competent boaters who can maneuver into, drop over the waterfall, then steer past the small island and tree in the middle of the stream on river right. Those who are not experienced whitewater paddlers would do well to avoid going over this drop!

NOTE: Lately, some brave boaters have taken to running Cummings and Martindale Dams in canoes and kayaks. This is a very dangerous activity that should be avoided by all except those with extreme whitewater skills running large drops or those with a death wish. Cummings Dam drops into water where old pieces of concrete and rebar steel can seriously injure or kill paddlers and destroy boats. Additionally, there is an airpocket behind Cummings Dam where the hydraulic current could suck a boat or paddler in. Martindale Dam looks easy because it is a gradient slide of about 60 degrees, but the concrete is very rough and can cause serious injury if you capsize going down. Extreme caution should be exercised to avoid going over either Cummings or Martindale Dams. Both dams can be easily portaged on river right, and the water behind each dam is backed up so there is no fast-moving current except when the river is high.



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Looking downriver from Luling Zedler Mill access



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Luling Zedler Mill Dam

Click the links below for information regarding the section of the Guadalupe River and its tributaries where you want to paddle.

[[Guadalupe River Homepage](#)] [[Brinks to Seidensticker](#)] [[Seidensticker to Bergheim](#)] [[Bergheim to Rebecca Creek](#)]

[[Canyon Dam to New Braunfels](#)] [[Blanco River](#)] [[San Marcos River \(Luling to Gonzales\)](#)]

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