

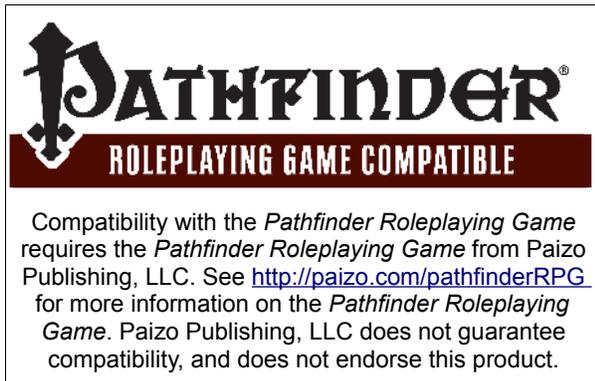


A Gamer Goes on Vacation

by Mark L. Chance

Ludi Fortes - Strong Games
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Well, it's summertime. Fish are jumpin', et cetera. For the first time in a few years, we can afford to get away for a week or so. Nothing extravagant. I'm still just a teacher in a charter school and my wife works for a non-profit. We're not rolling in money. No Scrooge McDuck moments where we open up the vault and go swimming in greenbacks and jewels.



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Instead, we hopped in our bird-poop stained Toyota loaded with clothes, CDs, a few books, and some groceries. Always groceries. My son [Giant Boy](#) (real name Christopher) tips the scales at more than 14 stones and towers over me by a good four inches, and we'd likely not make it to much past the city limits without groceries. This vacation, we headed up to northeast Texas, near [Caddo Lake](#), the only non-man-made lake in Texas. Specifically, we stayed in a two bedroom, two bath townhouse in Holly Lake, a community rather than a town that

doesn't appear on our road map.

Before we left Houston, I decided to go lazy and rely on Google's driving instructions instead of looking at the map for myself. This might be a good idea for a short drive across town, but across a state? Not so much. We saw nice small towns, but the directions were unnecessarily convoluted. In one town, the name of which I've forgotten, we were supposed to turn left on East Fannin. So, there we are, driving through town, looking for East [Fannin](#). I noticed an [Anson](#) Street. The next street was [Milam](#).

"We must be getting close," I said.

"How do you know?" wife Katrina asked.

"The last two streets had Texas history names."

Sure enough, East Fannin popped up in another two blocks.

Skill Synergies: A feature of earlier editions of the d20 System was skill synergies. If a PC had 5 or more ranks in one skill, it gave a +2 bonus to another skill. The *Pathfinder Roleplaying Game* removed these synergies, which I think is a good thing because it gives players the chance to lobby for creative use of skills. In the above example, it is obvious my Knowledge (Texas history) provided a +2 bonus to my Survival check to avoid getting lost.

On the way up, we passed through Tyler, Texas. It'd been several years since we'd been to [Caldwell Zoo](#), so we stopped at KFC for a quick lunch and then went to look at the animals. Caldwell Zoo is a small zoo. You can see all there is to see in an hour and a half easy enough. Most of the animals are birds. Lots of birds, including two American bald eagles, various parrots, gangs of flamingos, and a mini-aviary full of tweeting parakeets, cockatiels, and a lone cockatoo. There are penguins from South Africa as well. It might be 102 degrees Fahrenheit outside, but at least the penguins are comfortable.

Speaking of the aviary, you can hand-feed the birds while inside. The zoo sells birdseed-shishkabob for \$1 a stick. I didn't have any singles, so we didn't feed the animals. When we exited the aviary, a sign above several spigots and a trough informed us that we needed to wash our hands. (Wash is Texan for wash.) My children, used to following orders without question, promptly did as instructed.



"Dad," Giant Boy said, pointing at the sign, "you have to wash your hands."

I didn't. My hands were just as dirty coming out as they were coming in, and I was comfortable with that.

Caldwell Zoo has two white tigers. It being the middle of the day and extremely hot, the tigers weren't doing much other than nap. I sometimes wonder what they're thinking, these big alpha predators lazing their lives away in enclosures. No hunting, no stalking, no pouncing and killing. Are they bored?

Did you know that tigers have a roar so powerful that at close range it's a sort of sonic weapon? A tiger's roar can stun a hapless bit of four-legged dinner-on-the-move. Fascinating, huh? So, not only can a tiger puncture your skull with its powerful jaws and open up your arteries with its wicked claws, it can also sound blast you so that you're even more defenseless. As Katrina observed once watching a lion take down a baby gazelle on *Animal Planet*, "Nature sucks."

Tiger Roar Attack (Ex): As a standard action, a tiger can emit a stunning roar that affects a 10-foot cone. All creatures caught in the cone must make a Fortitude save or be stunned for 1 round. The save DC equals 10 + 1/2 the tiger's Hit Dice + the tiger's Strength modifier.

Speaking of sonic powers, doesn't it just make sense that fantasy parrots would have them? Add the following simple template to a normal bird to create a magical loquavian. Refluff the creature's appearance as needed.

Loquavian Simple Template

A bird with this template acquires some minor magical powers. Loquavians are prized among diplomatic circles, especially in certain tropical regions.

CR: +1

Rebuild Rules: Change Intelligence to 10 and Charisma to 13. Add Linguistics with ranks equal to Hit Dice. The loquavian can use *suggestion* as a spell-like ability once per day as a 5th-level sorcerer. The save DC equals 10 + 1/2 Hit Dice + Charisma modifier.

As the evening arrived, we hit the local grocery store in Hawkins, Texas, and then returned to our townhouse for dinner. I cooked up some sloppy Joes, mac-and-cheese, and BBQ beans. In order to save time, I stuck my serving of mac-and-cheese between the same bun halves that held my sloppy Joe mixture. Mm, mm, good. By the time dinner was done and Katrina had washed the dishes, I was highly tired. Katrina and our daughter Adrienne went to the pool for a swim, Giant Boy kept the TV company, and I went to bed, falling asleep after reading the first three chapters of Lincoln Child's [Worth Dying For](#). (I finished this novel a couple of days later.)

While I was reading, Katrina had the pleasure of getting hit by a football at the pool. A couple of teenage boys convinced that their hairless torsos and lousy aim were impressive tossed the pigskin back and forth at the pool. Adrienne was not impressed.

The next morning we had a simple breakfast of cereal, toast with jelly, and coffee. After eating, it was time for our first major excursion. After a short, hilly ride to the south, we hit I-20 East and drove to Shreveport, Louisiana. Shreveport is named for [Henry Miller Shreve](#), a riverboat captain who began the destruction of the [Great Raft](#), a huge logjam that had clogged the Red River since about the 12th century A.D. When the logjam was finally destroyed in the late 19th century, it lowered water levels in Caddo Lake, ruined the steamboat port town economy of Jefferson, Texas, and put Shreveport on the map.

After a few detours due to construction, we made it to the tourist center in downtown Shreveport. The ladies there were friendly and helpful. Since we were hungry and had only one day in town, we hopped back in the car, went across the bridge, and visited the [Louisiana Boardwalk](#), a sort of open air shopping mall and entertainment plaza. We had a tasty but expensive lunch in a Japanese cafe. Bento boxes for everyone!



We walked a bit by the Red River after lunch, poked our heads into a few stores, and Giant Boy decided it was time for dessert. Adrienne insisted we visit the self-serve frozen yogurt place. You grab a small bucket, fill it with your choices of yogurt flavors and toppings, and then pay based on weight. I'm not certain, but I think Giant Boy's portion of yogurt accounted for half the total weight of our four snacks.

Katrina wanted to ride the trolley that trundles around the boardwalk, so we did. Yes, it did go *clang! clang!* We got off the trolley near the carousel and bought tickets for a ride. Adrienne clambered from one merry-go-round animal to another, showing off her monkey-like agility.

New Trait: Like a Monkey

You gain a +1 trait bonus to Acrobatics checks when jumping and a +1 trait bonus to Climb checks.

By this time, it was close to two in the afternoon. Due to a logistical error, we had left our swimsuits and towels in the townhouse at Holly Lake instead of packing them in the trunk. This tacked an extra 30 or so miles to our next destination: the waterpark at the Villages.

Katrina drove on the return trip. We were soon back on I-20, but this time heading west. It's a straight shot on I-20 from Shreveport to hit Texas. Stay on the interstate, and you can't get lost. This didn't stop Giant Boy from asking Katrina, "Are we back in Texas?" as if she might have made a wrong turn and drove into Oklahoma by mistake.

Back at Holly Lake, we changed into our swim gear, grabbed towels, and soon were south of Tyler at the Villages. We purchased waterpark tickets and floated on the endless river, rushed down slides atop inflatable donuts, and rolled our eyes at the antics of unsupervised teenagers. As I've commented many times before, watching other people's children makes me appreciate mine that much more. Since Giant Boy weighs more than me, I insisted he sit in the front of the two-man inflatable donut when we tandemed down a waterslide. When we hit the pool at the bottom, his end promptly went under, tossing the boy headfirst into the water while I road high if not dry. Ah, good times.

We did have one briefly upsetting event. Christopher has a necklace from which hang two holy medals, one of [Saint Christopher](#) and the other of the Virgin Mary. He lost it. Somehow it came off. The waterpark isn't big, but it's a lot bigger than a necklace and was full of people. Katrina floated off to alert a lifeguard. She hadn't gone far at all when Adrienne found the necklace underwater on the floor against the wall of the endless river. One of the chain links had broken. I fixed the necklace and made sure it was secure. Not only does my daughter have monkey agility, she has ninja searching skills. I mean, seriously, who finds a submerged necklace with her toes?

**Blessed Medal**

Aura faint enchantment; **CL** 5th

Slot neck; **Price** 500 gp; **Weight** --

Description: This medal, usually about the size of a coin, has been blessed and dedicated to a specific deity or saint. Once per day, upon command, the medal grants a +5 sacred bonus to any single skill check made within 1 minute after the *blessed medal* is activated.

Construction Requirements: Craft Wondrous Item, *prayer*, **Cost** 250 gp.

After our fingers and toes were nice and wrinkly, we drove back to Holly Lake for a late dinner of tuna casserole. It had been a long day with lots of driving, walking, and swimming.

We slept in a little Wednesday morning, which means I was in bed until about 7:00 a.m. I put the morning pot of coffee on, played a little [Desktop Dungeons](#), and then called the Villages to schedule horseback riding for Adrienne and me. The last time we were up at the Villages, I didn't pack appropriate horseback riding clothes. Katrina took Adrienne to the stables, but Katrina couldn't handle the extreme altitude of the saddle, so Adrienne didn't actually get to do the trail ride. I had promised this wasn't going to happen this time. I had my horseback-riding clothes. Now we just needed a scheduled time.

The nice lady I spoke to explained that they wouldn't schedule times over the phone. I had to come in, fill out the government-required safety waivers, and pay for the ride ahead of time and in person. This was vexing. If you catch the lights through Tyler and avoid construction, it's still a 45 minute drive from Holly Lake to the Villages. I didn't catch the lights or avoid construction. Nevertheless, I am not easily thwarted. I got the trail scheduled in the last available time slot for the day. Of course, I then had to drive back to Holly Lake, arriving right around lunch time and having missed the pancakes Katrina fixed for breakfast while I was gone.

After lunch, I broke out the *Scrabble* game. I've been remiss as a father. Neither of my children have played *Scrabble* much. To make up for this laxity, I decided to help the children when they got stuck. Consequently, I ended up giving many point away. Even still, I was out of tiles first, and the best anyone else in the game could claim was that they tied my score. Had I not been helpful, I'd have crushed my word-forming enemies.

The time for trailriding had arrived after *Scrabble* ended. We returned to the Villages. While Adrienne and I went to the stables, Katrina and Giant Boy played games in the activity center. The trailride was relaxing. My horse was a bit fidgety, balking that I wouldn't let her stop and chew on grass whenever she felt like it. Adrienne's horse was slow. Really, really slow. The "trailboss" was a mid-20-something year-old kid. Trailriding at the Villages was a sidejob for him. His main job was as a fireman in Tyler. Seemed like a nice enough fellow. Professional but relaxed and friendly.



We spent the rest of our time at the Villages splashing, floating, and sliding in the waterpark. No lost necklaces this time. Once back at Holly Lake, I fixed more mac-and-cheese, cut up a fresh melon, and mixed up a quick salad dressing for our greens. We went to bed a bit early since there'd be no sleeping in Thursday morning.

We weren't up quite at the crack of dawn, but close to it. The well-oiled machine kicked into gear. I fixed breakfast: biscuits and cheesy eggs. Kids and wife bathed. We ate, I bathed, and then we packed everything into the car. It was time to check out of Holly Lake. I turned in the townhouse keys to registration. We had one more stop on our vacation: Jefferson, Texas.



Once upon a time, antebellum and before the Great Raft was destroyed, Jefferson was the second largest port in Texas. (Galveston was the first.) Jefferson was in the middle of cotton country and was the last river port for steamboats on the line chugging between Jefferson and New Orleans. Many of the buildings in downtown Jefferson are more than 100 years old. Lots of historic houses in the area

as well, including a few antebellum plantation houses. There's even a Civil War gunpowder storehouse still standing.

Our first stop was the old-fashioned general store to get some directions. We wanted to do three things in Jefferson: visit the [Gone with the Wind museum](#), take a bayou tour in a small boat, and visit the Grove, one of several historic sites in Jefferson with a long history of being haunted. Ooh, spooky! We managed to pull off two out of three. The museum was closed for the day.

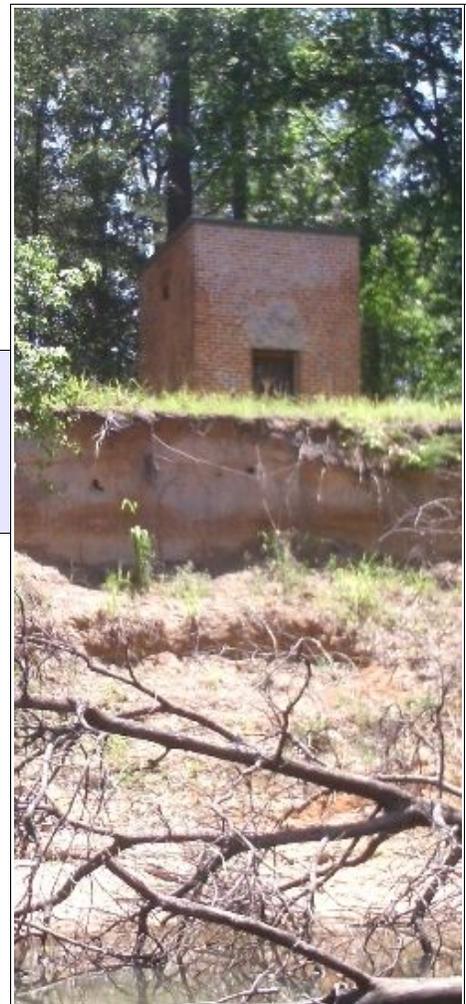
We had lunch at an expensive bistro. The wife and children had large, meat-filled sandwiches topped with pickled peppers and spicy mustards. Giant Boy overcame his aversion of condiments and ate the sandwich, peppers, mustards, and all. He requested another one, but at \$10 a pop, that wasn't going to happen. I had a salad, potato soup, and a delicious slice of oatmeal artisan bread topped with maple syrup. After lunch, we drove across the bridge and around the corner for our [bayou tour](#).

Another New Trait: Storyteller

You are skilled at sharing your knowledge and experiences. Choose one Knowledge skill. You gain a +1 trait bonus with this skill and can use this skill to make money as it were a Perform skill.

Our bayou tour guide was John Nance. John's an amateur historian who shares his knowledge of the area with humor and zest. There isn't much to look at during the hour-long boat ride up and down the bayou. Lots of trees, fallen logs, mud, dragonflies, and turtles. John, however, brings the monotony to life, talking about the local flora and fauna, the bygone days of steamboats loaded with cotton and the rowdy riverfront life, and the changes wrought by the Civil War and the Army Corps of Engineers.

Once our boat trip was over, we had some time to kill before heading to the haunted house. [The Grove](#) wasn't open that day, but Katrina talked to one of the owners, and they



agreed to host us for a tour since we were only in town for the day. We wandered through a few shops full of antiques, including one that had a framed, 1906 clipping from an East Texas newspaper lamenting a local court case that had its venue changed to Galveston. The reason for the lament? Well, in Galveston, both Catholics and African-Americans were allowed to sit on juries!

The Grove is a beautiful old house with a Greek Revival exterior but a Creole-style interior. The house was built in 1861, and has passed through less than 10 owners since then. Author and historian Mitchel Whittington, co-owner of the Grove, was a our tour guide. He and his wife bought, renovated, and live in the Grove, wherein they've embraced the site's history and ghosts with genuine affection.

Comforting Haunt

CR 4; XP 1,200

NG haunt (20-foot-square room)

Caster Level 4th

Notice Perception DC 18 (a faintly hummed lullaby)

hp 8; Trigger proximity; **Reset** 1 day

Effect: A gentle spirit haunts this room. Its supernatural powers aid those who sleep in the room, just as if the haunt cast *nap stack*. This effect reduces the amount of uninterrupted sleep or rest creatures within the room need in order to recover from injuries, regain spells, or other special abilities to 2 hours instead of the normal eight. In addition, if creatures continue to sleep or rest beyond the initial 2 hours, every additional 2 hours counts as a day of rest for the purpose of recovering hit points, ability damage, as well as for enduring diseases, poisons, or other afflictions. This means 8 total hours of sleep counts as 4 days for natural healing and for saving throws as diseases or similar afflictions run their course. When suffering from diseases, poison, or other afflictions, sleepers experience vivid dreams that help them track their recovery. If things go poorly they can, at any time, wake themselves up in order to seek a better alternative. If awoken or otherwise disturbed during this 8-hour period, creatures may return to sleep but they no longer enjoy the benefits of the accelerated recovery time. Creatures can only enjoy the benefits of this haunt once in any 1-week period.

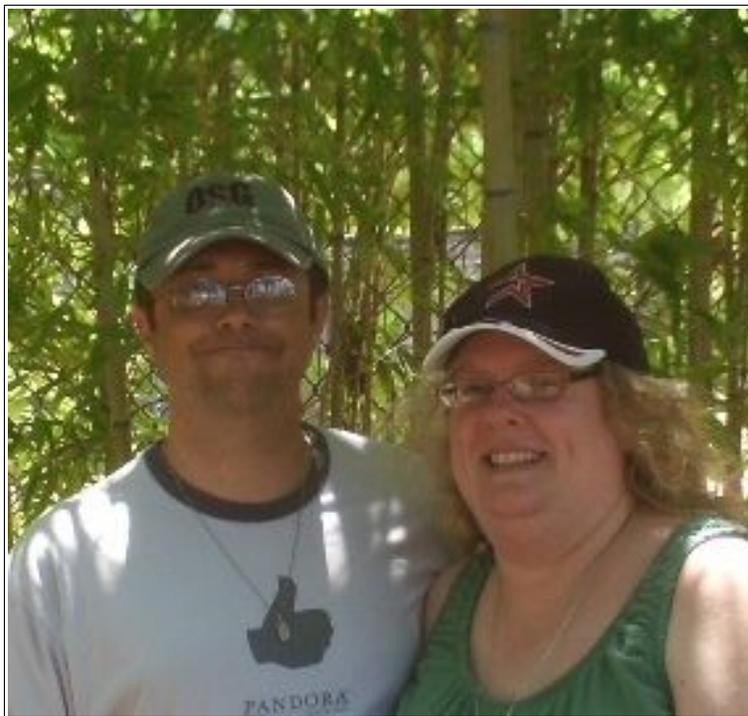
Destruction: A flask of unholy water sprinkled in the infested area permanently dismisses the comforting haunt.



Mitchel's guided tour of his haunted home included some fascinating history of Jefferson and the house's previous owners as well as retellings of various spectral encounters. Mitchel sounds like he believes his house is really visited by the spirits of previous owners, and he is quick to point out that the ghosts of the Grove are friendly. No Hollywood-esque effects such as bleeding walls or demonic faces in the Grove. The most interesting parts of the wandering narrative through the Grove were the stories about the family of

Daphne and Charlie Young, freed slaves who purchased the Grove and rose to local prominence. The Youngs purchased the Grove in 1885. The last of the Youngs, daughter Louise R. Young, died in 1983. Listening to Mitchel talk about the Youngs, they must've been wonderful people, and Miss Louise sounds like a lovely lady.

And so ended our visit to Jefferson, Texas. It was now time to head back to Houston, trucking down the winding 59-South through the Piney Woods of East Texas. We arrived back at home shortly before sunset, and a good time was had by all.



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