

Tonto, I Don't Think We're in Texas Anymore

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While vacationing in our Northwest, I realized that the designations of the landmarks and natural features that I was encountering were a far cry from what I was used to in deep South Texas. Here were no *arroyos, resacas, lomas, chaparral, tules, rios, lagunas, tanks, playas,* and *colonias*. No, after traversing the Great Plains the physical landscape had a totally different nomenclature. I was encountering buttes, bluffs, sierras, and terrain sculpted by glaciers.

What became apparent was that the English language was again exhibiting its healthy appetite to accommodate and digest whatever words struck the fancy of its American users. The nuances of the language in dealing with topographical descriptions and the like are considerable.

William Least-Heat-Moon once pointed this out. He noted that words perceived as interchangeable by some often were not. He provided this example: "A bayou is a river, a flowing; a marsh is a wet sometimes inundated grassland; and a swamp is flooded woodland." Lured by the diversity of expressions thrust at me, I was firmly hooked. This obsession led me to compile a list of such terms "from sea to shining sea".

The starting point is the Western Hemisphere and the North American Continent. Locating ourselves in country, state, province, county, parish, township, borough, district, municipality, city, town, village, burg, reservation, pueblo, precinct, ward, hamlet, metropolis, inner city, suburb, community, colony, commune, homestead, grant, center, resort, RV park, station, estate, fort, base, camp, settlement, outpost, quarters, block, territory, commonwealth, encampment, hinterland, backwater, and riverside we are ready to start our journey from your location or locale.

We may now move along our reach taking footpaths, cow paths, bridle paths, trails, bike trails, defiles, switchbacks, lanes, loops, thoroughfares, streets, avenues, drives, ways, terraces, boulevards, arteries, courts, circles, places, alleys, esplanades, causeways, turnpikes, shunpikes, routes, byways, highways, superhighways, expressways, freeways, parkways, traces, by-passes, boardwalks, detours, portages, defiles, rights-of-ways, and whatever will allow our mobility.

Leave the coastal regions and littoral and with them the oceans, seas, strands, and gulfs, seashores, shoreline, oceanfront, waterfront, sounds, forelands, channels, cuts, estuaries, harbors, ports, landings, anchorages, coves, bays, embayments, hooks, sandy or cobble beaches, mudflats, estuaries, islands, barrier islands, isles, islets, archipelagoes, reaches, holms, keys, cays, atolls, reefs, lagoons, tomboles, fjords, jetties, headlands, guts, ness, banks, shoals, capes, spits, bars, bosporuses, straits, narrows, bights, tidal bores, tidal pools, heads, necks, tongues, peninsulas, chersoneses, and points.

Let's be off to the heartland with its lowlands, highlands, midlands, wetlands, bottomlands, meadowlands, grasslands, rangelands, uplands, wastelands, salt flats, massifs, muskeg, tundra, barrens, deserts, and floodplains.

Take along boots, a sturdy boat, raft, innertube, or life preserver for we shall be crossing washes, brooks, creeks (cricks), rivulets, streams, gullies, gulches, watercourses, runs, rills, kills, rivers, branches, confluences, debouchures, forks, tributaries, sloughs, sluices, pools, weirs, swales, lakes, largos, sinkholes, ponds, eddies, intervalles, basins, tarns, meanders, bogs, fens, mires, morasses, quagmires, moors, washes, polders, glades, seeps, fords, locks, troughs, reservoirs, ditches, rapids, aqueducts, canals, falls, and cascades.

Do not get claustrophobic as we proceed inland through cirques, clefts, gulches, gorges, gaps, notches, box canyons, slot canyons, passes, corridors, valleys, dales, vales, draws, ravines, coulees, glens, depressions, holes, and hollows.

Surely these are no worse than thickets, wilds, brush, heath, forest, woodland, taiga, boreal forest, dunes, boondocks, everglades, scree, and montane.

Oh—it's heights of which you are afraid. Well, that might be a problem as we move to the divide. While the prairies, steppes, savannas, tablelands, pastures, foothills, knaps, knolls, slopes, rises, declivities, inclines, rolling foothills, hummocks, hillocks, and monadnocks should be of no bother and the plateaus and mesas of minor concern, the topography of the continental uplift will be challenging. Perhaps in reaching the hump, alp, pike, crest, summit, peak, pinnacle, promontory, tor, spine, overlook, vista, ledge, ridge, rim, or spur, you won't be able to handle the talus, hogback, razorback, hoodoo, perch, outcrop, crag, precipice, cliff, crater, balcony, face, escarpment, drift, crevasse, pipes, chimney, or rise. It may be easier to move on to our 50th state to find something less difficult such as crossing the pahoehoe lava field, circling around the kipuka, to ascend the pali on the aa cone leading to the dome of the volcanic caldera.

Grown faint of heart, have you, then better stick to your local parks and playgrounds, reserves, preserves, refuges, sanctuaries, greenbelts, arboretums, and groves as your journey's end.