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A ferry crosses the channel at sunset.

Ferries operate 24/7

Practically from the moment visitors arrive in Port Aransas, they're treated to a free boat ride, courtesy of the Texas Department of Transportation.

TxDOT operates six free ferries that shuttle vehicles from Harbor Island across the Corpus Christi Ship Channel to Mustang Island.

The ferries, named after former TxDOT executive directors, operate 24 hours, seven days a week.

A trip on the ferry takes three to 10 minutes, depending on weather and the traffic in the ship channel. Motorists often are treated to views of dolphins surfacing and pelicans flying past.

The wait for the ferry varies according to vehicular traffic, ship channel traffic and how many fer-

ries are operating. It's common for vehicles to be ushered immediately onto ferries with no wait. But waits also can sometimes be 45 minutes or more during peak operating periods.

Check the length of the lines of vehicles waiting to board the ferries by going to www.portasouthjetty.com. Click on the image of a ferry boat at the bottom left of the screen for a link to a ferry cam. Below that is a link to check the wait time for ferries.

The ferry system updates information on wait times hourly. Each ferry carries up to 20 regular passenger vehicles per trip, and transports about 100 vehicles per hour.

Maximum length for combined vehicles (car and boat) or travel

trailers is 65 feet, and the maximum width allowed is 120 inches (10 feet). The maximum height allowed on the ferries is 13 feet 6 inches and gross weight is 80,000 pounds.

Information on ferry operations, regulations and procedures is available on a 24-hour radio message that is broadcast on AM 530. Live broadcasts are available on that frequency during emergencies.

The ferry service is vital to Port Aransas residents during hurricane threats, as they provide the primary means of evacuation. When high winds and tides make the ferries' mission unsafe, they are transported to harbor in the Port of Corpus Christi.

The ferries are accessed from the mainland side of the channel through Aransas Pass.

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