

Texas Traveler



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Famous lights one of many reasons to make the drive

On the cover

An adventurer takes a zipline ride at Cypress Valley Canopy Tours near Spice, photo by Rona Dizenfeld/Special to the Express-News. From top: a swallowtail butterfly on a mountain sage at Cibolo Creek Ranch near Marfa, photo by Tracy Barnett/Staff; campers relax by a beach campfire on Mustang Island State Park at Port Aransas, photo courtesy Earl Nottingham/Texas Parks and Wildlife; Billy Bob's dance hall in the Stockyards at Fort Worth is called the world's largest honky-tonk, photo courtesy Fort Worth Convention and Visitors Bureau.



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Catch sight of a vermilion flycatcher at Lake Amistad.

{ A HAiku for YOU }

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RONA DISTENFELD/SPECIAL TO THE EXPRESS-NEWS

Mexican vaqueros help drive 200 longhorns to town on Belville's Heritage Day cattle drive.

For newcomers and natives alike, there's always another discovery

By Rona Distenfeld

Special to the Express-News

Texas has a lot to be proud of when it comes to the wonders of our home state. From the Gulf Coast to the hidden canyons of the Panhandle, the lakes and forests of the Piney Woods to the dramatic mountains and rare plant life of the Big Bend, you could spend a lifetime exploring and still not discover everything.

Have you eaten Permian Basin shrimp from West Texas? Picked your own blueberries, peaches or apples? Tasted award-winning Texas wines at the wineries that made them?

Have you seen the mysterious Marfa Lights? Shopped for bargains and treasures at Texas' big-

gest flea markets? Seen the story of Texas told with sound and lights in an open canyon?

Have you caught redfish in the bay? Watched eagles from a boat? Seen a fraction of the almost 500 bird species that live or migrate through our great state?

Did you know you can zipline through a canopy of cypress trees, fly a fighter plane in a simulator or take a trapeze class, all without leaving our state?

And don't forget history. From our politicians to our battles, Texas has had some of America's most colorful heroes and villains, and you can find their stories from one end of the state to the other, in caves and courthouses, stately homes and tiny cabins.

Something for everyone everywhere

Texas has more than 367 miles of coastline and the largest undeveloped barrier island in the United States. That makes for lots of great fishing, beachcombing, swimming, sailing, wind surfing and just plain relaxing on a beautiful beach. There are marinas that can welcome large boats, and tiny towns where life slows way down and you can walk everywhere. In towns along the coast you'll find the Texas State Aquarium and the Coastal Bend's only fine arts museum (Corpus Christi); educational kayak outings for all ages and great bay fishing (Matagorda); and stately homes with the gaiety of a classic boardwalk (Galveston).

Head to West Texas and the Big Bend region and you'll find the vast expanses of land that the settlers faced when they came through without benefit of roads and rest stops. From the Chisos Mountains you can look south into Mexico for miles on a clear day. Marfa once hosted Rock Hudson, Elizabeth Taylor and James Dean when



ROMA DISTENFELD/SPECIAL TO THE EXPRESS-NEWS

Play with the dolphins through the glass walls of the Dolphin Bay at the Texas State Aquarium in Corpus Christi.

they filmed "Giant" and now is home to the Chinati Foundation (and the famous Marfa Lights).

In Marathon, "Gateway to the Big Bend," the Gage Hotel is as well known for its restaurant as its beds, and Eve's Bed & Breakfast and Eco Resource Center is designed like something from the Arabian Nights. Even its organic garden looks like something from a fantasy. This part of Texas overflows with the unimaginable and unexplainable.

On the other side of the state, you'll find abundant water, green grass and soaring lodge pole pines. Woods and large lakes welcome hikers, fishermen, campers and more. You can pick blueberries in Athens, return to the Renaissance in Plantersville, or watch Blue Bell make its famous ice cream in Brenham.

The Hill Country is the place to see wildflowers in the spring and take scenic drives on winding roads. Dozens of little towns offer a taste of small-town Texas at its best. Try the barbecue in Llano, the pie at the Bluebonnet Café in Marble Falls, the German food in Fredericksburg and the wine that is winning awards around the world. You'll find music at festivals and dance halls, artists and cowboys, birds and bats, shady porches for rocking and cold rivers for swimming.

Big cities with big personalities

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its music, bats and Barton Springs, often making us forget it's also the seat of government and home to Texas' biggest university. San Antonio pays homage to its Mexican roots with the Mercado, celebrations and architecture, while the River Walk is world-famous for its restaurants and people watching.

Houston has the vibrancy of entrepreneurial spirit, great art museums and the "no limits" attitude that made it home to NASA. Dallas has style and flair (and don't forget that big hair!), shopping for every taste and budget, and sports of every stripe. Neighboring Fort Worth is still "Cow town" to the locals, with a far more western feel than any other major Texas city, and is home to the Cowgirl Hall of Fame and all things rodeo, but its tamer side offers world-renowned museums such as the Kimbell and great restaurants with famous chefs. In between, little Arlington keeps us all entertained



ROMA DISTENFELD/SPECIAL TO THE EXPRESS-NEWS

Towering cypress trees and cool water welcome a kayaker on the Guadalupe River.

with Six Flags and Hurricane Harbor, the Texas Rangers and, soon, the Dallas Cowboys.

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(800) 923-4453

Bear Springs Blossom Nature Preserve
www.keepbandera-beautiful.org/
bearspringsblossom

Charm keeps on rolling through the Hill Country

By **Rona Distenfeld**

Special to The Express-News

You might spot eagles up by Lake Buchanan, golden-cheeked warblers at the Bear Springs Blossom Center near Bandera or millions of bats at the Eckert James River Bat Cave Reserve near Mason. You can pick apples in Medina, hike through maple trees near Vanderpool, or fish, float or swim the area's many rivers and lakes. Go underground and see the waterfall inside Cascade Cavern, hear stories of outlaws and preachers inside Longhorn Cavern, or be amazed by the formations at the Caverns of Sonora.

The Hill Country is often called the heart of Texas, with McCulloch County at the state's geographic center. From Goldthwaite to Uvalde, Austin to Junction, you can drive hundreds of miles on scenic, winding roads where huge trees offer shade, and wildflowers greet the eye in the spring.

Courthouses in every architectural style dating to the 1800s grace the county seats, and many are listed in the National Register of Historic Places. Unexpected sights, such as the Stonehenge replica in a field outside Hunt, provide an excuse to explore the back roads. Museums honor every interest and oddity: Texas country music (Brady); the two-headed goat (Bandera's Frontier Times Museum); motorcycles (Vanderpool). Outside Johnson City, the Benini Sculpture Ranch is growing large-scale art that appears as you wind your way through the ranch's 140 acres.

You can get a more personal feel of



**RONA DISTENFELD/
SPECIAL TO THE EXPRESS-NEWS**

Shop for antiques and more on Fredericksburg's Main Street.

the area with one of Planet Earth Adventures' bicycle tours. Ride the wine trail or the many other scenic roads, eat at out-of-the-way fine restaurants and stay at some of the area's nicest B&Bs.

A taste of Germany

Much of the region was settled by German immigrants, and in towns such as Fredericksburg you can still dine on German food and hear locals speaking German. Other reminders of the past include the tiny Sunday houses scattered throughout the area. These one- or two-room weekend homes were built by well-to-do farmers and ranchers and used when the family came to town to trade, shop and socialize. Today many are charming B&Bs, unique to the area.

PLEASE SEE HILL COUNTRY PAGE 14J

IF YOU GO

For information on events, lodging, activities, restaurants, and more visit www.gruene-texas.com

• Gruene Hall

www.gruene-hall.com
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• The Grapevine

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Tubing and a two-step in historic Gruene

By **Rona Debenfeld**

Special to the *Espresso-News*

Back in the 1870s, this little town grew at the site of a popular river crossing and a stagecoach stop. Today all the highways bypass Gruene and it is a part of the city of New Braunfels. You won't drive through here on your way to anywhere else; you'll come to visit.

Drive in via Hunter Road, and you'll see Gruene Hall dead ahead. It claims the title of the oldest continually operating dance hall in Texas, and on any weekend night you can catch anything from country to bluegrass to rock here. Drop in on a Sunday afternoon, and you'll find sun-drenched tubers tapping their toes to the free live music right next to cowboys in Wranglers and boots. Kids chase each other around the beer garden, and locals catch up on news in the front bar every afternoon.

Then and now

Gruene Hall was built in the 1870s, and so were most of the buildings around it. Gruene prides itself on its history, and lives up to its motto: "Gently resisting change since 1872."

Shopping here gives you lots of chances to take home a little of the past. Browse the many vendors at Gruene Market Days the third weekend of every month, or the shops offering antiques and Texana. You never know what you might find, from china to old tools, cowboy hats to veils.

Gruene's laid-back pace also makes it a great place to relax. Come fish or float the river, taste Texas wines at The Grapevine, or spend the night at the Gruene Mansion Inn B&B. Listed on the National Register of Historic Places and designated a Texas Historic Landmark, it's the final step in your visit to the past.



ERICH SCHLEGEL/DALLAS MORNING NEWS

A couple takes a spin around the dance floor at the famous Gruene Hall.

Hill Country

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 10J

Main Street is lined with buildings from the 1800s and early 1900s and houses merchants that include award-winning salsa maker Fischer & Weiser, dozens of antique and crafts shops, and surprises such as Cru, a wine bar and restaurant with an impressively deep wine list. Off the main path on Adams Street, Texas Jack's Wild West Outfitters is the source for those wanting real Western wear.

The town honors veterans with the National Museum of the Pacific War, housed partly in the boyhood home of Adm. Chester Nimitz. The Hangar Hotel continues the tribute to World War II with '40s décor, and periodic air shows bring in vintage planes from all eras.

Fruit, wine and good times

Fredericksburg is famous for peaches, and the ar-

ea also is the center of Texas wine country, with more than a dozen wineries offering tastings and tours. Each has its own feel and specialty. They share a friendly, welcoming attitude and the chance to taste some good Texas-made wine.

Just east of Fredericksburg, the tiny town of Luckenbach has become a favorite weekend spot for bikers and other visitors. There are only two buildings; at the post office and general store you can buy a cold one, hear some locals picking guitars, and play washers. The other building is a hall where bigger name bands hold concerts, folks get married and burgers and ice cream are served from a stand.

Head north of Fredericksburg and you'll find Enchanted Rock, the largest exposed granite dome in North America. American Indians considered this a sacred spot, and many visitors today still do once they walk to the top. Then a short drive over to Texas 16 brings you to the Willow City Loop, one of the best places to see wildflowers and lovely views.



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EXPRESS-NEWS FILE PHOTO

Redbuds bloom along Town Lake Hike and Bike Trail near Lamsar Street bridge in Austin.

Austin: From Antone's to Zilker Park, a capital town

By **Roxa Diderik**
Special to the Express-News

State capital, live music capital, home to high tech and hippies, Austin is a city with many facets. It still feels like a small place in many ways, where strangers chat at the dog park, shorts and jeans are almost a dress code, and people are inclined to kick back and enjoy themselves.

By day, Austin shines indoors and out. This green city is studded with parks and bisected by the Colorado River. Take a stroll through the Zilker Park's Japanese Garden with its waterfalls, arched bridges and koi ponds. Learn about native plants and gardening tips at the Ladybird Johnson Wildflower Center. Rent jet skis and play on Lake Travis, or explore the greenbelt on either side of Barton Creek as it flows through the city to Town Lake. And don't forget to watch the bats come out to feed at dusk. Austin has the largest urban bat colony in North America living under the Congress Avenue

Bridge from March through September.

You can canoe downtown any day of the week, ride your bike around the Veloway, or walk or run the Town Lake Hike and Bike Trail.

Barton Springs is Austin's crown jewel. This spring- and creek-fed pool is a favorite spot for swimmers year-round with its constant 68-degree water.

Weird and wonderful

"Keep Austin Weird" is a city mantra, and here weird means fun. Come for one of the many distinctly Austin annual celebrations including Eeyore's Birthday, Kite Fest or the Zilker Hillside Musical. And what other town would host Spam-a-rama, a tribute to a canned lunch meat?

The Capitol XOX brings out runners decked out as queens, packs of cigarettes, cowboys, you name it. If costumes are your thing, don't miss Carnaval Brasileiro in February.

The first weekend of June brings the Republic of Texas Bike Rally to Austin.

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Thousands of bikers and motorcycle lovers come just for the free street party that closes Congress Avenue to make room for stages, vendors and hundreds of parked motorcycles.

Not all culture is Austin weird or nontraditional, however. The Texas Book Festival takes place here every October, the local theater scene has launched off-Broadway hits, and the Blanton Museum on the University of Texas campus has a stunning new home to display its collection of more than 17,000 works of art — the largest in Central Texas.

On the other side of campus, the Harry Ransom Center may be one of Austin's best-kept secrets. It is home to James Michener's art collection, Robert De Niro's collection of costumes and props from the movies he has made, Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein's Watergate papers, and much more.

The Capitol building is worth a trip. The buildings and grounds are full of interesting items, and the official tour is one of the best in any state. Guides share amusing facts and stories along with the facts, and you'll be amazed by the number of

places you'll spot the state seal.

Night life seven days a week

Austin is known internationally for its great live music. Go out any night of the week and you can find everything from jazz to zydeco, but pride of place goes to blues and country music.

Leave Sixth Street to the college kids, and find Austin's best nightlife at the Broken Spoke, a real Texas dance hall since South Lamar Boulevard was still in the country; Antone's, home of the blues for 37 years; the Copa, where you can salsa 'til you drop; and the Continental Club, where you'll hear everything from rock to zydeco and might even catch a visiting movie star checking out the band.

The South by Southwest Music Festival in March is the largest conference of its kind in the country. Hundreds of bands in every musical genre play the official showcases, and also appear along with even more bands at the many "not SXSW" unofficial showcases where no wrist bands are necessary.

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Bear Springs Blossom Nature Conservation Group Inc.
www.keeperbandera.beautiful.org/bearspringsblossom

Bandera and environs: A trip to days gone by

By **Rosa Diderfeld**

Special to the Express-News

A visit to the Cowboy Capital of the World is a step back in time. You find yourself in an era when watching TV was a family affair and weekends were for passing the time with your friends and neighbors at the local rodeo while the cowboys showed off their skills.

Take a walk down Bandera's Main Street and you'll find a dozen shops with offerings from the past. There's cowboy gear, of course, from straw hats to handmade leather goods. There are antiques and American Indian jewelry, and paintings and sculpture by local artisans with a national following. At the Bandera General Store you can still find real Moon Pies, little wax bottles with colored liquid, Gold Nugget gum, and other treats from every baby boomer's childhood.

On weekends, horses and longhorns draw children eager to pet them, and real cowboy singers ply their trade

along the sidewalks. At night, Bandera proves that cowboys can dance as clubs including Arky Blue's Silver Dollar, the Cabaret and the 11th Street Cowboy Bar crank up the bands. And don't be surprised to see horses tied up next to motorcycles in front of the clubs.

Get out of town

You can easily while away an afternoon watching people from a shaded bench in front of a local shop, or tour the scenic roads around Bandera and discover some of the best-kept local secrets.

A short drive north on Texas 16 brings you to Ranger Crossing, a roadside park by the Medina River. You can swim, picnic, be a daredevil on the rope swing, or just enjoy the cool shade of the stately cypress trees that line the banks. (You can also cool off in the river in town at City Park.)

Head to Medina for a stop at Love Creek Orchards. Medina is the Apple Capital of Texas, and at the general



Spectators line the streets in downtown Bandera to watch the arrival of longhorn cattle.

KIN MAN HUI/STAFF

Texas Traveler

store you can buy trees, apple ice cream, apple butter, gifts and more.

Keep going on the 337 Loop and head toward Lost Maples State Natural Area, known for having the westernmost stand of bigtooth maple trees in the country. Two miles before this park you'll find the Lone Star Motorcycle Museum, open Friday through Sunday. Owner Allan Johncock has spent 40 years collecting classics, from Nortons to Indians to Harleys and more. More than 60 bikes, from 1910 right up to today, are on display, and he is still competing on the Vintage Lightweight racing circuit around the country.

Head back to Bandera through Tarpley and you'll pass Mac & Ernie's. This roadside eatery looks like a hamburger stand, but serves up gourmet-quality food.

Back to nature

Discover what the Hill Country was like before man upset nature's balance at the Bear Springs



RONA DISTENFELD/SPECIAL TO THE EXPRESS-NEWS

Mac & Ernie's may look like a burger shack, but serves gourmet-quality lamb, quail, longhorn beef and more.

Blossom Nature Conservation Center. Madrone, cherry and Mexican buckeye trees are plentiful here (and almost nonexistent elsewhere in the region), yellow-cheeked warblers nest here, and Peter and Marianne Bonenberger point out many of the more than 183 plant species that thrive here as they guide you on trails cushioned with cedar.

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