

The Local's Guide to San Antonio

By Steve A. Peirce and the Hon. Ronald B. King

The great cowboy philosopher Will Rogers named San Antonio one of America's four unique cities. Even if Will never heard of urban legends such as the Donkey Lady or The Man With Chicken Feet, we surely agree that our city is unique. San Antonio has also been called every Texan's favorite city. It is our home, our favorite city, and we are glad to share with you this local's guide.

The Weather

Temperatures in San Antonio in October generally range from the low 60s to the mid-80s, often on the same day. You might need a sweater or light jacket in the morning or evening.

The Location

Downtown San Antonio is built around the San Antonio River, or more accurately, the San Antonio River was routed through downtown, as part of a Works Progress Administration project. The Marriott Hotels are on the east end of downtown, and many of the things to see are within walking distance to the west.

The Rivercenter Mall (shoprivercenter.com) is connected to the Marriott Rivercenter Hotel and is across the street from the Marriott Riverwalk Hotel. The Rivercenter Mall features more than 100 stores and restaurants plus an IMAX theater. If you want to know more about the

Alamo, see the 45-minute movie, "Alamo: The Price of Freedom"; the IMAX (www.amctheatres.com/movie-theatres/san-antonio/amc-rivercenter-11-with-alamo-imax) always shows it and other movies. The Rivercenter Mall also has the Rivercenter Comedy Club, a Morton's Steakhouse, and an expansive Food Court. The San Antonio River runs through the Food Court area, which often features live music on the banks.

The Walking Riverwalk Tour

Walk west down the main Rivercenter Mall hallway and exit the mall at street level. You will see a series of shops and Alamo Plaza. On your right (north), you will see the historic Menger Hotel, where Teddy Roosevelt assembled his Rough Riders at the Menger Bar (mengerhotel.com), and where staff and guests alike report frequent ghost sightings.

Directly to the north of the Menger is the Alamo, Shrine of Texas Liberty. Take off your hat before you enter and pay your respects. Think of the 26-year-old lawyer who was put in charge of defending the Alamo, William Barrett Travis, who looked down the barrel of thousands of Mexican General Santa Anna's guns, and penned a letter for help, which concluded with "Victory or Death." Envision Travis gathering almost 200 Defenders—all knowing they would die if they stayed and resisted the assault—and drawing a line in the dirt, asking every man determined to "stay here and die with me" to step over the line. (Legend has it that all but one Frenchman did. Jim Bowie, sick and confined to a cot, was carried over the line by his men.) Or picture Tennessee

Congressman turned Texian Volunteer Davy Crockett giving a rousing speech to the Defenders, claiming, “I can swallow Santa Anna whole if you butter him down and pin his ears back!”

The Alamo is one of five Spanish frontier missions in San Antonio, and is the only one owned by the State of Texas, rather than being part of the National Historical Park. The five missions—the Alamo (originally Mission San Antonio de Valero), Mission Concepción, Mission San Jose, Mission San Juan, and Mission Espada—were established in the 17th and 18th centuries to help spread Christianity and provide safety to the local people. Miles of sunny trails connect the missions, but driving to each mission is also easy and parking is plentiful. Tours of the four non-Alamo missions are provided by the National Parks Service and admission is free (nps.gov/saan/index.htm, or call 210.932.1001).

Directly to the north of the Alamo is the Hipolito F. Garcia Federal Building and United States Courthouse, which houses the two bankruptcy courtrooms for San Antonio. If you step inside, check out the frescos of Texas history in the lobby, as well as Judge King’s historic Courtroom on the Third Floor, which was featured in the movie *The Newton Boys* starring Matthew McConaughey, Ethan Hawke, Vincent D’Onofrio, and Julianna Margulies.

Across the alley from the Alamo (actually, across the street) is your obligatory row of tourist businesses. Plenty of fast food is available, and if you must have some, the hamburger at Fuddrucker’s is an excellent choice. Do not eat any

Mexican food at a fast food place in San Antonio. You’ll want the real thing. For weirdness, the Alamo Plaza has a Ripley’s Haunted Adventure with the Guinness World Records Museum (ripleys.com/phillips, or call 210.226.2828) where you can marvel and gasp at various freaks of nature and science.

From Alamo Plaza, the best way to get to the Riverwalk is by way of the Paseo del Alamo walkway (adjacent to Ripley’s) down the stairs past the fountains and through the lower level of the Hyatt Regency Hotel. As you exit the Hyatt Hotel at the Riverwalk, go right.

Walking to the right from the Hyatt (west) along the Riverwalk, you will see the South Bank. The South Bank has a Hard Rock Cafe, a martini bar called Swigs, a sing-along bar called Howl at the Moon, and Paesano’s Italian Restaurant. If you want barbecue on the Riverwalk, you never “sausage” a good place as The County Line. For local flavor, we recommend Paesano’s and its famous Shrimp Paesano. Under the Navarro Street Bridge, in the basement of a hospital, you will see a Dick’s Last Resort, which we don’t recommend. At Dick’s, you can take the stairs up to Navarro Street, and turn right (north) up Navarro Street toward Walgreens, which is at the corner of Houston Street and Navarro. From this corner, you can see two premier restaurants, The Palm and Bohannon’s Steakhouse. Facing The Palm, go left (west) and you will see the majestic Majestic Theater, which is a popular venue for plays and musical performances. If you’re lucky, you can score some tickets to see someone like Lyle Lovett, who plays there about once a year. Just on the other side of the Majestic, on St.

Mary's Street, is the Empire Theater, another popular venue for musical and theatrical performances (*majesticempire.com*). One block west of the Majestic, at 150 East Houston Street, is the modern Hotel Valencia, featuring the V-Bar, which is not a wrestling hold, but a James Bond style cocktail lounge. Across the street from the Majestic is the venerable Sheraton Gunter Hotel. If you need a haircut or a shoe shine, go to the old-fashioned barbershop in Gunter's basement; while you're there, read Steve Peirce's article on the wall, "You Can Get A Haircut In Bankruptcy, But You Can't Get A Bankruptcy With A Haircut," or one of their many popular magazines. If you want to try some inexpensive local Mexican food, go a block and a half north from the Gunter to 419 North St. Mary's and eat at the Blanco Cafe, which serves breakfast and lunch only. (Another great local and inexpensive Mexican restaurant is Mexican Manhattan (*mexicanmanhattan.com*), located on the river at 110 Soledad, near Commerce, two blocks north of the Bexar County Courthouse. Ask for directions. They close at 10:00 p.m.)

Head back eastward on Houston Street (facing the Majestic, that's left). On your right, at the corner of Houston and North Presa, you'll see the Buckhorn Saloon & Museum (*buckhornmuseum.com*, or call 210.247.4000). Formerly housed at the now defunct Lone Star Brewery, the Buckhorn can best be described as a taxidermy museum with a restaurant and saloon. It features an amazing display of 35,000 square feet of horns, fins, and feathers acquired from some of the great hunters of the world. Keep heading east for another block and you will return to Alamo Plaza,

where you can access the mall.

The Walking Riverwalk Tour, Going Left from the Hyatt River Exit

Other recommended restaurants along this route are the Zuni Grill (Southwestern food), Rio Rio (Mexican food), and Boudro's (Continental). Circle around to the right along the Riverwalk (the left leg of the river takes you back to the mall), and you will see the Hilton Palacio Del Rio Hotel, the Little Rhein Steakhouse, and a stage with grass-covered steps across the river. The stage is the Arneson River Theater, site of numerous festivals and musical performances. Walk up the steps and enter the area called La Villita, San Antonio's oldest surviving neighborhood, dating from the 1750s. La Villita features artists, craftsmen, and specialty shops. If you have a hankering for authentic German food and the best homemade root beer anywhere, circle back down the grassy steps, exit the Commerce Street Bridge, and you will see Schilo's Delicatessen (opened in 1917 and pronounced SHEE lows) located street level at 424 East Commerce near Alamo Plaza (*schilos.com*, or call 210.223.6692). From Alamo Plaza, walk opposite from the Hilton (north), and you're back to Rivercenter Mall.

Now You Need Transportation

Take judicial notice! San Antonio is the home of the best Mexican food and Margaritas anywhere. A short drive or trolley ride west on Commerce will take you to Market Square, also called El Mercado. The most notable Mexican restaurants in Market Square are Mi Tierra (open 24/7) and its sister restaurant, La Margarita

(mitierracafe.com; lamargarita.com). Market Square features eateries, shops, curios from Mexico, and two mini malls. Many festivals and various musical events take place at Market Square.

Outside downtown, the best of the best Mexican restaurants are La Fogata (probably the most beautiful setting, and “everclearly” the most powerful Margaritas), La Fonda on Main (great food, some outdoor seating, and authentic, real lime juice Margaritas), Los Barrios (expansive menu, home cooking, but weak Margaritas), and close to downtown in the South Town/King William area, Rosarios and El Mirador, (lafogata.com; rosariosa.com; lafondaonmain.com; losbarrios1.com; elmiradorrestaurant.com).

North of downtown is the Museum Reach, a 2009 Riverwalk extension that sports the San Antonio zoo, the Japanese tea Gardens, Brackenridge Park, the Witte Museum, the Doseum, the San Antonio Museum of Art, and the Pearl District. The Pearl District features a farmers market, retail shops, and spectacular restaurants (many of them upscale; atpearl.com/food).

The Spurs

October is the beginning of basketball season. Check out the Spurs’ website (nba.com/spurs) and watch for the possibility of a home game during the conference.

The Hill Country

San Antonio is at the base of the Texas Hill Country, a scenic expanse of natural beauty and small towns. Straight up

Bandera Road (aka Highway 16), about 10 miles outside of San Antonio, is the town of Helotes. Helotes is the home of the venerable Texas music venue, Floore’s Country Store (liveatfloores.com, or call 210.695.8827), where decades ago, house act Willie Nelson sang “Hello Walls” under the stars and Heloteons cried in their Lone Star beers. Today you might see Texas musicians such as Robert Earl Keen or Pat Green while enjoying tamales and barbecue. Even the Red Headed Stranger has been known to stop in to do a show. Shows are indoors or out, depending on the weather.

Within a 45-minute drive of San Antonio, off I-35 north, is Gruene, Texas (say GREEN, not GROON). Gruene is an historic German town completely surrounded by the City of New Braunfels, which is another historic German town. Gruene is located on the Guadalupe River, which is a favorite location for rafting, kayaking, and tubing. The centerpiece of Gruene is Gruene Hall, billed as the oldest dance hall in Texas. Gruene Hall features live music, usually Thursdays through Sunday nights, including Saturday and Sunday afternoons. Gruene Hall has been highlighted in many music videos and movies and is a frequent venue for great Texas entertainers such as Asleep at the Wheel, Jerry Jeff Walker, and Gary P. Nunn (gruenehall.com, or call 830.606.1281). Note: some shows at Gruene Hall sell out in advance. Gruene also features many restaurants and shops, as well as the Guadalupe River, which are within walking distance. The most popular restaurant in Gruene is the Gristmill (gristmillrestaurant.com or call 830.625.0684).

For another outing, you can take the hour and a half drive to Fredericksburg and Luckenbach, going west on I-10 to north on 87. Where 87 meets Highway 290, you will find the town of Fredericksburg, a tourist favorite, which features shops, restaurants, and pubs. About five miles east on 290 from Fredericksburg is a turnoff at the KOA Campground site, Farm Road 1376, to Luckenbach, Texas, which is a right turn down a driveway near a low water crossing. Luckenbach (luckenbachtexas.com, or call the store at 830.997.3224) consists of an old Post Office store, a dance hall, and a small scattering of buildings. On a Sunday afternoon, you can get a cold beer at the store and listen to musicians who frequently gather there. You can continue traveling further east on 290 and visit Stonewall and Johnson City where you can see the boyhood home of Lyndon Johnson.

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How to Act

That's right, you're not from Texas, but Texas wants you anyway. For your own protection, please heed the following warnings. Never say, "San Antone" unless you happen to be singing a song (such as San Antonio Rose) that requires you to say "San Antone." If you're going to wear cowboy boots, your pants must be long enough to make a one-half inch clearance from the floor at the back of the heel, with a slight "break" in the pant leg at the instep. DO NOT wear high waters and cowboy boots. Don't say anything bad about Kawhi Leonard or Tony Parker, but if by accident you do, say that Manu Ginobili is the most exciting player in basketball. And never claim that you have had better Mexican food anywhere else, even if you have. Have fun, and come back and see us.