

Weird and wonderful

Ultra-hip Austin is an ideal gateway for exploring the Lone Star State, finds Ella Buchan

The shores of Barton Springs Pool in Zilker Lake were barely visible, with just the odd patch of grass between rectangles of towels, picnic blankets and languid bodies, sunbathing between dips in the refreshingly chilly water.

Nearby Lady Bird Lake was dotted with the skinny ovals of kayaks and paddleboards, gliding serenely on the teal-hued water.

When it's hot outside (as it often is, this being Texas), Austin

residents don't complain or work themselves into a sweat. They make a beeline for the nearest body of water.

Maybe being blessed with so much green and blue space explains the laid-back vibe that hums gently through Austin's streets. Perhaps it's the 228 sunny days the city bathes in, on average, each year, or the eclectic, chilled-out music scene. Or maybe it's all of these things - plus having other Hill Country

attractions, from wineries to dude ranches, a short drive away.

Norwegian launched direct flights from Gatwick to Austin in spring 2018, opening up the city and nearby areas to UK visitors.

▶ WHAT TO SEE

Visitors who spend time browsing South Congress Avenue's shops, stuffed with hand-stitched cowboy boots and vintage gear, might notice three words in the windows: "Keep Austin Weird."

The slogan tells you a lot about this city - it's fiercely independent and delightfully offbeat. Recommend clients spend a few hours pottering about this stretch of galleries and boutiques, stopping to try on the cowboy look at Allen Boots.

The dining scene is equally eclectic. Elizabeth Street Cafe is a chic spot serving enormous bowls of vermicelli noodles, wafer-thin vegetables and tender meat laced with rich spices



PICTURE: SHUTTERSTOCK



“**‘Keep Austin Weird’ tells you a lot about the city – fiercely independent and delightfully offbeat**

LEFT: Bar 96, Rainey Street

BELOW: Upstairs at Caroline

and umami flavours. They do a nice brunch too, with Japanese whisky cocktails. Or recommend Caroline, attached to the Aloft hotel downtown. This breezy spot serves eggs benedict in a bright dining room and patio, while

its semi-open upstairs area has sofas, lawn games and cocktails. To get a sense of the city beyond downtown, recommend AO Tours. Its pink vans take visitors on a 90-minute spin around the city (for about £20),

giving an overview of the historic buildings and sites, including buzzy entertainment district 6th Street and the State Capitol complex. It also covers trendy neighbourhood East Austin and the African American Cultural District, before giving a glimpse of Hill Country’s vast green spaces and lakes.

It’s a great way to get your bearings. Because, while Austin is easy to walk or cycle around, it packs in a lot of attractions. Take the music and nightlife scene. While 6th Street is a hub in the same vein as Beale Street in Memphis or Bourbon Street in New Orleans, pockets of hip (and more chilled-out) bars are tucked

away nearby. You just need to know which corner to turn.

Rainey Street’s bungalows house cute bars with live music and twinkly-lit patios. Most allow you to bring in food bought from nearby trucks. Then there’s super-trendy East Austin’s Manor Road area, packed with laid-back brew pubs and locally focused restaurants such as Hoover’s Cooking and Eastside Cafe, which sources ingredients from its garden.

Closer to downtown, Antone’s – one of the locations taken over by the huge SXSW festival every March – has live blues most nights, and you can usually buy tickets on the door.

But one of the city’s most popular gigs is a performance by Mexican free-tailed bats. Between March and October, crowds gather each evening on Congress Avenue Bridge, waiting for the million-plus migrating bats to emerge from their nests under the arches and flutter into the night.

There’s even a Bat Fest every August, celebrating the tiny mammals with live music, food trucks and costume contests.

For the best seats in the house, Lone Star Riverboat offers sunset cruises for about £20. The open boats glide down Lady Bird Lake before stopping a little past the bridge to watch the show.

Where to stay



SAVE
Fairfield Inn & Suites, Fredericksburg
This new Marriott hotel is within easy reach of the area’s wineries and charming downtown. Comfortable in-room desks and free high-speed internet make it ideal for business travellers. Doubles from £100. marriott.com



SPEND
Westin Austin Downtown
Clients looking to party won’t have to venture far if they stay here. The Westin’s rooftop pool is one of the city’s hippest hangouts on weekends thanks to DJs, great cocktails and skyline views. Doubles from £150. westinaustindowntown.com



SPLURGE
Hotel Emma, San Antonio
This former brewhouse is one of the defining features of the city’s hip Pearl District, built on the site of the disused Pearl Brewery. The stylish rooms are complemented by touches such as welcome margaritas and bedtime macarons. Doubles from £250. thehotelemma.com



PICTURES: NICOLE FRANZEN; KEVIN BESWICK; PEOPLE PLACES & THINGS PHOTOGRAPHICS; ERRICH PETERSEN

PICTURES: VISIT AUSTIN/BAR 96; TRAVELTEXAS; SAN ANTONIO MUSEUM OF ART

WHERE TO GO NEXT

Austin is tucked on the edge of Hill Country, home to vibrant cities, pretty towns and hundreds of wineries. Recommend clients hire a car so they can explore farther afield.

San Antonio is about 90 minutes’ drive away. Most people come to visit the site of the 1836 Battle of the Alamo, or to potter along the pretty River Walk, which is home to restaurants, bars and the impressive San Antonio Museum of Art.

But now the city has a neighbourhood that rivals Austin in the hip stakes. Developed on the site of an old brewery, the Pearl District has shops and restaurants inside former administrative offices, accommodation in a brewhouse (Hotel Emma) and a food hall in a bottling plant. Right by the San Antonio River, it’s easy to walk to downtown attractions, or

grab a bike from one of the city’s B-Cycle hubs.

Fredericksburg, a German-settled town about an hour from Austin or San Antonio, makes an elegant base for exploring the Texan wine scene. Though most of the grapes are grown further north, in Lubbock, Hill Country has become a hub of tasting rooms, both in the charming downtown area and surrounding countryside, which is also famed for growing intensely flavoured and juicy peaches.

It isn’t just the quality of the wine – from bold, subtly spicy reds to sweet wines made with viognier grapes – that’s surprising. Though it looks like a film set at first glance, Fredericksburg is full of character, as evidenced by its food scene.

Restaurants are tucked within antiques stores and below galleries – Woerner Warehouse Country Market & Cafe and the



ABOVE: San Antonio Museum of Art

Bistro at Vaudeville, respectively – while Otto’s German Bistro serves upscale, modern takes on heritage recipes. Then there’s the music, from downtown dive bars to the ‘picker circles’ at legendary Luckenbach Texas, famously played by Willie Nelson.

Suggest a hike at nearby Enchanted Rock State Natural



Norwegian’s new route runs three times a week from Gatwick to Austin, from £340 return. norwegian.com

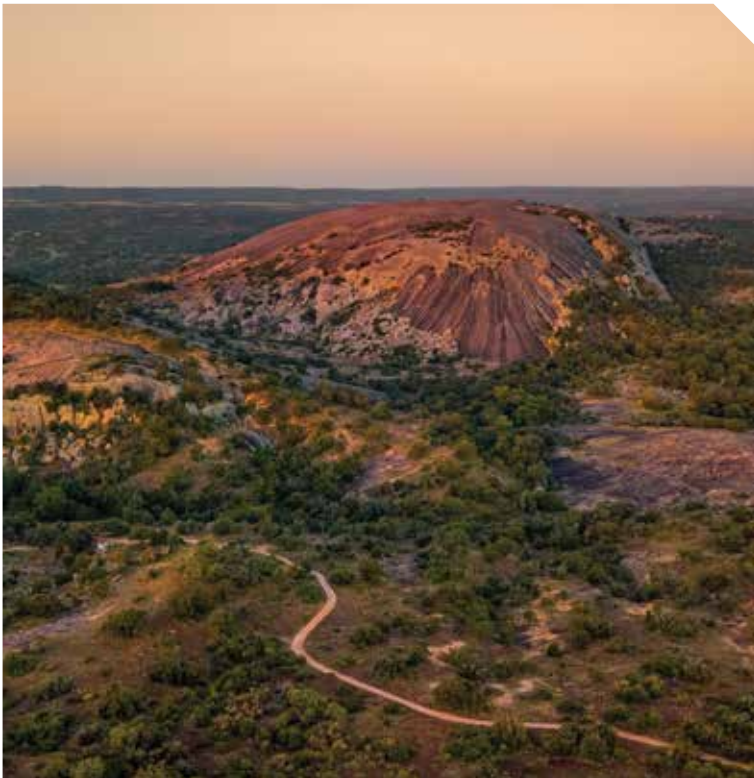
Go to the tourist board’s TravelTexas.com site for tips on planning trips to the state. traveltexas.com

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ABOVE: Enchanted Rock State Natural Area



Fredericksburg really resembles a Western movie set, with general stores and ramshackle bars

Area. Its huge granite boulder is dotted with patches of fragrant shrubs, blackjack oaks and vernal pools teeming with minuscule fairy shrimps, whose eggs survive the dry season before springing to life when it rains.

For clients interested in immersing themselves in the Old West, or just wanting to wear their new cowboy boots, suggest extending their stay with a trip to Bandera, less than an hour from Fredericksburg (or two hours from Austin).

The downtown really does resemble a Western movie set, with gable-roofed buildings, general stores and ramshackle bars crammed with memorabilia (including a collection of bras tacked to the walls and ceiling at 11th Street Cowboy Bar – apparently the donors were rewarded with free shots).

A stay in Bandera, though, is all about the dude ranches, built on land once used for cattle drives. Now the Texas longhorns are a tourist attraction. Clients can see the huge, curly-horned cattle up close at Silver Spur Guest Ranch, reaching its pastures via a hayride with world champion gunslinger Pistol Packin’ Paula.

Accommodation at the ranch starts at about £120 per night, including all meals and two hours of horse riding each day, trekking through meadows and woodland with a real-life cowboy.



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