

# What a ride

As the San Antonio Stock Show & Rodeo turns 75, Andrew McQuarrie gets a taste of the action

It's only when you're watching a man somersaulting over a charging bull that you truly come to understand the phrase 'nerves of steel'. Sitting in the crowd at the 75th edition of the San Antonio Stock Show & Rodeo, I'm overcome by a wave of gratitude that I'm unaware what it feels like to have my body gouged by a bull's horn. The somersaulting stuntman – who is thankfully unhurt – is among the stars of Noche Del Vaquero ('Cowboy Night'), which honours south Texas's history and culture. It's unclear to me whether the somersault routine is an

authentic display of that culture, but it certainly plays a memorable role in an evening that showcases the depth and breadth of cowboy traditions.

San Antonio's rodeo is different in that it includes a Mexican-style *charreada*, which incorporates elements of dressage.

"Mexico is where rodeo comes from," says Cody Davenport, chief executive of the show and rodeo. "We're very proud of our culture and heritage."

San Antonio's three-week fixture attracts 1.5 million visitors and their enthusiasm is infectious. I quickly fall deeper under the spell of the event's festival-like feel. ➤

PICTURE: Sam Anderson ©



**Marc Anderson**  
chief executive  
and president,  
Visit San Antonio

“San Antonio offers the international traveller so much from an experiential standpoint. People are looking for authentic experiences, and if they’re going to travel 10 hours to the US, they want to experience something new and rich that speaks to their soul. The people of San Antonio love tourism and hospitality – and they’re going to welcome visitors with open arms. Our rodeo is one of the largest in the country, and it’s such a phenomenal experience for family travellers and couples who are looking for new experiences. Obviously, it’s steeped in cowboy culture, but the music concerts feature rap and R&B stars alongside A-list country musicians – so it can be surprising. We are one of the more affordable destinations, especially for family travel. When you compare a theme park visit in San Antonio with other places across the US, you’re looking at a third or half of what you would spend elsewhere.”



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Boudro’s; Noche Del Vaquero; longhorn cattle; mutton bustin’

PICTURES: San Antonio Stock Show & Rodeo/Scott M Foley



**BUSTIN’ A MOVE**

The more adventurous youngsters take part in one of the most bizarre competitions I’ve witnessed: Mutton Bustin’. Children as young as four lie on top of a sheep and cling on for dear life as the animal hurtles out of the gate, with the winner being the participant who holds on longest – which tends to be about eight seconds.

One day these kids might grow into professionals, but for now they’ve got to put in the hard yards and fall flat on their faces in front of 17,000 fans at NBA team San Antonio Spurs’ stadium, before being helped to their feet and stumbling away bandy-legged.

Yet sometimes even the fully fledged cowboys fare little better in their own categories, which only adds to the joy of seeing a moment of triumph.

**LEARNING THE ROPES**

I eventually get my own taste of victory during a day at a ‘dude ranch’ in Bandera, in the hill country northeast of San Antonio. Under the guidance of Larry Cortez, the 77-year-old owner of Rancho Cortez, I’m taught how to rope cattle and ride a horse.

“Whoa, boy, slow down – you’re like a helicopter,” says Cortez in response to my first roping attempt which, admittedly, comes close to decapitating the audience. But on my third shot, the loop in the 28-foot rope catches hold of the plastic calf’s neck and I’m lauding myself as a rising star of the ranching scene.

To maintain such high levels of performance, eating

“Children as young as four lie on top of a sheep and cling on for dear life as the animal hurtles out of the gate

well is vital. Thankfully, San Antonio is a specialist in this department, as the culinary capital of Texas and a Unesco-designated Creative City of Gastronomy.

The Mexican and Tex-Mex options supply a bounty of flavours in hearty quantities, especially at vibrant restaurant Mi Tierra Cafe y Panaderia. It’s been owned by the Cortez family – separate from the ranch-owning Cortez – for 83 years. Having begun with just three tables, the premises can now host up to 2,000 guests at a time, serving high-quality dishes using local ingredients.

“If it’s not good enough to feed my own mother, I don’t buy it,” says Eusebio Trujillo, a member of the Cortez clan, who has worked for the business for 48 years. He leads us to a huge mural entitled *The American Dream*, which depicts members of the Cortez family alongside others with Mexican roots who have gone on to achieve success in the US.

“See that gentleman there?” asks Trujillo, picking out a character from the display. “That’s me as a younger man.” ➤

# DESTINATIONS

## THE US | TEXAS



### Mi Tierra Cafe y Panaderia

This San Antonio landmark serves breakfast 24 hours a day, with Tex-Mex, Mexican and American classics featuring on the menu. Dishes come in portions that will set you up well for exploring the city.

[lafamiliacortez.com/mi-tierra](http://lafamiliacortez.com/mi-tierra)



### Casa Hernán

The traditional Mexican cantina is in the heart of Southtown, which boasts a large creative community; eye-catching artwork adorns the walls and sprouts from the floor. Chef Johnny Hernandez played a key role in the campaign to have San Antonio's culinary prowess recognised by Unesco.

[casahernan.com](http://casahernan.com)



### Boudro's

This riverside bistro combines the traditions of south Texas with the flair found in the world's top restaurants. Bold flavours are complemented by an extensive wine cellar, while first-time guests will be thrilled by the tableside guacamole preparation.

[boudros.com](http://boudros.com)



ABOVE: Boat trip on the San Antonio River PICTURES: Visit San Antonio; 9001 Productions

### SENSE OF HISTORY

A mile's stroll along Houston Street from Mi Tierra Cafe y Panaderia is one of Texas's most significant landmarks.

The Alamo is an 18th-century Spanish mission and fortress, but it is better known for the battle it hosted 188 years ago. The 13-day conflict was a critical engagement in the Texas Revolution and led to the death of about 200 'Alamo defenders' on March 6, 1836, including the famed Davy Crockett.

Tour guide Ed Johnson shows us the spot where Crockett's body was found, but adds that "history is not just the big names you read about". This point rings true beyond the entrance to the Alamo church, where a series of flags represent the nations where the defenders hailed from.

I linger by the saltire and note the plaque dedicated to the four Scots – John McGregor, David Wilson, Isaac Robinson and Richard Ballentine – and the "many other defenders of Scots ancestry" who gave their lives fighting against dictator Antonio López de Santa Anna and his army.

### RIVERSIDE RELAXATION

Our hotel, the Hyatt Regency San Antonio Riverwalk, is mightily convenient for taking a city-centre boat trip. And it's during a 35-minute sailing, knee-to-knee with fellow passengers (all of us cringing at our captain's cheesy jokes), that I enjoy a spell of inner peace

in the unlikeliest of circumstances. Perhaps it's the sun shining down, or maybe it's the soothing notes of the lapping water, or the green of the hanging trees, but as we nudge along the river, learning the stories behind San Antonio's historic buildings and new developments, I feel completely at ease.

A glance either side confirms it's not just me experiencing this. As well as the smiling faces within the boat, the pedestrians are clearly having a good time too. The whole city seems to have a spring in its step. I feel as if I've arrived at a proper understanding of San Antonio.

The destination delivers the thrill of a rodeo and the sense of place and history that comes with the Alamo, as well as the tickling of taste buds through its culinary expertise. But equally, there is something to be said for laying down your Stetson, riding helmet or chef's hat and taking a leisurely trip along the San Antonio River. Better bring your sailor's cap too. **TW**

### BOOK IT

**North America Travel Service** offers five nights at Hyatt Regency Riverwalk San Antonio, with Virgin Atlantic flights in February 2025, from £2,185, including a day experience at Rancho Cortez and a Go Rio cruise. Tickets for the 2025 San Antonio Stock Show & Rodeo have yet to go on sale. [northamericatravelservice.co.uk](http://northamericatravelservice.co.uk)