

Texas trails

Everything is bigger in Texas – but a self-drive around its smaller towns and cities reveals a different side of the Lone Star state, writes **Rhonda Carrier**



Jesse Stratton Band, Luckenbach

hip Texan capital Austin has a growing reputation as a live-music capital – but for anyone keen to take a deep dive into American country music, it's also the gateway to a little-known area called Texas Hill Country. Within easy reach of Austin, but a world apart in many ways, this is a place to get under the skin of the Texas that exists beyond the big cities.

Lying 45 to 90 minutes west and southwest of the state capital – depending what order you take things in, since it makes for a more or less circular route – this little pocket of small towns and back roads goes through mainly agricultural land and is packed with excellent music venues.

Expect the big skies and open vistas of classic US road trips, plus plenty of peach farms. It also brings together several layers of heritage – Native American, German Lutheran and cowboy culture – that, when combined, paint a different and hugely ➤

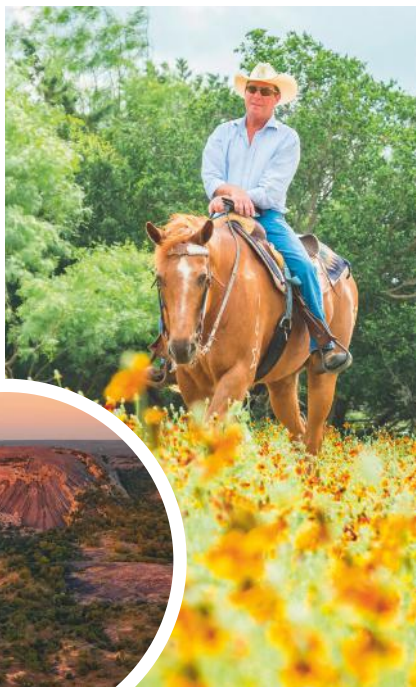
DESTINATIONS

THE US | TEXAS



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: 11th Street Cowboy Bar; Mayan Dude Ranch; Enchanted Rock State Natural Area, Fredericksburg; Luckenbach

PICTURES: Travel Texas/Pierce Ingram



fascinating picture of this much-misunderstood and underrated state. Fantastic wineries, superb food and outdoor adventures, including hiking and horse-riding on family ranches, put the icing on the Texan cake.

LUCKENBACH

Arriving at Luckenbach, just under 90 minutes west of Austin's airport, clients might feel like they've walked onto a movie set. But this tiny dot of a settlement, with its Lutheran church and legendary dance hall, is real, and a brilliant place to take in some of the best-known artists on the Texas music scene, whether indoors or out on the picnic tables under the oak trees, where friendly locals love to chat to visitors.

It feels like little has changed since Luckenbach was founded by German settlers in the 1840s and 1850s, with a lost-in-time general store stocking everything from guitar picks to 'God Bless Johnny Cash' car stickers.

FREDERICKSBURG

Drive 15 minutes northwest to Fredericksburg, also founded by German settlers in 1846, and you'll still see many signs in German on the town's historic Main Street. Its boutiques, art galleries, museums, bakeries and restaurants make it a joy to amble around.

Fredericksburg and the surrounding area is also at the heart of Texas Wine Country, with more than 60 wineries giving scope for visitors to taste the wide array of varietals on offer at venues such as Signor

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Vineyards on the Texas Hill Country Wine Trail.

There's also fresh air and exercise on offer at the Enchanted Rock State Natural Area, one of the most-visited nature reserves in Texas. A hike to the top of the rock itself rewards visitors with 360-degree views over Hill Country as well as geological anomalies such as vernal pools, where populations of 'fairy shrimp' dry out but then emerge when it rains and the seasonal pool is filled with water again.

BANDERA

It's an easy 50-minute drive south to the 'cowboy capital of the world', so-named because of its role as a staging area for the last great cattle drives of the 1800s.

Characterful Bandera and its surrounding hills now stand out for about a dozen working ranches where visitors can enjoy an authentic taste of the cowboy lifestyle through activities such as hay-bale rides to see longhorn cattle, roping displays by wranglers, horse-riding and outdoor cowboy breakfasts of ranch beans, hamburger rice and 'biscuits' with pepper gravy. ➤

6
OF THE
BEST

PLACES TO EAT in Texas Hill Country

Hill Country Herb Garden, Fredericksburg:

An enchanting wellness retreat with kitchen and herb gardens, serving home-grown veg.

Cabernet Grill, Fredericksburg: A landmark restaurant by award-winning chef Ross Burtwell, pairing outstanding cuisine with the state's largest selection of Texas wines.

Union Station, New Braunfels: A railroad-themed breakfast and lunch joint that has been family-owned for nearly 25 years, with the best pancake stacks around.

Krause's Cafe, New Braunfels: A local institution for schnitzels and other Germanic classics, with a huge beer garden and outdoor music space plus quirky events such as armadillo races and beer 'steinholding' contests.

Black's Barbecue, New Braunfels and San Marco: Legendary venues for slow-smoked meats including brisket, pulled pork, spare ribs and sausages.

Gristmill River Restaurant & Bar, New Braunfels: A 19th-century cotton gin overlooking the Guadalupe River, beneath Gruene's water tower, serving the like of Texas torpedoes and deep-fried bacon-wrapped jalapeños.



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FROM LEFT: Practising the Texas two-step at Gruene dance hall, New Braunfels; live music is a staple at Gruene Hall PICTURES: Travel Texas

Properties such as the fifth-generation Dixie Dude Ranch, Rancho Cortez and Mayan Ranch make for a quirky stay for lovers of classic Americana and offer facilities such as outdoor pools.

And make sure clients don't miss what's on offer in Bandera itself, especially the 11th Street Cowboy Bar Steak Night, where visitors bring their own juicy meats to cook over communal grills, accompanied by sides served from an outdoor booth. After dining is done, everyone takes to the bar's open-air dance floor to Texas two-step with a local band, with cowboys on hand to show visitors the ropes. Also unmissable is a drink in Arkey Blue's Silver Dollar, the oldest continuously operating honky-tonk bar in Texas.

NEW BRAUNFELS

Clients can put their new dancing skills to the test 75 minutes east of Bandera in New Braunfels, where the Gruene Historic District includes Gruene Hall, the oldest Texan dance hall still in operation. Built in 1878, it retains its high-pitched tin roof and original layout complete with side flaps for open-air dancing.

But there's more to this town than country dancing and cowboy boot shops; as the name suggests, New Braunfels is also rich in its German heritage, including many preserved 19th-century buildings.

There's outdoor fun to be had too in the form of swimming and tubing along its two converging rivers, the Comal and the Guadalupe. Families also love its 70-acre Schlitterbahn water park.

SAN MARCOS

One of the most interesting things about this part of Texas is that the German settlers made concerted attempts to coexist with the Native American population, successfully negotiating (and upholding) land treaties.

Situated on the shores of Spring Lake, San Marcos is the longest continuously inhabited location in North America and a sacred site to the Coahuiltecan people. The two-day Sacred Springs Powwow, held each October, is no tourist display but the real deal, organised by the non-profit Indigenous Cultures Institute and bringing together art, music, dance and food by groups from across Native America, including traditional drumming, inter-tribal dances and storytelling.

Genuine and heart-stirring, it's a powerful event worth planning a trip around. And it can be combined with a glass-bottomed boat tour of Spring Lake to see the natural springs and resident turtles. Also worth a look is the Wonder World Cave & Adventure Park, offering more lessons in geology in a state-recognised historic landmark.

Lastly, those who love classic Americana and the exuberant retail culture of the US will love Buc-ees, a vast service station and convenience store that has established a cult following for its Beaver Nuggets (sweet corn puff snacks) and an entire wall of jerky. San Marcos also has the largest outlet mall in the state, for those who still haven't found the right cowboy boots to take home while taking advantage of tax-free shopping in Texas. They'll need something to remember this little slice of cowboy country by – and to keep practising that two-step. **TW**

BOOK IT

USAirtours has a seven-night self-drive with flights to Austin on September 8, car hire, a night at The Truehart Hotel, Fredericksburg, then two each at Dixie Dude Ranch, Bandera; Prince Solms Inn, New Braunfels; and Embassy Suites by Hilton San Marcos, from £1,809. usairtours.co.uk

North America Travel Service has a 12-night fly-drive, A Texas Adventure, including Austin, Fredericksburg, a two-night stay at Mayan Dude Ranch in Bandera, then three nights each in Omni hotels in San Antonio and Houston. Prices start from £2,649 in September, with flights and car hire. northamericatravelservice.co.uk

Journeyscape has a 16-day trip visiting Austin, San Marcos, New Braunfels, San Antonio, Bandera, Luckenbach, Fredericksburg, Waco and Dallas, starting from £4,620, including hotels, flights, car hire and excursions. journeyscape.com

Find out more at traveltexas.com