

The Best of Texas

by David Baird, Eric Peterson & Neil E. Schlecht

Texans are a unique bunch, unapologetic in their swaggering embrace of the place they call home. “It’s flat and dry,” you say. “Yup, parts are,” they reply. “It’s hot,” you say. “Hotter ’n hell,” they confirm. “Texans talk funny,” you say. “Y’all do too,” they retort. Self-confident and independent almost to a fault, Texas seems to embody all that’s good, bad, and especially big about the United States. The former independent Republic of Texas—which shook off the landlord claims of Spain, Mexico, France, and even the United States—has diehards who still wish Texas would suck it up and secede.

Texans don’t seem to mind too much if outsiders get caught up in the myths and clichés about Texas (that way they get to keep the truth to themselves). A 10-gallon hat doesn’t hold 10 gallons of anything, nor is Texas flat, dry, and featureless, filled with cowboys on the range, oilmen watching their backyard gushers spit up black gold, and helmet-haired beauty queens. But it’s hard to compete with the state’s image, the canvas for 100 Western flicks. The big-sky frontier of Texas and the West is the quintessential American landscape, the mythic cowboy leading his longhorn cattle on long drives a heroic figure. The outlaws who thumbed their noses at authority (behind the barrel of a gun) and the boomtown gamblers who struck it rich are also part of the romantic tale of Texas.

The cowboy still exists, but Texas is now decidedly more urban than rural. Three of the nation’s 10 largest cities are here: Houston, Dallas, and San Antonio. Texas today is as much a leader of high-tech industries as it is an agricultural and ranching state. There are world-class art museums and collections in Houston, Fort Worth, and Dallas, where local philanthropists have used their money and influence to import the world’s most celebrated architects to build some of the nation’s most talked-about museums. Although Texas is by and large a conservative place, Austin has for decades supported thriving hippie and renegade musician communities, and Dallas is nipping at its heels with a thriving music scene. The state is a melting pot dotted by pockets of Czech, German, and Irish communities; bilingual populations in the lower Rio Grande Valley and border towns; and more than four million people of Hispanic descent statewide.

This enormous state also has immense geographical diversity. Cross Texas and you’ll see desert plains in the Texas Panhandle, the Piney Woods in East Texas, beaches in the Gulf Coast, North Texas prairies, scenic wildflowers and lakes in Central Texas Hill Country, desert canyons in Big Bend National Park, and the rugged Guadalupe Mountains.

Still, some of the clichés are true. Texas, the second-largest state in the United States in both land mass and population, is larger than any country in Europe. You can set

out from Amarillo in your car and drive south for 15 hours and still not reach the Mexico border. And everything is bigger in Texas, of course: The ranches are bigger, the steaks are bigger, and the bigger and badder cars—Cadillacs with longhorns on the grille and monster pickup trucks with gun racks in back—really do exist. In Texas you can carry a concealed handgun—even in church—and the state is known as the capital punishment capital of the world. “Don’t Mess with Texas” is more than an effective antilitter campaign.

Texans, though, are startlingly friendly and hospitable folks. Deals are still completed with handshakes, and adults say “yes, ma’am” and “nossir” to each other. Also, Texans love their sports, especially football. This is a place where entire towns pack the bleachers for Friday night high school games and preachers mention the game in their sermons, praying for victory in a kind of gridiron holy war.

Former Texas governor and owner of the Texas Rangers baseball team George W. Bush, who delights in using the down-home moniker “Dubya,” lost the popular vote but was elected the 43rd president of the U.S. in 2000 and reelected in 2004. Bush regularly draws the national media corps to his sprawling ranch in Crawford, Texas, outside of Waco, when he takes long breaks from Washington “to get back in touch with real people.” (Cindy Sheehan, the antiwar activist who lost a son in the Iraq war and camped outside the ranch, may not have been what he had in mind.) Bush usually makes the best of a photo op by strapping on his cowboy boots and homespun airs and hopping in the pickup, showing that he knows how to make the most of his transplanted Texan status.

It’s hard for most people to be indifferent about Texas. It’s a place to romanticize and ridicule, to dream about and dismiss. Texans can leave the state, but sooner or later they’ll admit their weaknesses for Texas dance halls and Old West saloons, Tex-Mex and barbecue, cowboy boots, and country music. From the big sky and flat plains and the Hill Country highways lined by Texas bluebonnets to the larger-than-life personalities like LBJ, Anne Richards, and Willie Nelson: Texas stays with you.

—Neil E. Schlecht

1 The Best Luxury & Historic Hotels

- **The Adolphus Hotel** (Dallas; ☎ 800/221-9083 or 214/742-8200): This landmark Beaux Arts hotel, built by beer baron Adolphus Busch, looks and feels like a European château. Luxuriate among dark-wood parlors, baroque art and antiques, and an opulent dining room, one of Big D’s best restaurants. Rooms are English country style, and a three-course English tea is served in the lobby living room every afternoon. See p. 82.
- **The Mansion on Turtle Creek** (Dallas; ☎ 800/422-3408 or 214/599-2100): Repeatedly named one of the top five hotels in the United States, the Mansion draws movie stars, princes, presidents, and luxury mavens. Formerly the grand estate of a cotton magnate in the 1920s and 1930s, the Mansion is refined and supremely elegant throughout, with service to match. The innovative Southwestern restaurant has slipped a notch, but is still among the most prized in town. See p. 85.
- **Hotel Zaza** (Dallas; ☎ 866/769-2894 or 214/468-8399): This super-fashionable Uptown boutique hotel has a catchy name and a cachet few can match. It is luxurious but überhip, with eclectic style to burn. The numerous “concept” suites with

funky themes (the “Shag-a-delic” Suite, anyone?) now pale in comparison with the new, fantasy-land “Magnificent Seven” suites. See p. 86.

- **W Dallas-Victory** (Dallas; ☎ 877/WHOTELS or 214/397-4100): The most buzzed-about hotel in Big D has an unwieldy name, but panache to burn. With a striking tower design, views of the Dallas skyline, a 10,000-square-foot Bliss spa, an outpost of NYC’s Craft restaurant, and Michael Kors–designed uniforms, it’s got all the star power it needs to attract a healthy portion of the fabulous and beautiful. See p. 86.
- **Stockyards Hotel** (Fort Worth; ☎ 800/423-8471 or 817/625-6427): Over-the-top luxury would be gauche in the old stockyards, so this extremely comfortable and authentic slice of the Old West qualifies as a Fort Worth indulgence: cowboy luxury. Outlaws on the run, cowpokes and their madames, and the C&W elite have all propped up their boots here. Cowtown’s cattle-ranching and railroad past are effortlessly evoked in the rooms, each of which is different: Tie your horse to the post (okay, park the Taurus in the lot) and bunk in the Bonnie & Clyde, Geronimo, or Victorian Parlor room. See p. 124.
- **Four Seasons Hotel Houston Center** (Houston; ☎ 800/332-3442 or 713/650-1300): Lots of space to stretch out in and lots of service so you don’t have to stretch too far. This hotel surpasses all others in amenities and services. Within a few blocks are the baseball park, the new basketball arena, a shopping mall, and the convention center. A bit beyond that is the city’s theater district and nightlife hub. See p. 164.
- **Hotel Derek** (Houston; ☎ 866/292-4100 or 713/961-3000): The most comfortable and most fun place to stay in Houston’s highly popular Uptown/Galleria area. The Derek offers a rare combination of practicality and style, making it a perfect choice for the business traveler or the vacation shopper. Service is smooth, and the hotel’s restaurant is winning raves from the local food writers. See p. 170.
- **Lancaster Hotel** (Houston; ☎ 800/231-0336 or 713/228-9500): Personal service, charming rooms, and great location are the keys to this hotel’s success. If there’s one hotel that makes having a car unnecessary in Houston, this is it. A block away are the symphony, the opera, three theaters, and the ballet. Also within a block or two are a multiplex cinema and several restaurants and clubs—you’ll have the best part of the city at your feet. See p. 165.
- **Omni Corpus Christi Hotel** (Corpus Christi; ☎ 800/843-6664 or 361/887-1600): The two towers of the Omni overlook Corpus Christi Bay, and the floor-to-ceiling windows of the 20-story Bayfront Tower offer spectacular views of the Gulf, particularly from its upper floors. Pamper yourself with a massage from the in-house massage therapist or relax in the whirlpool. Then have dinner in their Republic of Texas Bar & Grill. See p. 223.
- **Radisson Resort South Padre Island** (South Padre Island; ☎ 800/333-3333 or 956/761-6511): From the high-ceilinged lobby to the beautiful landscaping around the swimming pools, this Radisson spells luxury. Many rooms have grand views of the ocean, and everything is at your fingertips. See p. 243.
- **Omni La Mansión del Río** (San Antonio; ☎ 800/830-1400 or 210/518-1000): Occupying what was once the local seminary, this hotel has kept the local feel of the building, with architectural features such as beamed ceilings and stone balconies.

La Mansión is not a high rise, and it enjoys a wide frontage along the River Walk. It is, in short, the best hotel for experiencing San Antonio. See p. 258.

- **Watermark Hotel & Spa** (San Antonio; ☎ 866/605-1212 or 210/396-5800): If relaxation and pampering are what you seek, the Watermark should be your first choice in San Antonio. From the moment you step foot into the lobby, everything is taken care of effortlessly. The hotel has a great location on the River Walk, but the rooms are so attractive and comfortable, the service so personal, and the spa so easy to enjoy that you might never leave the premises. See p. 258.
- **The Driskill** (Austin; ☎ 800/252-9367 or 512/474-5911): If you want to play cattle baron, you can't do better than stay in this opulent 1886 hotel, restored to its former glory at the end of the 20th century. See p. 299.
- **Four Seasons Austin** (Austin; ☎ 800/332-3442 or 512/478-4500): With panoramic views of the lake, the wonderful service that this chain is known for, and a spa that consistently wins high praise, nothing is lacking here. Rooms are large and comfortable and come with all the amenities. Right outside the door is Austin's popular hike-and-bike trail, which rings the lake, and Austin's comfortable and fun downtown. See p. 302.
- **Cibolo Creek Ranch** (Shafter; ☎ 432/229-3737): Tucked under the Chinati Mountains in some of the most wide-open country in all of Texas, this is a getaway for the most special of occasions, and accordingly priced. The idyllic setting plays host today to a first-class resort, featuring picture-perfect guest rooms with red tile floors, adobe walls, and sumptuous border decor. The recreation is as impressive as the scenery. See p. 363.

2 The Best Bed & Breakfasts & Boutique Hotels

- **Hôtel St. Germain** (Dallas; ☎ 214/871-2516): Ever wanted to stay with your spouse at a plush bordello? This intimate boutique hotel and elegant, prix-fixe restaurant is about as close as you'll come to that fantasy. A gorgeous mix of early-20th-century France and New Orleans, the seven suites are so swank, with such pampering features as wood-burning fireplaces, draped Napoleon sleigh beds, bidets, and soaking tubs, that you may not want to leave. But your budget may force you to. See p. 84.
- **Belmont Hotel** (Dallas; ☎ 866/870-8010 or 214/393-2000): Dallas usually goes gaga over mirrored glass and brand-spanking-new buildings, so it's a refreshing change to find this vintage 1940s motor lodge in Oak Cliff transformed into a stylish, retro-styled boutique hotel. With its cool lounge bar and mid-century modern decor, it's a dollop of Palm Springs with views of downtown Dallas. See p. 83.
- **The Ashton Hotel** (Fort Worth; ☎ 866/327-4866 or 817/332-0100): Just off Sundance Square, this new boutique hotel—Fort Worth's only small luxury hotel—offers plush rooms and smooth service, as well as one of the best restaurants in North Texas. It's the new place to be in Cowtown. See p. 126.
- **Etta's Place** (Fort Worth; ☎ 866/355-5760 or 817/255-5760): A cozy and relaxing small hotel that feels like a B&B is just a heartbeat from Fort Worth's charming nightlife, shops, and restaurants of Sundance Square. It bears the name of Etta Place, the handsome girlfriend of the Sundance

Kid, who no doubt would approve of the spacious, modern rooms with lots of light and Texas touches. Kick back in the clubby library and music rooms. See p. 128.

- **La Colombe d'Or** (Houston; ☎ 713/524-7999): Have a four-course French dinner served in your suite's separate dining room. With such personal service and with only five suites, there's no way you'll get lost in the shuffle. Occupying a mansion built for an oil tycoon in the 1920s, the hotel has uncommon architectural features, and is furnished with antiques. Its location in Houston's Montrose District puts it squarely in the middle of the hippest part of town. See p. 168.
- **George Blucher House Bed & Breakfast Inn** (Corpus Christi; ☎ 866/884-4884 or 361/884-4884): This wonderful B&B combines the ambience of an elegant historic home—it was built in 1904—with modern amenities. Breakfasts are served by candlelight; and you're just across the street from a prime bird-watching area. See p. 223.
- **Ogé House Inn on the River Walk** (San Antonio; ☎ 800/242-2770 or 210/223-2353): The King William area abounds with B&Bs, but the Ogé House stands out as much for its professionalism as for its gorgeous mansion and lovely rooms. You don't have to sacrifice service for warmth here. See p. 261.
- **Mansion at Judges Hill** (Austin; ☎ 800/311-1619 or 512/495-1800): A room in the original mansion evokes the feel of a more relaxed and gracious era, especially the second-floor rooms which have a large and inviting porch, tempting one to linger and enjoy the view. The service, which is friendly and helpful, does everything to reinforce such a feeling. See p. 306.
- **Villa del Rio Bed & Breakfast** (Del Rio; ☎ 800/995-1887 or 830/768-1100): A luxurious Mediterranean-style villa—actually a mix of Italian and Mexican styles—built in 1887, the Villa del Rio gets our vote for the best place to stay in this area for anyone who appreciates old-world ambience and pampering and an exciting breakfast. See p. 379.

3 The Best Hotel Bargains

- **The Bradford at Lincoln Park** (Dallas; ☎ 888/486-7829 or 214/696-1555): A new residential-style hotel that primarily targets businesspeople, it's also superb for other travelers and families. The nicely styled and spacious suites have fully equipped kitchens, and there are a pool and small spa, exercise room, and business center, as well as free continental breakfast and local calls. See p. 89.
- **The Hotel Lawrence** (Dallas; ☎ 877/396-0334 or 214/761-9090): Downtown used to be a wasteland after dark, but now it's become a cool spot where a number of upscale hotels and restaurants are thriving. But you won't have to pay through the nose to stay near the famed grassy knoll and the original Neiman Marcus. This historic hotel has nice rooms and good services—in addition to its coveted location—for the cost of a roadside motel. See p. 84.
- **Lovett Inn** (Houston; ☎ 800/779-5224 or 713/522-5224): This B&B offers attractive, comfortable rooms with private balconies for a low price. Add a pool and a central location that is handy but quiet, and you have a winning combination. See p. 169.

- **Best Western Sunset Suites—Riverwalk** (San Antonio; ☎ 866/560-6000 or 210/223-4400): Low room rates, lots of free perks, and a convenient location near downtown—not to mention superattractive rooms in a historic structure—make staying here a super deal. See p. 200.
- **Austin Motel** (Austin; ☎ 512/441-1157): Look for the Austin’s classic neon sign in Austin’s hip SoCo area. The rooms have been individually furnished, many in fun and

funky styles, but the place retains its 1950s character and its lower-than-1990s prices. See p. 305.

- **Travelodge Hotel—La Hacienda Airport** (El Paso; ☎ 800/772-4231 or 915/772-4231): Some roadside motels surprise you with their attention to detail—this is definitely one of them. We like the eight Jacuzzi rooms, featuring picture windows that separate the tubs from the bedrooms, and the family suites, amusingly decorated with plenty of room. See p. 351.

4 The Best Restaurants

- **The French Room** (Dallas; ☎ 214/742-8200): This formal but thankfully not intimidating restaurant in the historic Adolphus Hotel is dreamy, like dining at Versailles. Indulge in superb classic French cuisine and museum-quality wines surrounded by a rococo-painted ceiling, flowing drapes, and crystal chandeliers. See p. 90.
- **Stephan Pyles** (Dallas; ☎ 214/580-7000): The legendary West Texas chef, back after a long hiatus, has upped the ante in dramatic fashion in his new, chic but still very Texan, eponymous restaurant in the Arts District. Pyles, *Esquire* magazine’s Chef of the Year in 2006, says what emanates from his massive kitchen is “new millennium Southwestern cuisine.” The man behind Star Canyon has taken Big D by storm once again. See p. 91.
- **Javier’s Gourmet Mexicano** (Dallas; ☎ 214/521-4211): The owners and devotees of this gourmet Mexico City restaurant will gently inform you that, no, this isn’t Tex-Mex. Javier’s serves deliciously prepared grilled fish and meat dishes and mesquite-smoked chicken in a Spanish colonial setting. Come for a top-shelf margarita at the clubby bar, but I guarantee you’ll stay for dinner. See p. 94.
- **Café Ashton** (Fort Worth; ☎ 817/332-0100): The creative New American bistro fare at this swank restaurant, in a boutique hotel of the same description, quickly shot to the top of everyone’s best-of lists in Fort Worth. Hotel dining is rarely this good or this intimate. See what all the fuss is about. See p. 132.
- **Lanny’s Alta Cocina Mexicana** (Fort Worth; ☎ 817/850-9996): The young great-grandson of the man behind Fort Worth’s longtime standard for Tex-Mex, Joe T. Garcia’s, has struck out on his own with this sensational fine-dining take on Mediterranean cooking with Mexican sensibilities. Sophisticated but unfussy, it’s *the* place to dine in downtown Fort Worth. See p. 134.
- **Mark’s** (Houston; ☎ 713/523-3800): No fussy French nouvelle here, and no boring steak and potatoes either. Mark’s manages to serve up dishes that can satisfy at some deep subconscious level while they fulfill our eternal quest for something new. This is New American cooking as it should be performed. See p. 178.
- **Cafe Annie** (Houston; ☎ 713/840-1111): No other restaurant in Houston garners quite the attention that this place does from both food critics

and the public alike. With its innovative Southwestern cooking, the best wine list in the city, and a master sommelier (the only “master” in Texas), the restaurant has its credentials. Chef/owner Robert Del Grande offers up wonderful dishes that show just how fertile the crossbreeding of Mexican and American cooking can be. See p. 183.

- **Le Rêve** (San Antonio; ☎ 210/212-2221): Regularly designated the best restaurant in Texas, Le Rêve never disappoints. Owner/chef Andrew Weissman is exacting in the practice of his craft and produces a dining experience that is close to being other-worldly. See p. 266.
- **Uchi** (Austin; ☎ 512/916-4808): Don't think of this restaurant as just a good place for sushi and Japanese cuisine. It's a great restaurant, period, with creative cooking that transcends its humble roots. The setting, in a beautifully revamped 1930s house, is transcendent, too. See p. 311.

- **Café Central** (El Paso; ☎ 915/545-2233): Well worth the splurge, Café Central is a sleek urban bistro serving sophisticated international cuisine. The menu changes daily, but always offers a wide range of standout fare—most notably creative Southwestern interpretations of traditional Continental dishes. The wine list is one of the city's best, with nearly 300 bottles, and desserts include the best *leches* (Mexican milk cakes) in all of Texas. See p. 352.
- **Ocotillo** (Lajitas; ☎ 432/424-5000): For our money, this is the best restaurant on the entire Texas-Mexico border. Ocotillo specializes in wild game with Mexican-inspired sauces; the interplay between the two is a revelation. Executive Chef Blas Gonzales brought 20 years of experience from Austin. Everything is fresh: Seafood is flown in daily from both coasts, and many ingredients are grown in a terrace garden on-site. See p. 397.

5 The Best Texan Dining

- **Sonny Bryan's Smokehouse** (Dallas; ☎ 214/357-7120): Sonny Bryan's has been turning out sweet barbecue since 1910, and the little smoke shack out on Inwood has acquired legendary status. Salesmen perch on their car hoods with their sleeves rolled up and wolf down hickory-smoked brisket, sliced-beef sandwiches, and succulent onion rings. Thinner sorts squeeze into tiny one-armed school desks and get ready to douse their brisket with superb, tangy sauce. A classic. See p. 98.
- **Bob's Steak & Chop House** (Dallas; ☎ 214/528-9446): Bob's will satisfy the steak connoisseur—the real Texan—in you. With a clubby but relaxed mahogany look and behemoth

wet-aged prime beef and sirloin filets, this is a place for the J. R. crowd. Even the accompaniments—“smashed” potatoes and honey-glazed whole carrots—are terrific. And the meat-shy need not fear: The chop-house salad is a meal in itself. Cigar aficionados should keep their noses trained for Bob's cigar dinners: Every course is served with a different cigar. See p. 93.

- **Lonesome Dove Western Bistro** (Fort Worth; ☎ 817/740-8810): The work of a daring young couple, this friendly and eclectic restaurant challenges Cowtown to broaden its horizons. The Southwestern menu at this Stockyards eatery successfully stretches the popular theme in new

ways, adding unique Texas touches that are both avant-garde and comforting. Pop in for the cheap Stockyards lunch special or dive into a blowout dinner. See p. 131.

- **Angelo's** (Fort Worth; ☎ 817/332-0357): Fort Worth's classic Texas barbecue joint is as unpretentious as they come: Its wood paneling, mounted deer and buffalo heads, metal ceiling fans, and Formica tables might have come from a Jaycee lodge. That's kitschy cool to some, meaningless to everyone else. What is important is the fantastic hickory-smoked barbecue. See p. 135.
- **Loma Linda** (Houston; ☎ 713/924-6074): Bursting the bubble of a perfectly puffed tortilla smothered in chile con queso is the moment where anticipation meets realization in the Tex-Mex experience. The aroma, the texture, the taste . . . words fail me. You can scour the borderlands a long time before coming up with an old-fashioned Tex-Mex joint like this one. The restaurant even has its own special tortilla maker for producing these puffed-up beauties. Also of note are the perfectly seasoned classic Tex-Mex enchiladas with chili gravy. See p. 176.
- **Gaidos** (Galveston; ☎ 409/762-9625): Offering traditional cooking as it is practiced on the Texas Gulf Coast, Gaidos is the keeper of the flame for lovers of seafood that steers clear of fads and trends. The family has been serving up stuffed snapper, gumbo, and fried oysters for four generations. See p. 212.
- **La Playa** (Corpus Christi; ☎ 361/980-3909): For a Tex-Mex restaurant to be considered truly great, it must, of course, do a good job with the traditional enchiladas in chili gravy, have excellent fajitas, and pay attention to the details in cooking the rice and beans. It helps if it has a signature dish or two. In this case, it's deep-fried avocados. No place but Texas, baby! See p. 224.
- **La Playa** (Port Aransas; ☎ 361/749-0022): This place is in no way connected to La Playa of Corpus Christi. But the cooking is just as local and does a great job with Tex-Mex style seafood dishes such as *campechana* cocktails and fish tacos. The margaritas transcend cultures, but La Playa's got that hominess and welcoming feel that is as much Texas as anything else. See p. 233.
- **Mi Tierra** (San Antonio; ☎ 210/225-1262): Some people dismiss this cafe as touristy. Not so. It is the practitioner of old San Antonio cooking traditions. Order any of the Tex-Mex specialties and sit back and enjoy the ambience—both the food and the decor are expressions of local tastes when celebrating is called for. And travelers need no excuse to celebrate once they've hit upon this gem. See p. 268.
- **Shady Grove** (Austin; ☎ 512/474-9991): This is the most quintessentially Austin restaurant in town. It offers a laid-back Texan menu, a huge outdoor patio, and an "unplugged" music series. See p. 313.
- **L&J Café** (El Paso; ☎ 915/566-8418): An El Paso landmark since it opened its doors in 1927, the L&J is both inexpensive and offers some of the best Tex-Mex food you'll find anywhere. The chicken enchiladas, overflowing with fluffy meat and buried under chunky green chile and Jack cheese, approach perfection. It doesn't hurt that the salsa is spicy, the beer is cold, and the service is quick and friendly, even when the place is filled to capacity—as it is most of the time. See p. 353.
- **Starlight Theatre** (Terlingua; ☎ 432/371-2326): A 1930s movie palace abandoned when the mines in Terlingua went bust in the following decade,

the Starlight Theatre was reborn as an eatery and watering hole in 1991. The stage is still here, but the silver screen takes a backseat to the food (especially the trademark enchiladas,

filet mignon, and sautéed chicken), drink (namely Texas beers and prickly pear margaritas), and desserts (the cobbler for two is legendary). See p. 396.

6 The Best Lone Star Experiences

- **Hopping Aboard the Grapevine Vintage Railroad:** The Old West comes alive aboard the Tarantula Railroad. A nostalgic train (when running, a restored 1896 steam locomotive called *Puffy*) rumbles along the track from Stockyards Station in Fort Worth, tracing the route of the Chisholm Trail, to the Cotton Belt Depot in historic Grapevine, Texas, a town with 75 restored turn-of-the-20th-century buildings. See p. 140.
- **Lassoing the Fort Worth Stock Show and Rodeo:** Fort Worth ain't called Cowtown for nothing. In late January and early February, the Southwestern Exposition and Livestock Show, as it's officially called, recalls the glory cowboy days with horse shows, auctions, and all sorts of livestock, from beef cattle to llamas and swine. The nightly rodeos are big draws. See "Fort Worth" in chapter 4.
- **Attending a Mariachi Mass at Mission San José:** The Alamo may be more famous, but hearing a congregation of San Antonians raise their voices in spirited prayer reminds you that the city's Spanish missions aren't just, well, history. See p. 276.
- **Tubing on the River:** In central Texas, upstream from the town of Gruene, is

a stretch of the Guadalupe River that Texans love to float down "leisurely like" in tubes (one tube per person and one for the ice chest). During the late spring and early summer the air is hot, the water is cold, and the "tuber" (tube-potato?) finds life most agreeable. There is no shortage of outfitters who can set you up with a tube and put you in the water. See p. 336.

- **Explore Tejas/Cross the Border:** There are nearly 800 miles of Texas-Mexico border, and the Rio Grande from the Gulf of Mexico to El Paso is a fascinating region. We are big fans of Ciudad Acuña, across the river from Del Rio, and the amazing canyons in Big Bend National Park, but the entire "borderlands" region is more attractive and diverse than most visitors realize. See chapters 9 and 10.
- **Exploring Big Bend National Park:** Vast and wild, this rugged terrain harbors thousands of species of plants and animals—some seen practically nowhere else on earth. A visit can include a hike into the sun-baked desert, a float down a majestic river through the canyons, or a trek among high mountains where bears and mountain lions rule. See "Big Bend National Park" in chapter 10.

7 The Best Museums

- **The Nasher Sculpture Center** (Dallas): This world-class collection of modern sculpture recently debuted in the downtown Dallas Arts District. Ray Nasher and his wife Patsy spent 4 decades assembling what has been

called the finest private collection in the world (it includes superlative works by Miró, David Smith, Brancusi, Moore, Giacometti, Picasso, Matisse, Calder, and many more). Designed by Renzo Piano, it has a

gorgeous open-air sculpture garden with landscape design by Peter Walker. See p. 102.

- **Meadows Museum of Art** (Dallas): Now in a new building with more room to show off the greatest collection of Spanish masters outside Spain, the Meadows was built by a Dallas oilman fascinated by Spanish art. The museum proudly displays a wealth of works by Velázquez, Goya, Ribera, Murillo, Zurbarán—just about all the biggies from Spain’s golden era as well as the 20th-century masters Picasso, Dalí, and Miró. See p. 106.
- **Kimbell Art Museum** (Fort Worth): Probably the country’s finest small museum, this masterwork by Louis Kahn is a joyous celebration of architecture and a splendid collection of art to boot. Kahn’s graceful building, a wonder of technology and natural light, is now a chapter in architectural studies worldwide. The small permanent collection ranges from prehistoric Asian and pre-Columbian pieces to European old masters, Impressionists, and modern geniuses. The Kimbell also gets some of the world’s most important traveling shows. See p. 142.
- **Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth** (Fort Worth): In a spanking new modernist building designed by the Japanese architect Tadao Ando, the new Modern—actually the oldest art museum in Texas—is now the nation’s second largest dedicated to contemporary and modern art. The permanent collection includes works by Picasso, Rothko, Warhol, Rauschenberg, and Pollock. See p. 142.
- **Amon Carter Museum of Western Art** (Fort Worth): The newly expanded Amon Carter Museum is one of the finest collections of Western and American art in the country, including the most complete group of works by Frederic Remington and Charles M. Russell, two behemoths of Western art. It also possesses a great photography collection and important paintings by Georgia O’Keeffe and others. See p. 140.
- **Menil Collection** (Houston): One of the great private collections of the world, it could very well have ended up in Paris or New York, but was graciously bestowed by the collectors on their adopted city. To experience the Menil is pure delight; very little comes between the viewer and the art, which includes works by many of the 20th-century masters, classical works from the ancients, and tribal art from around the world. See p. 190.
- **Museum of Fine Arts, Houston** (Houston): With the addition of the Audrey Jones Beck Building, the Fine Arts museum has doubled its exhibition space and has especially put its collection of Impressionist and baroque art in the best possible light. The museum also has several satellite facilities and attracts major touring exhibitions. See p. 188.
- **The Center for the Arts & Sciences** (Brazosport): One of those rare entities that does a lot of things exceptionally well, The Center includes a terrific natural history museum, a delightful small planetarium, an attractive art gallery, two theaters for a variety of performing arts events, and a nature trail. See p. 214.
- **San Antonio Museum of Art** (San Antonio): Almost as impressive for its architecture as for its holdings, this museum combines several castlelike buildings of the 1904 Lone Star Brewery. The \$11-million Nelson A. Rockefeller Center for Latin American Art is the most comprehensive collection of its kind in the United States. See p. 275.

- **Marion Koogler McNay Art Museum** (San Antonio): A beautiful collection beautifully located and beautifully displayed. This small museum is a delight to visit for everyone, but especially for fans of modern art, who will devour its collection of works by the modern masters. See p. 275.
- **McDonald Observatory** (northwest of Fort Davis): McDonald Observatory is considered one the world's best astronomical research facilities, and twice a day visitors can glimpse sunspots, flares, and other solar activity. Additionally, nighttime "Star Parties" are held 3 evenings a week, when visitors can view celestial

objects and constellations through the observatory's high-powered telescopes. See p. 359.

- **Panhandle-Plains Historical Museum** (Canyon): The largest history museum in Texas, this excellent museum is anything but a dusty collection of spurs and bits. Well thought out, engaging, and informative, it is largely hands-on—you can sit in a Ford Mustang and listen to Buddy Holly tunes or try out a sidesaddle. There are also comprehensive exhibits on the region's history in terms of petroleum, art, transportation, Western heritage, and paleontology/geology. See p. 425.

8 The Best Shopping

- **Neiman Marcus** (Dallas): Established in 1907, Neiman Marcus is intimately identified with Big D and its shopaholics. The luxury purveyor's annual holiday catalog, with his-and-her fantasies for the rich, has become an institution. The downtown store is classy and retro-cool, the best place in North Texas to drape yourself in Prada and Chanel. See p. 112.
- **NorthPark Center** (Dallas): Dallas loves to shop, and while there are more malls than most people (except Dallasites) know what to do with, NorthPark is the most traditional and elegant (even with its recent expansion that doubled its size); it also has a graceful layout that outclasses its more garish competitors. Besides top anchor stores (Neiman Marcus, Tiffany's), it enjoys rotating pieces from owner Ray Nasher's spectacular collection of modern sculpture, on display throughout the mall. See "p. 113.
- **Stockyards National Historic District** (Fort Worth): In Cowtown, looking the part is important. Pick up Western duds—suits and shirts with elegant piping and embroidered

yokes that would have made you a star in the Old West, plus cowboy boots and other Western paraphernalia—just steps away from the old Stockyards livestock pens. Right on the main drag is **Maverick**, which has upscale Western wear and a bar serving up Lone Star longnecks. **M. L. Leddy's** is a longtime family-owned shop with a big boot sign out front and top-quality hats, hand-tooled belts, and custom-made boots. And just down the street, plunk down the cash for exquisite custom cowboy boots at **Ponder Boot Company**. See "Fort Worth" in chapter 4.

- **Uptown** (Houston): In this one, relatively small district of the city you can find Houston's Galleria (with over 300 retailers including Saks, Neiman Marcus, Tiffany's, and Versace) and four other malls fronting Post Oak (including such retailers as Cartier and FAO Schwarz). See "Shopping" in chapter 5.
- **Paris Hatters** (San Antonio): Pope John Paul II, Prince Charles, Jimmy Smits, and Dwight Yoakam have all had Western headgear made for them

by Paris Hatters, in business since 1917 and still owned by the same family. About half of the sales are special order, but the shelves are stocked with high-quality ready-to-wear hats, too. See p. 283.

- **Capitol Saddlery** (Austin): The custom-made boots of this classic three-level Western store near the capitol, run by the same family for 7 decades, were immortalized in a song by Jerry Jeff Walker. Come here for hand-tooled saddles, belts, tack, and altogether unyuppified cowboy gear. See p. 328.
- **Fredericksburg** (Texas Hill Country): It's hard to say how a town founded by German idealists ended up being a magnet for Texas materialists, but Fredericksburg's main street is chock-a-block with boutiques. This is the place to come for everything from natural chocolate mint-scented room deodorizer to handmade dulcimers. See p. 332.
- **El Paso Chile Company** (El Paso): We love this shop for its tongue-searing delicacies, with fiery names such as "Hellfire & Damnation," and all things spicy. See p. 350.

9 The Best Places for Boot-Scotin'

- **Adair's Saloon** (Dallas): Deep Ellum's down-'n'-dirty honky-tonk is unfazed by the new wave discos, rock clubs, and preppy SMU students in its midst. It sticks to its down-to-earth antistyle, knee-slapping country and redneck rock bands, cheap beer, and tables and walls blanketed in graffiti. See p. 116.
- **Gilley's Dallas** (Dallas): Gilley's is where John Travolta rode a bucking bronco in *Urban Cowboy*, and now Big D has a branch of the famous Houston honky-tonk. If bigger is better, this one's right up there with the best of them: It's got 90,000 square feet of dance floor, bars, and stages. See p. 116.
- **Billy Bob's Texas** (Fort Worth): Kind of like a big-tent country theme park, Billy Bob's has it all: 40 bars, a huge dance floor for two-stepping, pro bull riding, and live performances by some of the biggest names in country music. And of course dance lessons: Shuffle and two-step like a Texan after a few hours with instructor Wendell Nelson. See p. 149.
- **Blanco's** (Houston): This is one of those genuine honky-tonks where you go for the music and the dancing and not for dressing up in Western duds. It's strictly come as you are, and this place attracts 'em from all walks of life, from bankers to oil field workers. It's a small venue, but gets some of the best of Texas's country music bands. See p. 199.
- **Floore's Country Store** (San Antonio): Not much has changed since the 1940s when this honky-tonk, boasting the largest dance floor in South Texas (half an acre), opened up. Boots, hats, and antique farm equipment hang from the ceiling of this typical Texas roadhouse. There's always live music on weekends; Willie Nelson, Dwight Yoakam, Robert Earl Keen, and Lyle Lovett have all played here. See p. 285.
- **Texas Hill Country** (San Antonio and Austin): The Texas Hill Country has some of the best honky-tonks in the state. In Gruene, just outside of New Braunfels, **Gruene Hall** is the oldest country-and-western dance hall in Texas and still one of the mel-lowest places to listen to music. Don't miss **Arkey Blue & The Silver Dollar Bar**, a genuine spit-and-sawdust

cowboy honky-tonk on the Main Street of Bandera. When there's no live music, plug a quarter in the old jukebox and play a country ballad by owner Arkey. And look for the table where Hank Williams, Sr., carved his name. See "Hill Country Side Trips" in chapters 7 and 8.

- **Broken Spoke** (Austin): This is the gen-u-ine item, a Western honky-tonk with a wood-plank floor and a cowboy-hatted, two-steppin' crowd. Still, it's in Austin, so don't be surprised if the band wears Hawaiian shirts, or if tongues are planted firmly in cheeks for some of the songs. See p. 330.

10 The Best of Natural Texas

- **Dallas Arboretum & Botanical Garden:** Who knew Dallas had more than dust, concrete, steel, and glass? This surprising oasis on the edge of White Rock Lake is a great spot to duck the Texas sun. Relax on 70 acres of groomed gardens and natural woodlands, interspersed with a handful of historic homes. The gardens are especially colorful in spring and fall. See p. 104.
- **Fort Worth Botanic & Japanese Gardens:** A rambling, spacious showcase of 2,500 native and exotic species of plants on 100-plus acres, this is the oldest botanical garden in Texas, created back in the late 1920s. The Texas Rose Garden, 3,500 roses that bloom in late April and October, and beautiful Japanese Garden are terrific places to hide out from the world. Bring a picnic, a book, and a flying disk. See p. 141.
- **Big Thicket National Preserve:** It has been called "the American Ark" for its incredibly rich variety of plants and wildlife, all packed into 100,000 acres of watery bottomland in deepest East Texas. You can explore the area on foot or in canoe, and see firsthand how the woods grow so thickly here that they all but blot out the sun, and make trailblazing almost impossible. See "Side Trips to East Texas" in chapter 5.
- **Aransas National Wildlife Refuge:** A mecca for birders, with some 300 species sighted here, the refuge is also

home to a variety of frogs and other amphibians, plus snakes, turtles, lizards, and numerous mammals. But Aransas has become famous for being the main winter home of the near-extinct whooping crane, the tallest bird in America—5 feet high with an 8-foot wingspan. See "Rockport" in chapter 6.

- **Mustang Island State Park:** This barrier island has more than 5 miles of wide, sandy beach, with fine sand, few rocks, and broken shells, and almost enough waves for surfing. The park is one of the most popular of Texas state parks, and is especially busy on summer weekends. See "Port Aransas" in chapter 6.
- **Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center:** Few people remember that it was Lady Bird Johnson who started a program to beautify America's highways—and that she began practicing it in her home state. This flower-powered research center is a natural outgrowth of this first lady's lifelong efforts to beautify the state. See p. 320.
- **McKittrick Canyon:** The canyon is forested with conifers and deciduous trees. In autumn, the maples, oaks, and other hardwoods burst into color, painting the world in bright colors set off by the rich variety of the evergreens. See "Guadalupe Mountains National Park" in chapter 10.
- **Palo Duro Canyon State Park:** This 60-mile canyon, sculpted by the Prairie Dog Town Fork of the Red

River over the last 90 million years, is a grand contrast to the ubiquitous, treeless plains of the Texas Panhandle. Its 800-foot cliffs, striped with orange, red, and white rock and

adorned by groves of juniper and cottonwood trees, present an astoundingly stark beauty. See “Canyon & Palo Duro Canyon State Park” in chapter 11.

11 The Best Historical Attractions

- **The Sixth Floor Museum at Dealey Plaza** (Dallas): The events of November 22, 1963, shook the world. John F. Kennedy’s assassination in Dallas is remembered by everyone old enough to remember, and argued over still. Visitors can tour the sixth floor of the Texas School Book Depository, from where the Warren Commission concluded that a single sniper, Lee Harvey Oswald, felled the president. The museum also examines the life, times, and legacy of the Kennedy presidency, making it a place to revisit not only the tragic episode but also an era. See p. 100.
- **The Stockyards National Historic District** (Fort Worth): Still very much looking the part, this area north of downtown was once the biggest and busiest cattle, horse, mule, hog, and sheep marketing center in the Southwest. Put on your boots and best Western shirt and tour the Livestock Exchange Building; Cowtown Coliseum (the world’s first indoor rodeo arena); former hog and sheep pens now filled with Western shops and restaurants; and Billy Bob’s Texas, the “world’s largest honky-tonk.” Then grab a longneck at the White Elephant saloon—the oldest bar in Fort Worth and the site of the city’s most famous gunfight in 1897—and check in at the historic Stockyards Hotel. To enhance the experience, check out the “longhorn cattle drive” that rumbles down Exchange Avenue daily—or take the Vintage Train into Grapevine. See “Fort Worth” in chapter 4.
- **San Jacinto Monument** (Houston): Here on the battlefield of San Jacinto, a small army of Texans led by General Sam Houston charged the much larger, better equipped Mexican army and dealt them a crushing blow. The victory gave Texas its independence. A monument and museum occupy the battlefield to honor and explain the history of the battle and its significance. See p. 185.
- **USS *Lexington* Museum on the Bay** (Corpus Christi): Exploring this huge World War II-era aircraft carrier offers non-naval persons the opportunity to get an idea of what it was like to live for sometimes months in the claustrophobic conditions of such a limited area. In addition to sleeping, dining, and cooking areas, the ship provided a hospital, rec room, and, of course, numerous necessary working areas. See p. 221.
- **The Alamo** (San Antonio): It’s smaller than you might expect, and it sits smack in the heart of downtown San Antonio, but the graceful mission church that’s come to symbolize the state is a must-see, if only to learn what the fuss is all about. See p. 273.
- **San Antonio Missions National Historical Park**: It’s impossible not to remember the Alamo when you’re in San Antonio; more difficult to recall is that the Alamo was originally just the first of five missions established by the Franciscans along the San Antonio River. Exploring these four missions, built uncharacteristically close to each other, will give you a glimpse of the city’s early Spanish and Indian history. See p. 276.

- **State Capitol** (Austin): The country's largest state capitol, second only in size to the U.S. Capitol—but 7 feet taller—underwent a massive renovation and expansion in the 1990s, which left it more impressive than ever. See p. 319.
- **New Braunfels:** Trying to decide which of the Hill Country towns is the most representative of the area's rich German heritage is tough, but the *gemütlich* inns, history-oriented museums, and sausage-rich restaurants—not to mention the major celebration of Oktoberfest—make New Braunfels a standout. See “Hill

Country Side Trips from Austin” in chapter 8.

- **El Paso Mission Trail:** Established in the 17th and 18th centuries, these three historic Spanish missions provide a link to El Paso's colonial past. They are among the oldest continually active missions in the country, and warrant a visit for their architectural and historic merit. Especially impressive is the large Presidio Chapel San Elceario, near the site of “The First Thanksgiving,” said to have taken place in 1598, 23 years before the Plymouth Thanksgiving. See p. 344.

12 The Best Family Adventures

- **Old City Park** (Dallas): Dallas is determinedly modern, with gleaming skyscrapers and a love for newness, but its Western heritage lives on museum-like in this facsimile of the Old West, a 13-acre park of historic buildings. Mounted like a late-19th-century village, it has a redbrick Main Street, Victorian homes, train depot, general store, one-room church, schoolhouse, and bank, all relocated from the Dallas area. The “Living Farmstead” recreates a 19th-century prairie with actors in period garb. See p. 106.
- **The Stockyards** (Fort Worth): Far from a dry old historic district, the Stockyards come alive with the flavor of the Old West. Kids will adore the twice-daily “cattle drive” of the Fort Worth Herd, which rumbles down the cobble main drag, led by cowhands in 19th-century duds. They'll also love to find their way around the **Cowtown Cattlepen Maze**, a human maze made to look like old cattle pens. See “Fort Worth” in chapter 4.
- **Fort Worth's Children's Museums** (Fort Worth): The **Fort Worth Museum of Science and History** is large and multifaceted, with a domed IMAX

theater, planetarium, and a bunch of great hands-on science displays, including life-size Lone Star dinosaurs. The **National Cowgirl Museum and Hall of Fame** teaches little cowgirls and cowboys about pioneering women of the American West, but in a way that really brings the culture to life: Jukeboxes pump out country tunes, and kids can ride a simulated bucking bronco, see the film of their adventure on the museum's website, and get their pictures superimposed on Old West film posters. And don't forget the **Fort Worth Zoo**, one of the best in the country. See “Fort Worth” in chapter 4.

- **Arlington:** Sandwiched between Dallas and Fort Worth is a kids' suburban dream world, where youngins can stumble from the roller coasters at Six Flags Over Texas to the water slides at Hurricane Harbor, followed by a visit to Ripley's Believe It or Not and The Palace of Wax, topped off by paying their respects to baseball's greats at the Legends of the Game Baseball Museum at The Ballpark in Arlington. See “Arlington” in chapter 4.

- **Space Center Houston** (Houston): Always the most popular attraction in the city, NASA's Space Center Houston is a joint effort powered by NASA technology and Disney know-how. It is the epitome of interactive display and simulation that manages to fascinate both kids and parents. During your visit, you can check out what's going on at the Johnson Space Center through a tram ride and video feeds. See p. 187.
- **The Gulf Side of South Padre Island:** Fine white sand and warm water lapping at your toes—what more do you want? Although the shore is lined with hotels and condos, the beaches are public and open to everyone. See “Padre Island National Seashore” in chapter 6.
- **Six Flags Fiesta Texas** (San Antonio): Major thrill rides, a huge swimming pool shaped like Texas, and entertainment/food areas with Texas history themes—there's something for every family member at this theme park, and it's even slightly educational. See p. 277.
- **The Austin Bats:** The majority of adults and kids alike tend to find bats a bit creepy—until they learn more about them, that is. From March to November, you can watch thousands of bats emerge in smoky clouds from under the Congress Avenue Bridge, and find out why Austinites adore the little critters. See “Seeing the Sights” in chapter 8.
- **Balmorhea State Park:** This is one of the crown jewels of the Texas state parks and also one of the smallest, at 45 acres. The main attraction is the massive, 1¼-acre swimming pool—3.5 million gallons of water at a fairly constant 74°F (23°C). Not your usual swimming pool, it's teeming with small fish and laden with rocks. But swimming, snorkeling, and scuba diving are all popular. There's also a reconstructed *cienega* (desert wetland) where you might spot native wildlife such as a Texas spiny soft-shell turtle, a blotched water snake, or a green heron. See “Small Towns of Central West Texas” in chapter 9.

13 The Best of Texas Online

- **The Handbook of Texas Online** (www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online): The Handbook is an encyclopedia offering concise entries that explain who's who, what's what, and where's where in Texas. It's easy to use and has information on just about everything, from the locations of towns and counties to explanations of some of the state's legends, to biographical data on the many characters who left their mark on Texas history.
- **Texas Department of Transportation** (www.traveltexas.com): The state's official tourism website is practically the only site you'll need to type in—everything else will be a link. We especially like the section that offers easily printable discount coupons, primarily for lodging and attractions.
- **Texas Outside** (www.texasoutside.com): This is a great resource for planning outdoor activities for just about anywhere in the state. It breaks Texas down into different regions and has separate pages for Texas's largest cities. You'll find maps and information on all sorts of outdoor sports, such as hiking, hunting, fishing, biking, and canoeing.
- **Dallas–Fort Worth Area Official Visitors' Website** (www.visitdallas-fortworth.com): For purely practical matters, this frighteningly bureaucratic-sounding address gives you the lowdown on area events and even

allows you to download coupons good for saving a few bucks at museums, theme parks, and other local attractions.

- **Guidelive.com:** The entertainment Web page of the *Dallas Morning News*, North Texas's major newspaper, contains the most current events listings, as well as restaurant, movie, music, and show reviews for both Dallas and Fort Worth. It even has a shopping blog that promises the inside guide to the best local finds and deals.
- **MySanAntonio.com:** The website of the city's only mainstream newspaper, the *San Antonio Express-News*, not only provides the daily news, but also links to local businesses such as dry cleaners and florists (via its Power Pages) and to movie, nightlife, and dining listings and reviews.
- **Austin 360** (www.austin360.com): Movie times, traffic reports, restaurant picks, homes, jobs, cars. . . . This site, sponsored in part by the *Austin-American Statesman*, the city's main newspaper, is a one-stop clicking center for a variety of essentials. It's easy to navigate, too.
- **Texas fun:** We all know the Internet's best for purely personal and marginal interests, so check out these sites once you're done with your trip planning. Visit **www.texascooking.com** for authentic Texas cooking, including recipes and discussions of mysteries such as the Texas fruitcake subculture conspiracy. Then there's **www.texascooking.com/notable.htm**: Which is the best three in a row? Morgan Fairchild, Farrah Fawcett, and Freddy Fender, or George "Spanky" McFarland of "Our Gang," Larry McMurry, and Meat Loaf?