

The Best of San Antonio & Austin

Drawing up best-of lists (and reading those of others) has become a favorite pastime in the U.S. these days. Almost every national magazine or Podunk weekly newspaper has its yearly best-of list. Sometimes it's given a little extra dressing up and called "awards." In this game, anybody can play (and the Internet seems to be the favorite playground), so don't let me have all the fun. Make your own lists. There are a lot of things in San Antonio and Austin that lend themselves to such lists: best walks through downtown, best margarita, best puffy taco, best way to work off the aftereffects of too many margaritas and puffy tacos. Make your lists, but let me help with the research.

1 MOST UNFORGETTABLE EXPERIENCES

- **Strolling the Grounds of the Alamo:** In the middle of this bustling city, the grounds of the Alamo (holy grounds, if you consider yourself a Texan) can seem curiously quiet on some days, when the crowds have abated—so quiet you can hear the wind blowing through the oak trees. Perhaps it was that quiet in the moments before the final siege. Perhaps it was that quiet when days earlier William Travis purportedly drew his famous line in the sand. See p. 111.
- **Walking the River in Downtown San Antonio:** The first planned urban green space in Texas, the River Walk, is still the best. Follow the original course of the river as it meanders through this old city, a city that owes to this river its origin, its layout, and, now, even its prosperity. Old bridges, some quite low, span the river at varying angles. Here and there you glimpse between buildings a distant view of something such as an old skyscraper, but mostly it's the feel of an urban canyon, with buildings rising up along both banks. See it both at daytime and at nighttime as you get two different views. See p. 116.
- **Lazing in the Courtyard at the Marion Koogler McNay Art Museum:** As fine as many of the paintings here are, when it comes to transcendent experiences, you can't beat sitting out on the lovely tree-shaded patio of the McNay. See p. 117.
- **Riding a bike through the King William District and Upper Southside:** Riding through this area just south of downtown is a trip through time and across cultures, from the opulent mansions built here by German merchants in the 19th century to the artsy and ethnic Hispanic areas south and east. See chapter 7.
- **Splashing around Barton Springs Pool:** The bracing waters of this natural pool have been drawing Austinites to its banks for more than 100 years. If there's one thing that everyone in town can agree on, it's that there's no better plunge pond on a hot day than this one. See p. 224.
- **Joining the Healthy Hordes on Austin's Hike-and-Bike Trails:** Head over to the shores of Town Lake to see why *Walking* magazine chose Austin as

America's "Most Fit" city. Walkers and runners share the path with cyclists and strollers. You get good vistas of the city and the lake and see quite a bit of local society, too. See p. 245.

- **Sipping a Margarita While Watching the Sun Set over Lake Travis:** Relax at the Oasis on one of the many decks that stretch across a hillside high above Lake Travis, order a large margarita, and begin congratulating yourself on living the high life. Laid out before you are miles of watery landscape. If conditions are right, a soft redness will tint the view and create a warm, fuzzy feeling of oneness with the world. See p. 216.
- **Attending a Taping of Austin City Limits:** This will be a matter of luck, but if you come to town at the right

time, and the show that will be taped happens to be music you like, then there's nothing better than getting tickets to be part of the show. And then, sometime later, when the show airs, you can relive the experience. See p. 265.

- **Checking Out Who Is Playing at the Continental Club:** While you're in town, there will be some act playing at the Continental Club that you positively can't miss. It might be a happy hour show; it might be an evening show; it might be somebody you haven't even heard of yet. But take my word for it, with the variety and quality of acts that perform at this famous little club on South Congress Avenue, there's no better place to expand your musical tastes. See p. 272.

2 BEST SPLURGE HOTELS

- **Omni La Mansión del Río** (San Antonio): There's no hotel more San Antonio than this luxurious palace on the River Walk. Graceful buildings and courtyards, balconies overlooking the river amid tall cypress trees, handsome rooms decorated in traditional San Antonio style—La Mansión has it all. See p. 75.
- **The Watermark Hotel & Spa** (San Antonio): Also on the river, this hotel, sister to La Mansión, specializes in pampering with style. A spa takes care of the details. See p. 75.
- **Hyatt Regency Hill Country Resort & Spa** (San Antonio): Visiting San Antonio with the family? Hole up in this place and the kids will forever be in your debt. With tubing and many other outdoor activities on the property and SeaWorld in the neighborhood, there's plenty to keep them busy while you enjoy your own relaxing activities or sneak off to the more urbane pleasures of the city. See p. 88.
- **Hotel Contessa** (San Antonio): With its great location on the river and its bold design, this hotel offers a promising setting for an enjoyable stay. The guest rooms offer comfort and great views of either the River Walk or the skyline. See p. 72.
- **Four Seasons Austin** (Austin): Settle into one of the large guest rooms overlooking the lake, have the front desk schedule a massage at the highly regarded spa, get the concierge to line up dinner reservations at your favorite restaurant, and then pinch yourself to make sure you're not dreaming. The only thing that could make a stay at this hotel any more special would be billing someone else for it. See p. 180.
- **The Driskill** (Austin): This hotel is Austin's jewel. It's got all the history, all the character, and now, all the comfort that you could want. In the original building, where big cattle baron Jesse Driskill still surveys the scene (in stone effigy), you'll find suites with the most character. See p. 180.

- **The Mansion at Judges Hill** (Austin): Splurge and reserve one of the large signature rooms on the second floor of the original mansion. These have access to the sweeping upper porch, which is one of the mansion's best features and a great place to relax and have a cocktail. Lots of amenities and personal service make this place perfect for any kind of visit to Austin, but especially a pleasure trip. See p. 187.
- **Lake Austin Spa Resort** (Austin): This spa resort gets more write-ups by the national press than any other lodging in town. Most of the articles do a good job conveying how relaxing and serene the place is, but not many do justice to its beauty. It's a rare combination of all these things. See p. 193.
- **Hotel Saint Cecilia** (Austin): This new hotel captures a good bit of the feel for what's fun about the South Congress scene but takes the comfort to an entirely new level. Sleep deeply on a handmade Swedish mattress, greet the morning with whatever your favorite crepe is. Lounge on the private deck or patio of your room, or spin some vinyl on your in-room turntable. The only inherent problem with this arrangement is getting the motivation to leave the hotel. See p. 185.

3 BEST MODERATELY PRICED HOTELS

- **Riverwalk Vista** (San Antonio): Lots of character, space, and amenities are what this independent, moderately priced hotel is known for. And the downtown location is central for those wanting to enjoy all the city has to offer. See p. 80.
- **O'Brien Historic Hotel** (San Antonio): Near La Villita and the River Walk, the location is great. Rooms are attractive and contain extras, such as robes and good-quality linens not usually seen at this price level. See p. 80.
- **Beckmann Inn and Carriage House** (San Antonio): Get the full bed-and-breakfast experience in the beautiful Victorian-era neighborhood of the King William District. Built in 1886, in Queen Anne style, the house features a lovely wraparound porch, perfect for enjoying the afternoon in this quiet spot near the San Antonio River. Rooms and common areas are set off with lots of antiques. See p. 81.
- **Bonner Garden** (San Antonio): In an Italianate Villa with a rooftop deck and panoramic views, you can find lovely rooms that steer clear of the cluttered look. You'll also find that rarest of features in a bed-and-breakfast—a large pool. Just north of downtown, the location is central and convenient. See p. 83.
- **Austin Motel** (Austin): In Austin's cool SoCo district is this hip, funky, completely remodeled old motel. The place keeps an air of the past about it, but the rooms have been individually furnished, many with fun and flair. See p. 186.
- **Austin Folk House** (Austin): This bed-and-breakfast, with a great location on the west side of the university campus, offers rooms with plenty of character. Check out the artwork and enjoy some of the uncommon architectural features of this house. You're close to both downtown and the shops and restaurants on or just off of Lamar Boulevard. See p. 187.
- **Habitat Suites** (Austin): Several hotels in Austin take ecoconsciousness beyond the old "we won't wash your towels" option, but no one takes it nearly as far as Habitat Suites. Almost everything here is ecofriendly. It's also guest friendly, with quality linens and amenities, and lots of extras you don't see in other hotels. See p. 188.

- **Holiday Inn Austin Town Lake** (Austin): Okay, it's a freeway hotel, but you're also on the lake. And by the time this book hits the shelves the hotel will have gone through a major remodeling.

Get a room facing the lake and you'll have gorgeous views. The location is close to all the central Austin attractions. See p. 184.

4 BEST DINING EXPERIENCES

- **Le Rêve** (San Antonio): Generally acknowledged as the best French food in Texas and one of the top restaurants in the country, this small restaurant on the river offers the ultimate dining experience, where every detail has been thought through. Choose between a three-, four-, or five-course menu or, better still, opt for the tasting menu and have a sampling of several different sensations. See p. 96.
- **Las Canarias** (San Antonio): For a romantic dinner for two, dine either along the River Walk or inside one of the cozy, softly lit dining rooms, accompanied by the soft music of a guitar or piano. Start off with one of the aperitifs, for which the bar has a good reputation. Then move on to a meal that, like San Antonio, represents the melding of unlikely cultural influences. See p. 94.
- **Silo** (San Antonio): This place serves new American cooking exactly the way it should be done—with much art and little fuss. The surroundings are spacious, low-key, and comfortable. And the service is attentive and knowledgeable, but without attitude. See p. 105.
- **Liberty Bar** (San Antonio): This is the place for letting your hair down and enjoying a little local society. There are few other places in San Antonio that so effortlessly reflect the culture of their town, especially in matters of eating and drinking. Periodically, the management tries to fancy things up, but it meets more than a little resistance from the regulars. See p. 102.
- **Uchi** (Austin): Don't think of Uchi as just a great 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. 205.
- **Threadgill's** (Austin): As the locals say about this place, "It's world famous, at least in Austin." What's so famous about it is the honest, old-style cooking that Austinites have been praising for years: the chicken-fried steak with cream gravy, the fried okra, and the ham steak with Jezebel sauce. Local musicians love playing here; the owner is one of the city's biggest supporters of live music. There is no restaurant more Austin than this one. See p. 212.
- **Kreuz Market** (Lockhart): It's a short, pleasant drive to Lockhart and to this pilgrimage site for the barbecue faithful. Kreuz has the best sausage and ribs I've ever tasted. But don't expect to be putting any sauce on your meat. That would be an insult to the cook, and they take these things personally down here. If you positively must have that rich and tangy Texas barbecue sauce, then steer your car toward Black's, also in Lockhart, and held in high esteem by the must-have-sauce crowd. See p. 279.
- **Curra's Grill** (Austin): It's not the decor (or maybe it's the absence of decor) that brings people from all walks of life to this homey eatery in South Austin. It's for Curra's particular style of Mexican cooking that is, for locals, a delicious departure from standard Tex-Mex, without

getting too far away from Tex-Mex's comfort food aspect. Not that the visitor

would recognize them, but the place gets a lot of local celebrities. See p. 207.

5 BEST THINGS TO DO FOR (ALMOST) FREE

- **Scouting the Alamo and the River Walk:** How many other cities have freebies as their two major attractions? All the more reason for seeing the Alamo—and for seeing it more than once—until you find just the right moment to savor within its ancient walls. It's hard to say whether the River Walk is better at night or during the day, so see it both ways and make up your own mind. See chapter 7.
- **Visiting San Antonio Missions National Historic Park/Attending Mariachi Mass at San José:** See these as a day trip or break it up into a couple of visits. Now with the hike and bike path completed, you can see them as part of a 12-mile physical and religious exercise. On Sundays at noon, a mass is held by the community of San José to the accompaniment of a mariachi band. Now that's pure San Antonio. See chapter 7.
- **Exposing Yourself to Art at the Blue Star Arts Complex:** Enter this huge warehouse at the south end of San Antonio's downtown area, and you'll find thousands of square feet of studio and gallery space. In the thick of it all is the artist-run Contemporary Arts Center—a fertile home for whatever's new in the local art scene. See chapter 7.
- **Taking Austin's Visitor Center Walking Tour:** These history excursions are provided free by the city and are superb. See chapter 14.
- **Visiting the LBJ Library (Austin):** There's a lot to interest the visitor here, including an animatronic replica of the former President. LBJ was often very quotable, as the exhibits make clear. See chapter 14.
- **Touring Central Market or Whole Foods (Austin):** Those who track this kind of information tell me that these two supermarkets are among the top five most popular attractions in Austin. While you're there, take a break and have lunch or dinner. Dining in grocery stores has become de rigueur in Austin. See chapter 15.
- **Touring the Capitol (Austin):** Definitely take the free tour rather than the self-guided tour. You'll have an easy time remembering you're in Texas; the place is loaded with state icons, and the size—bigger than all other state capitols—says it all. See chapter 14.
- **Enjoying Free Outdoor Concerts (Austin):** There are so many free outdoor concerts in Austin sponsored by both public and private money that you will probably have a chance to catch one. Check the local papers for info. See chapter 16.

6 BEST SAN ANTONIO SHOPPING

- **Buying Day of the Dead Souvenirs in Southtown:** The Day of the Dead (actually 2 days, Nov 1–2) is commemorated throughout the largely Hispanic Southtown, but you can buy T-shirts with dancing skeletons and folk-art tableau typical of the holiday at Tienda Guadalupe year-round. See p. 145.
- **Checking out the Headgear at Paris Hatters:** Even if you're not in the market for a Stetson, you should at least wander over to this San Antonio

institution that has sold hats to everyone from Pope John Paul II and Queen Elizabeth to lesser lights such as TV's Jimmy Smits. See how big your head is compared to those of the stars. See p. 148.

- **Shopping for Handmade Boots at Lucchese:** For the adult male Texan of a certain class, and especially for the San Antonian, getting fitted for Lucchese (pronounced Loo-*kaiz-ee*) boots is a sign that one has made it in the world. For establishment Texas, these boots are a

symbol of Texas roots and should be worn both with suits and jeans. See p. 148.

- **Buying "Easy-Life" Potion from a Neighborhood Botanica:** Okay, you might prefer the standard love potion, but for my money, getting the easy-life mojo up and running is far more important. Truth be told, there is a lot more to explore in these places than simple potions. Stores like Papa Jim's are fertile grounds for the amateur urban anthropologist. Check them out. See p. 146.

7 BEST HOUR IN AUSTIN

- **Enjoying a Massage:** With a little planning ahead for that idle hour, you can change the whole complexion of the rest of your day. This is very much a common practice here, and when in Rome (er, Austin) . . . Most independent hotels can arrange an appointment with a massage therapist. See chapter 12.
- **Strolling up South Congress:** You never know what you're going to find when walking along this row of shops, eateries,

and galleries. It's the best window shopping in Austin. You'll be hard pressed to keep it to just an hour. See chapter 15.

- **Browsing through Tesoros:** This store is one of a kind, but, as it deals in imports, has nothing in the way of local goods. Still, visitors and locals are fascinated by the variety of crafts and folk art for sale. There's plenty to capture the eye across a wide range of prices. See chapter 15.

8 BEST AUSTIN OUTDOOR ACTIVITIES

- **Feasting the Eyes on the Colorful Gardens at the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center:** Spring is prime viewing time for the flowers, but Austin's mild winters ensure that there will always be bursts of color at Lady Bird Johnson's pet project. See p. 225.
- **Playing in the Water at Lake Travis:** The longest of the seven Highland Lakes, Travis offers the most opportunities for watersports, including jet-skiing, snorkeling, and angling. See p. 233.
- **Going Batty:** From late March through November, thousands of bats emerge in

smokelike clouds from under the Congress Avenue Bridge, heading out for dinner. It's an intriguing sight, and you can thank each of the little mammals for keeping the air pest free—a single bat can eat as many as 600 mosquitoes in an hour. See p. 220.

- **Having Coffee at Mozart's:** Picture a deck overlooking Lake Austin. Add to the picture the delights of coffee and baked goods, and perhaps a good book, and you have nature and civilization in perfect balance. See p. 218.

9 BEST PLACES TO HANG WITH AUSTINITES

- **The B Scene at the Blanton Museum:** On the first Friday of every month, local art lovers socialize over wine and finger food at the new Blanton Museum. Music, too, is provided, but not so much that it puts a damper on the conversation. See p. 219.
- **Early Evenings at Scholz Garten:** At Austin's oldest drinking establishment, you can buy a pint of draft beer and claim your spot at one of the large picnic tables that fill the outdoor patio. People show up after work to slow down and enjoy some casual conversation. On Thursday evenings in cool weather, a brass band will play for beer, and they're not bad. See p. 275.
- **First Thursdays in SoCo:** The first Thursday of every month is a lively time on South Congress. Crowds show up to hear the free music, look over the goods at the street stalls, and enter the shops that stay open late for the occasion. You never know who or what will show up, and everyone is in the mood to have a good time. See p. 250.
- **The Broken Spoke:** There are a lot of dance halls in central Texas, but you would be hard pressed to find a better, more fun place to go than this one. You'll see lots of local color and enjoy the easy-going society that Austin is known for. Everybody has a good time. See p. 270.

10 BEST PLUNGES INTO EXCESS

The following is not for everyone. To enjoy these experiences for what they are requires a certain appreciation for irony and absurdity.

- **Best Stereotype Wrapped Up in a Caricature (San Antonio):** A visit to the Buckhorn Saloon and Museum makes you ponder some of the deeper questions, such as "Why don't more museums sell beer?" There are no easy answers. Yes, much is made of the Old West's culture of violence. You can see gunfights enacted and exhibits on blood-thirsty desperadoes. It's all good family fun. But to those who would still cock an eyebrow at this place, I have one thing to say: costumed fleas. They must be seen (barely) to be believed. See p. 121.
- **Best Sensory Overload (San Antonio):** Excess, thy name is mariachi. To set the scene perfectly you need a table by the river, a rather large platter of Tex-Mex food in front of you, a frozen margarita at your right hand, and the aforesaid mariachis, belting out some standard, such as "Guadalajara, no te rajes," with great bravado. They must of course be topped with their large sombreros and one of them plucking the strings of one of those large bass guitars. Lesser mortals might well recoil from the stimulation of so many nerve cell receptors. But you can placidly take it all in, comfortable in the knowledge that you have reached the promised land of travel brochures. Congratulations. Fortunately for you, San Antonio can provide all these ingredients without much effort.
- **Best Way to Take the "Walk" out of River Walk (San Antonio):** Big boats on a small river—there's something very Texas about this, as there is with the boat captain's monologue. See p. 116.
- **Best White Elephant Souvenirs (San Antonio):** Are you in the market for a souvenir with no redeeming aesthetic value? Are you looking for that perfect

something to quiet forever those pesky requests to bring something back from your trips? Souvenir stores can be found scattered throughout the touristy areas of downtown, but there is an especially

fertile hunting ground along the west side of Alamo Plaza. Take your pick of such gems as an Alamo ashtray, a beer can wind chime, or a barbed wire candle, just to name a few.