

2005 Best of the Road



A larger-than-life statue, "An Honest Day's Work" by Fred Fellows, thrills visitors at the Museum of Western Art in Kerrville, TX.

Round up those notions that Texas is only cowboys, cactus, and flat-as-a-pancake terrain. In the land of the longhorns, perhaps the only thing that rises as high as a Texan's state pride is the lush land that makes up the Hill Country. Despite the "Don't mess with Texas" signs lining this route, the locals are friendly, and the driving is easy. Western art, cowboys, and history are all here in the Editor's Picks, shown in bold, our way of sharing with you those special things we call "Best of the Road."

Head for the Hill Country

For a full map of Texas, see pp. 194-205 of Rand McNally's 2005 Road Atlas.



There's no better place to begin a Texas adventure than the state's capital city, Austin. Consider learning some of the state's tumultuous history for a greater appreciation during the ensuing trip.



Lone stars appear just about everywhere in Texas, including the gate to the State Capitol in Austin.

The Bob Bullock Texas State History Museum is the place for a quick, fun lesson. Soak up Texas history and culture at this modern, multimedia museum's theaters and many exhibits. The gigantic bronze lone star sculpture marks the spot. (And get used to seeing those lone stars – they're everywhere in this state.)

Just a short walk from the Bullock, on the southwest corner of the University of Texas campus, is the Harry Ransom Center. Visitors can marvel at a Gutenberg bible, the world's oldest known photograph, and a gallery full of interesting relics from one of the largest humanities collections in the country.

To the south lies the SoCo District, South Congress Avenue, with some of the city's most hip and hopping shops and eateries. Great stores line the wide sidewalks: Spanish home decorations at Mi Casa, creative costumes at Lucy in Disguise, where everything from toxic waste to Mr. Potato Head is on the list of get-ups. Magnolia Café has good grub 24-7, with dishes highlighting fresh local produce and breads, homemade soups, fresh-squeezed juices, and a menu of feel-good favorites.

Vespaio, a trendy local meeting spot for great Italian cuisine, offers a more upscale dining experience. The dark woods and warm yellow walls welcome diners. Freshly made pasta and creative daily specials will introduce the tongue to new flavors and textures.



The menu also includes decadent desserts, such as the chocolate mousse torte and strawberry napoleon. Another option is just up the street: Amy's Ice Cream scoops sweet, creamy treats from a

Amy's Ice Cream in Austin.

rotating menu that includes more than 260 flavors.



Vespaio is a favorite dining spot in Austin.

The Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center, just outside Austin, displays the fruits of this First Lady's labor and her love for native plants and flowers. The gardens are a tapestry of color showing how indigenous vegetation is a beautiful alternative to traditional landscaping. Butterflies flit through the air, hummingbirds zoom by, and birds chirp in this serene natural haven.

The landscape becomes more rugged heading west into the heart of Hill Country and toward the

town of Dripping Springs. When it's hot, the Hamilton Pool Preserve is a great place to cool off. This is no ordinary swimming spot. Formed by a collapsed grotto, the pool is surrounded by high limestone cliffs and collects the spring water from a 50-foot waterfall. For those looking to stay dry, the River Trail follows the Pedernales River for a 1.6-mile round-trip hike. Guided tours by preserve staff are offered on Sundays, too.

From the pool, it's a short drive to the tiny town of Driftwood and **Salt Lick BBQ**. Texans love their barbecue, and this smokehouse has been a consistent winner among Austin-area picks. People travel from all over for a taste of Salt Lick's smoky ribs, brisket, sausage, chicken, and scrumptious sides, including beans, pickles, bread, and "non-creamy-slightly-tangy potato salad and cole slaw." Salt Lick smokes all its meats with live oak and pecan shells for a rich smoky taste that isn't overpowering. Top choice for dessert: warm, sweet, and



Native plants flourish at the Lady Bird Wildflower Center in Austin.



melt-in-your-mouth delicious peach cobbler (with a soft cake-like cobbler instead of the crunchy norm).

A winding road south leads to lovely Wimberley, an artists' community on the banks of the Blanco River. Whimsical, colorful vases, lamps, glasses, and other art objects take shape at the Wimberley Glass Works, where daily demonstrations (except on Tuesdays) show off the ancient art of glassblowing. The town's lodgings even show off the area's art. At the Blair House Inn, local artworks are displayed and sold in the art gallery. The Blair House has 11 themed guestrooms and cottages and also offers cooking.

Hand-blown glass is a specialty at Wimberley Glass in Wimberley.



Wimberley offers a taste of Texas Tuscany at the Bella Vista Ranch & Olive Orchard, one of only three olive orchards in the state. The ranch is modeled after a classic Italian farm, complete with a family vineyard, fruit and citrus trees, berry bushes, nut trees, vegetables, herbs, and of course lots of olive trees. Learn all about the making of heart-healthy olive oil from plant to press to the aging process. A sampling session gives visitors the opportunity to taste the distinctive flavors of different types and ages of oils — it's as complicated and sophisticated as wine tasting.

The "Devil's Backbone" (RR 32), a winding, up-and-down path along a ridge, offers some of the best scenic overlooks and vistas in the Hill Country. The road heads west towards the charming town of Fredericksburg, the second German settlement in Texas. Fredericksburg was established in 1846, and the German influences are still evident in the buildings, names (everything is a "Haus"), food, and culture found around town today.

On the very wide Main Street — it's wide enough for an ox cart to turn around in — the Pioneer Museum Complex shows what life was like for settlers in the late 1800s. The complex includes a general store, house, smokehouse, bathhouse, one-room schoolhouse, and Sunday house.

Just southwest of town is the **Fredericksburg Herb Farm**, with four acres of organic flowers and herbs used to create a line of simple and natural health, beauty, home, and garden products. Those with some time to spare can indulge in all-natural goodness at the day spa, have lunch in the restaurant where



Fredericksburg Herb Farm is also known as an herbal haven.

home-baked herbed breads and other fresh dishes are featured on the menu, or stroll through the five gardens: the Star, Secret, Children's, Cross, and Ichthus Gardens. For take-home bliss, the farm sells body oils, lotions, soaps, candles, teas, and other organic goodies.

The road turns straight south to the town of Kerrville, located on bluffs high above the Guadalupe River. Outside of town, a true Texas treasure nestles high on a hill in a residential area: the **Museum of Western Art**, formerly the Museum of Cowboy Artists of America. It shows a softer side of the wild cowboy spirit in the sculptures, paintings, and art works on display in intimate galleries.

The next stop on this Hill Country tour is Bandera, the "Cowboy Capital of the World." The drive down RR 173 from Kerrville to Bandera may make it hard to concentrate on the road: lush mini-mountains rise above fertile green fields, providing breathtaking views on both sides of the road. Bandera, population 957, appears to be straight out of a Western movie, with old weathered buildings and facades that have resisted change and modernization for the past 70 years. The town is known for its rodeos and ranches and boasts over a dozen different full-facility dude/guest ranches.

One of the area's newest and more unusual ranches is the Flying A Ranch. It offers exotic game hunting for deer, sika, aoudad, ibex, oryx, and more.



Two "must" stops on Main Street include the O.S.T. Restaurant and Arkey Blues Silver Dollar. O.S.T. stands for Old Spanish Trail, a famous missionary route that brought Spanish explorers and settlers through Bandera. The restaurant has been in operation since 1921 and serves up good old-fashioned homestyle cooking, along with a long list of Tex-Mex specialties and breakfast specials served any time of day. The daily buffet and salad bar are served Old West style in a chuckwagon in the John Wayne room.

Across the street from O.S.T., Arkey Blues Silver Dollar gives dancers a quick Texas two-step lesson on the sawdust-covered dance floor. (Sawdust makes it easier to slide since Arkey's doesn't have a waxed wood dance floor.) Texas honky-tonk music doesn't get any more authentic than this. The laid-back atmosphere is complemented by walls jam-packed with neon signs, bumper stickers, defunct license plates, and countless pictures of famous country music singers.

About 30 miles southeast of Bandera is the famed home of the Alamo. But San Antonio is more than just the Alamo. On the south side are some of the city's shining stars. A local favorite is the Guenther House. This restaurant/museum/retail store is located next to the Pioneer Flour Mill, the country's oldest continuously family-run mill, and the house was the Guenther family's private residence. The riverside home is a great place to start the day with an enjoyable breakfast followed by a tour through the rooms and store.

Across the street from Guenther House is another San Antonio star, **Blue Star Arts Complex**. The complex includes four historic warehouses developed into a mixture of arts-oriented spaces: galleries, retail stores, artists' workspaces, and design offices. This Southtown complex sits along the San Antonio River and also has its own brewery, the Blue Star Brewing company, and performance troupe, Jump-Start Performance Company.

Flying A Ranch near Bandera is far from rustic.





San Antonio Museum of Art is a popular stop on the south side of San Antonio.

Other top south-side sites include the San Antonio Museum of Art, located in the historic Lone Star Brewery, and the Steves Homestead in the King William Historic District. The San Antonio Conservation Society gives docent-guided tours of the Steves Homestead and offers brochures for self-guided walking tours of the King William area, too.



The Steves Homestead Museum reflects the elegance of the King William District in San Antonio.

The trip back towards Austin wouldn't be complete without stops in New Braunfels and San Marcos. New Braunfels, the first German settlement in Texas, was founded in 1845, one year earlier than Fredericksburg. The European-style city is built around an inner ring with the requisite bandstand and park plaza, and the downtown area has a plethora of shops filled with antiques, specialty gifts, clothing, and more. A favorite shopping spot is the Grass Market, which includes several shops in little houses and a restaurant, the Huisache Grill, all tucked along a grassy, shaded path.

No visitor to New Braunfels should pass up this town's treasure, the **Gruene National Historic District**. Gruene (pronounced "green") draws loads of locals and visitors with its historic buildings, laid-back atmosphere, and down-home fun. One much-loved summer activity is "toobing" down the Guadalupe River. Half-day and full-day floats from various points upstream are available for people and their coolers.



Gruene National Historic District in New Braunfels features many fine restaurants.

Gruene Hall, Texas's oldest dance hall, boasts vintage signs with two-digit phone numbers and the original wooden dance floor, though very worn and slightly warped these days. Next door, the Gristmill River Restaurant and Bar is housed in an old grain mill and offers excellent eats in rustic rooms.

After a night of good food, great music, and lots of dancing, stroll down the street to the Gruene Mansion Inn for a comfortable night's rest. H. D. Gruene, one of Gruene's founders (who also built Gruene Hall), constructed the historic mansion and its accompanying structures for his family to live in. The inn's country breakfast fuels guests for the day with fresh-baked muffins, cakes, and goodies, as well as eggs, meat, fruit, juices, teas — the works.

A little north of Gruene, the small college town of San Marcos has a lot more to offer than Texas's largest outlet malls. The Millie Seaton Collection of Dolls and Toys contains nearly 9,000 dolls, an exceptionally copious collection that is neatly displayed throughout the three floors of the historic Augusta Hofheinz house.

Millie started her private collection in 1965 while reading about dolls on vacation. The result of her obsession now includes everything from the oldest known doll (dating back 300 years), the tallest doll (a Raggedy Ann doll that stands at more than 6 feet), china-head dolls, Barbie dolls, Japanese dolls, paper dolls, clowns, voodoo dolls, wax dolls, celebrity dolls, Disney dolls, and everything in between.

Visitors to the Wonder Cave can see and touch the Balcones fault line, which runs from Oklahoma down through Texas. Tectonic forces along the fault line between the Edwards Plateau (Hill Country) and the Gulf Coastal Plains formed the area's rugged topography. The cave is also located about 200 feet above the Edwards Aquifer, an important water source for San Antonio, Austin, and surrounding areas. The 45-minute tour visits six limestone "rooms" and descends 160 feet.

Back above ground, there's one last stretch of road on this Texas tour. The terrain flattens out on the highway heading north toward Austin's skyline. Though the big city beckons, memories of organic farms and olive orchards, one-of-a-kind art galleries and honky-tonk music are a reminder that natural beauty and a more laid-back way of life are always waiting in the Hill Country.

For additional information:

Austin Convention and Visitors Bureau, 301 E. Congress, Ste. 200, Austin, TX, 78701, (800) 926-2282, www.austintexas.org

Bandera Chamber of Commerce, 331 Main St., Bandera, TX, 78003, (830) 796-3280, www.banderatex.com

Blue Star Arts Complex, 1400 S. Alamo St., San Antonio, TX, 78210, www.bluestarartscomplex.com

Flying A Ranch, 1919 State Route 173 S, Bandera, TX, 78003, (830) 796-4750, www.flyingaranch.net

Fredericksburg Convention and Visitors Bureau, 302 E. Austin Fredericksburg, TX, 78624, (830) 997-6523, www.fredericksburg_texas.com

Fredericksburg Herb Farm, 405 Whitney St., Fredericksburg, TX, 78624, (800) 259-4372, www.fredericksburgherbfarm.org

Greater Dripping Springs Area Chamber of Commerce, 600 US 290, Dripping Springs, TX, 78620, www.drippingspringtx.org

Greater New Braunfels Chamber of Commerce, P.O. Box 311417, New Braunfels, TX, 78131, (800) 572-2626, www.nbccham.org

Kerrville Convention & Visitors Bureau, 2108 Sidney Baker, Kerrville, TX, 78028, (830) 792-3535 or (800) 221-7958, www.kerrvilletexascvb.com

Museum of Western Art, 1550 Bandera Hwy, Kerrville, TX, 78029, (830) 896-2553, www.museumofwesternart.org

Salt Lick BBQ, 18300 FM 1826, Driftwood, TX, 78619, (512) 858-4959, (888) 725-8542, www.saltlickbbq.com

San Antonio Convention and Visitors Bureau, 203 S. St. Mary's St., 2nd floor, San Antonio, TX, 78205, (210) 207-6700 or (800) 447-3372, www.visitsanantonio.com

San Marcos Area Chamber of Commerce, 202 N. C.M. Allen Parkway, San Marcos, TX, 78667, (512) 393-5900, www.sanmarcostexas.com

Wimberley Chamber of Commerce and Visitors Center, 14100 R.R. 12, Wimberley, TX, 78676, (512) 847-2201, www.wimberley.org

