

## The Best of San Antonio

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**N**o matter if you call it the Fiesta City or the Alamo City, each of San Antonio's nicknames reveals a different truth. Visitors come here to kick back and party, but they also come to seek Texas's history—some would say its soul. They come to sit on the banks of a glittering river and sip cactus margaritas, but also to view Franciscan missions that rose along the same river more than 2½ centuries ago.

Multiculturalism isn't just an academic buzzword in San Antonio, the only major Texan city founded before Texas won its independence from Mexico. During its early days, it was populated by diverse groups with distinct goals: Spanish missionaries and militiamen, German merchants, Southern plantation owners, Western cattle ranchers, and Eastern architects. All have left their mark, both tangibly on San Antonio's downtown and subtly on the city's culture and cuisine.

With its German, Southern, Western, and, above all, Hispanic influences—at the 2000 census, the city was nearly 60% Mexican-American—San Antonio's cultural life is rich and complex. At the New Orleans-like Fiesta, for example, San Antonians might break confetti eggs called *cascarones*, listen to oompah bands, and cheer rodeo bull riders. Countless country-and-western ballads twang on about “San Antone”—no doubt because the name rhymes with “alone”—which is also America's capital for Tejano music, a unique blend of Mexican and German sounds. And no self-respecting San Antonio festival would be complete without Mexican tamales and tacos, Texan chili and barbeque, Southern hush puppies and glazed ham, and German beer and bratwurst.

The city's architecture also reflects its multiethnic history. After the Texas revolution, Spanish viga beams began to be replaced by southern Greek revival columns, German *fachwerk* (half-wooden) pitched roofs, and East Coast Victorian gingerbread facades. San Antonio, like the rest of the Southwest, has now returned to its Hispanic architectural roots—even chain hotels in the area have red-clay roofs, Saltillo tile floors, and central patios—but updated versions of other indigenous building styles are also popular. The rustic yet elegant Hill Country look, for example, might use native limestone in structures that combine sprawling Texas ranch features with more intricate German details.

These days, San Antonio is simultaneously moving backward and forward. The city is succumbing to the proliferation of highways, faceless housing developments, and homogeneous restaurant and lodging chains that so many Southwestern cities seem to equate with progress; in fact, early in the 20th century it almost paved over the river on which the city was founded. But it's also making a concerted effort to preserve its past, and for economic, and not sentimental, reasons: Cultural tourism sells, after all. Amid San Antonio's sprawl, it's the winding downtown streets that most visitors recall, and that once-endangered

river. Few who come here leave without a memory of a moment, quiet or heart quickening, sunlit or sparkling with tiny tree-draped lights, when the river somehow worked its magic on them.

## 1 Frommer's Favorite San Antonio Experiences

- **Recapturing Texas's Fight for Independence at the Alamo:** It's hard to imagine the state's prime attraction as a battle site, surrounded as it is now by hotels and shops—that is, until you step inside the Long Barrack, where Texas's most famous fighters prepared to fight General Santa Anna's troops. Here, you just might shut out those modern images (if not the crowds) for a moment. See p. 84.
- **Attending a Mariachi Mass at Mission San José:** It's very moving to watch members of the congregation of this largest of the mission churches raise their voices in spirited musical prayer each Sunday at noon. Come early, as seats are limited and this is a popular thing to do. See p. 92.
- **Strolling Along San Antonio's River Walk:** Whether you opt for the buzz of the busy South Bank portion of the River Walk, or decide to escape to one of its quieter stretches, the green, lush banks of San Antonio's river will match your mood, day or night. See p. 105.
- **Seeing a Show at the Majestic Theatre:** As it happens, the restored Majestic offers top-notch shows of all kinds, but the venue itself is worth the price of admission alone. Book a seat in the front rows, or try the upstairs mezzanine so you can gaze at the star-studded ceiling. See p. 124.
- **Climbing into a Treehouse at the Witte Museum:** You can recapture your youth (or enjoy your kids relishing theirs) at the Witte, where the HEB Treehouse has interactive science exhibits galore. See p. 91.
- **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. 91.
- **Pretending You Live in the King William District:** The opulent mansion homes built here by German merchants in the 19th century are eye-popping. You can't enter most of them (unless you're staying at one of the area's many B&Bs), but the fantasizing is free. See chapter 6.
- **Ascending the Tower of the Americas:** In the daytime, the tower provides a great way to get the lay of the land. At sunset, it's transformed from pragmatic to romantic as you sip a drink and watch the city lights wink on. See chapter 6.
- **Buying Day of the Dead Souvenirs in Southtown:** The Day of the Dead (actually 2 days, Nov 1 and 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 chapter 7.
- **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 like TV's Jimmy

Smits. See how big your head is compared to those of the stars. See p. 120.

- **Grooving to Jazz at The Landing:** Jim Cullum and his band

play cool jazz at a cool location on the River Walk. A groove doesn't get much mellower than this. See p. 126.

## 2 Best San Antonio Hotel Bets

- **Best Place for the Trendy to Be Seen:** The **Hotel Valencia Riverwalk**, 150 E. Houston St. (☎ 866/842-0100 or 210/227-9700), hosts Vbar and Citrus, two of the hottest hangouts in town. And flanking the hotel are Acenar and Sip (rhymes with hip), two other top styling spots. See p. 45.
- **Best Value for Business Travelers:** Such features as a location near the convention center and high-speed Internet access in the room make the **O'Brien Historic Hotel**, 116 Navarro St. (☎ 800/257-6058 or 210/527-1111), convenient for all business travelers, while low rates and perks such as free local phone calls make it especially appealing to those whose companies aren't picking up the tab. See p. 52.
- **The Best Place to See (or Feel) a Ghost:** San Antonio's got plenty of historic hotels—the kind where haunts tend to linger—but only **The Menger**, 204 Alamo Plaza (☎ 800/345-9285 or 210/223-4361), claims to have 32 ghosts. You can take your pick of the spirits you want to sleep with—or drink with. The bar where Teddy Roosevelt recruited his Rough Riders is in this hotel, too. See p. 50.
- **Best for Families:** If you can afford it, the **Hyatt Regency Hill Country Resort**, 9800 Hyatt Resort Dr. (☎ 800/233-1234 or 210/647-1234), just down the road from SeaWorld, is ideal for a family getaway. Kids get to splash in their own shallow pool, go tubing on a little river, and be entertained in a kids' camp—and you get to relax in the resort's spa or play a few holes on its expanding golf course. See p. 61.
- **Best Riverside Bargain:** The **Drury Inn & Suites**, 201 N. St. Mary's St. (☎ 800/DRURY-INN or 210/212-5200), is a good, economical downtown bet located in a historic building right on the river. Breakfast and afternoon cocktails are included in the room rate, and in-room fridges and microwaves mean you can cut down on food costs in this pricey area even further. See p. 51.
- **Best Budget Lodging:** How do I love the savings at the **Best Western Sunset Suites**, 1103 E. Commerce St. (☎ 866/560-6000 or 210/223-4400)? Let me count the ways: Low room rates, lots of freebies, and a convenient location near downtown, plus very attractive rooms, make staying here a super deal. See p. 53.
- **Best B&B:** The King William area abounds with B&Bs, but the **Ogé House**, 209 Washington St. (☎ 800/242-2770 or 210/223-2353), stands out as much for its professionalism as for its gorgeous mansion and lovely rooms. New management has added modern amenities such as wi-fi, too. It's hard to beat this mix of the old and the new. See p. 53.
- **Best One-Stop Lodging:** You never have to wander far from the **Marriott Rivercenter**, 101 Bowie

St. (☎ 800/228-9290 or 210/223-1000), what with its excellent health club (on the same floor as the hotel's free washers and dryers, no less); its proximity to the Rivercenter Mall and to water taxis that take you along the River Walk; and its abundant on-site eateries. See p. 48.

- **Best Place to Spot Celebrities:** Everyone from Paula Abdul to ZZ Top (hey, they're big in Texas) has stayed at **La Mansión del Río**, 112 College St. (☎ 800/292-7300 or 210/518-1000); discretion, a willingness to cater to special requests, and a location that's just slightly away from the action might explain why. See p. 46.
- **Best for River Views:** La Mansión del Río, the Marriott Rivercenter,

the Watermark, and the Westin Riverwalk each boast prime watery views from some of their rooms, but if you stay at the **Hyatt Regency San Antonio on the River Walk**, 123 Losoya St. (☎ 800/233-1234 or 210/222-1234), you can book less expensive atrium-view lodgings and still glimpse a bit of the river running through the lobby. See p. 46.

- **Best New Hotel:** With its top-notch spa and health club, spacious, Zen-chic guest rooms, and excellent service, the **Watermark Hotel**, 212 W. Crockett St. (☎ 866/605-1212 or 210/396-5800), did what didn't seem possible: made a splash on the crowded high-end River Walk lodging scene. See p. 48.

### 3 Best San Antonio Dining Bets

- **Best for a Romantic Dinner:** On a quiet stretch of the River Walk, **Las Canarias**, at La Mansión del Río, 112 College St. (☎ 210/518-1063), avoids the noise that plagues most waterview restaurants. You'll enjoy candlelight and superb, discreet service. See p. 68.
- **Best Movable Feast:** It used to be that you could dine on the river only if you were with a group, but among the restaurants that now offer reservations on communal tables to individuals and couples, **Boudro's**, 421 E. Commerce St./River Walk (☎ 210/224-8484), tops the meals-on-river-bergs list. See p. 69.
- **Best for Serious Foodies:** After several years on the fine dining scene, **Le Rêve**, 152 E. Pecan St. (☎ 210/212-2221), has proved that it's got staying power—there were rumbles about the chef moving to Dallas a while back—and that San Antonio is ready for a

place where men have to wear jackets and there is seating for dinner. The reward is stellar French food. See p. 68.

- **Best Seafood:** You'd think that serving brain food on the river would have been a no-brainer, but it wasn't until the arrival of **Pesca**, 212 W. Crockett St. (☎ 210/396-5817), that there was a real contender. ***Shark alert:*** This place will take a bite out of your dining budget. See p. 69.
- **Best Italian Cuisine:** The risotto, potato gnocchi, and saltimbocca are among the dishes perfected by a chef from Rome that make it worth the trip to **Massimo**, 1896 Nacogdoches Rd. (☎ 210/342-8556), in the Alamo Heights area. See p. 77.
- **Best Place to Listen to Music While You Eat:** Enjoy creative South American, Mexican, and Caribbean fare at Southtown's **Azuca**, 713 S. Alamo St. (☎ 210/225-5550), while listening to

salsa, merengue, and other Latin sounds. See p. 73.

- **Best Blast from the Past:** **Schilo's**, 424 E. Commerce St. (☎ 210/223-6692), not only serves up German deli in portions that date back to pre-cholesterol-conscious days but also retains prices from that era. See p. 73.
- **Best New Restaurant:** It's a tie this time: I love the innovative Tex-Mex food and the party atmosphere at **Acenar**, 146 E. Houston St. (☎ 210/222-CENA), a sizzling addition to the River

Walk, but I'd drive much farther than Olmos Park, just a few minutes north of downtown, to take advantage of the great Italian food and great prices at **Ciao Lavanderia**, 226 E. Olmos Dr. (☎ 210/822-3990). See p. 71.

- **Best Place to Encounter Artists:** Terrific food, a nice selection of libations, good prices, and a fun, funky atmosphere draw creative types of all kinds to the **Liberty Bar**, 328 E. Josephine St. (☎ 210/227-1187). See p. 75.