

Authentic Austin: It's Out of the Ordinary

Down-home yet sophisticated. Laid-back and bustling with high energy. Traditional and avant-garde at the same time. These qualities allow Austinites and visitors alike to embrace the city's unique, often quirky, identity and appreciate the traditions that it was founded upon. Over the past two decades, the small university town where Willie Nelson crafted his own unique musical style grew into a big city with a glittering skyline and 1.4 million people in the metropolitan area.

More and more, Austin stacks up as "the" place to see and be seen. *Travel + Leisure* lauds Austin for having strong environmental awareness, friendly people and great vintage shopping. Golf.com names Austin America's #1 Golf Destination. *MovieMaker* magazine touts it as the country's "Best Filmmaking City." *Men's Journal* places Austin among its "50 Best Places to Live." According to *Money*, it's the "Best Place to Start a Business."

It's a 24-hour city where celebrities enjoy just hanging out alongside the locals. Matthew McConaughey, Lance Armstrong, Sandra Bullock, Quentin Tarantino, Dennis Quaid, Robert Rodriguez, and the Wilson brothers, Owen and Luke, are all residents or frequent visitors to the Texas capital.

Part of Austin's draw is the distinctive attractions. For instance, thousands flock downtown to the Congress Avenue Bridge nightly, from April through November, to watch more than 1.5 million Mexican free-tailed bats take flight at dusk. As the seat of local government and home to the Texas Capitol, Austin offers a rich history with long-standing political traditions. Aside from politics, nothing strikes up a heated discussion more quickly than trying to name *the best* barbecue joint around. Is it the Salt Lick, County Line, Stubbs or Iron Works?

Barbecue shares top billing in Austin with Tex-Mex, and Austin's signature dish is the breakfast taco. In fact, guests haven't experienced the city until they've enjoyed this specialty at one of many local eateries. Some local favorites include Guero's Taco Bar and Maria's Taco Xpress. True foodies will discover that in addition to the laid-back atmosphere of BBQ joints and taco stands, Austin is home to sophisticated international cuisine and high-end dining. Hudson's On the Bend's menu features Texas game with rare regional ingredients, Uchi puts a southwestern twist on world-class sushi and the Driskill Grill at Austin's historic Driskill Hotel has been named among the best hotel restaurants in the nation.

If shopping highlights your Austin playlist, downtown pedestrian districts and high-end malls offer distinct options. In the heart of the city, the 2nd Street District welcomes visitors to stroll along broad sidewalks and browse among unique local boutiques. Downtown is also home to local favorites like Keeper's Fine Menswear and Heritage Boot, where owner Jerry Ryan designs each pair of his artsy cowboy boots. Just north of the city, The Domain offers an outdoor mall boasting such designer names as Tiffany & Co., Burberry, Michael Kors and more. Bargain hunters enjoy two major outlet malls, Round Rock Premium Outlets and Prime Outlets San Marcos, within an hour of downtown Austin.

An unending play list of live music echoes from nearly 200 venues on any given evening. It's the constant sound of blues, country, rock and roll, jazz and Tejano that fuse together to solidify Austin as "Live Music Capital of the World®." Live music extends into the city's burgeoning cultural arts scene as well. The historic Paramount Theatre features touring acts, while One World Theatre and Zachary Scott Theatre showcase world music and locally-produced pieces. The city's newest cultural landmark, the Long Center for the Performing Arts, provides a permanent home for Austin Symphony, Ballet Austin and Austin Lyric Opera, in addition to dozens of independent theatre companies and performance groups.

The Long Center for the Performing Arts looks over the shores of Lady Bird Lake, a verdant downtown oasis that bisects downtown. Bordered by 10 miles of highly traveled hike-and-bike trails, Lady Bird Lake is at the heart of a network of more than 200 municipal parks. Visitors can rent a canoe or kayak and paddle out onto the lake from Austin's 360-acre Zilker Park, a favorite venue for disc golf, outdoor music events and swimming in Barton Springs Pool, which, at 68 degrees year-round, offers welcome respite from the summer heat. Visitors to Zilker Park can also access the Barton Creek Green Belt, which winds for eight miles throughout the city and offers hiking, climbing and swimming holes along the way.

Golf enthusiasts can enjoy world-class courses and a deep-rooted golf heritage. The Legends of Golf, the first senior professional tournament, launched from Onion Creek Country Club; Ben Crenshaw hit his first hole-in-one at Lions Municipal; Chuck Cook operates a local golf academy and Harvey Penick's methods are still taught at the Harvey Penick Campus at Golfsmith's flagship store. Premier courses are located at area resorts like Barton Creek Resort (which also houses the Chuck Cook Golf Academy) and Hyatt Regency Lost Pines Resort & Spa, where legendary designer Arthur Hills created a challenging, 7,205-yard, par 72 course. In addition to resort golf courses, intermediate and expert players can test their skill on more than 20 public courses.

Long revered as the playground of Texas, Austin stands as the gateway to the scenic Texas Hill Country—a vast region of rolling hills, sparkling lakes and fields of wildflowers where nature trails, parks and greenbelts create a lush retreat in the heart of the Lone Star State. McKinney Roughs State Park offers hiking and horseback riding, while west of Austin, Enchanted Rock invites hikers to trek to the top for a dazzling view.

Within a two-hour drive of Austin, historic towns offer quaint shopping and dining, as well as beautiful views of the Hill Country's signature wildflowers. In Marble Falls, locals and visitors alike take in the beauty of the famous cascade for which the town was named and browse among antique shops around the town square. Johnson City, named for an ancestor of former American President Lyndon Baines Johnson, features the Johnson Settlement and LBJ National Historic Park. Another don't-miss is the tiny town of Luckenbach, made famous in a song by Willie Nelson and Waylon Jennings. There are only three buildings in all of Luckenbach, but a stop at the post office/general store/tavern is not one that visitors soon forget. Stop by for a Hill Country Musicians Jam on Saturday or Sunday – you never know who might show up.

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