



### Austin, Texas

## A Capital Retreat Check Out the Southwest's Hippest City

By Robin Barr Sussman

Day 1 / Where to Stay

Day 2 / Where to Eat

Day 3 / What to See & Do



The Austin skyline

Somewhere between its mantra "Keep Austin Weird" and its solid reputation as "The Live Music Capital of the World," the state capitol of Texas—once a hippy-dippy laid back college town—became a Hollywood hotspot. Perhaps it was when local boy Lance Armstrong began bringing home Tour de France trophies, or when actress Sandra Bullock purchased her 10,000-square-foot lakefront home. Quentin Tarantino also aided and abetted when he started his annual film series at the Alamo Drafthouse. The net result: Austin was always a party town but is now sealed as the Southwest's hippest city.

With its rolling hills, sparkling waterways, miles of green vistas, the gateway to the Hill Country is now one of America's fastest growing cities—a city that merits plenty of visitors looking for a wide range of attractions and activities. Austin has been voted as one of America's fittest and also smartest cities. Its cultural arts have also stepped up to the plate. **Ballet Austin**, under the artistic direction of Stephen Mills, emerges among the country's leading ballet companies while the **Austin Symphony** continues to entertain a vast audience. No wonder Californians are migrating east and retailers, residential high-rises and hotels are building upwards and outwards at record speed.

Austin is healthy with large, upscale hotel chains for the many Texas-size conventions, the **South by Southwest Music, Film & Interactive Festival** each March, and the **Austin City Limits Music Festival** in September, both of which attract thousands. For those who need proximity to the downtown convention center or for walking to shops, restaurants and clubs, we suggest **Hilton Austin**, sprawling and convenient.

If you want to splurge, though, stay at **The Four Seasons** on Town Lake; a glamorous downtown property perched on the edge of the sparkling water with a full service spa and an excellent restaurant named **Trio**. For pure history, book a room at **The Driskill**, an elegant landmark built in 1886 by cattle baron Jesse Driskill (never mind the reputed ghosts who haunt certain rooms). The handsome Driskill Bar is always a scene with politics and movers and shakers.



**The Bar at The Driskill**

**The Residence Inn Downtown** is a good option for families who desire suites and a kitchen. There are plenty of other small independent hotels, but the coolest most Zen-like place to lay your head—where the rock stars hide out—is **San Jose Hotel**, a few minutes outside of downtown across the South Congress bridge.

A note about the weather. Austin's climate is temperate, with mild winters and very warm summers but anticipate a thunderstorm any time of the year. From November through March, pack a sweater or lightweight jacket for the brisk evenings. Also bring short-sleeved shirts and other warm-weather clothes, along with a bathing suit, if visiting any other time of year. Springtime is green and gorgeous, with cool crisp sunny days. Bring comfortable shoes so you can do lots of walking downtown, which is compact with a few mildly strenuous hills.

For transportation, **The Dillo** trolley is free and makes stops all around downtown. Also check out **Capital Metro**, but you'll need to rent a car if you plan on venturing out of downtown. Stop by the **Austin Convention and Visitors Bureau** to pick up detailed maps and other city directories.

## DAY 1

Start your first day in Austin exploring downtown where all the action is. A Mexican style breakfast at **Las Manitas** will fuel you for a day of sightseeing. Huevos rancheros, doused with fiery salsa, are best quenched with the fresh squeezed orange juice or limonada. Take the Austin-American Statesman or Austin Chronicle if you want to study up on live music venues for the evening.

At the north end of Congress Street, begin at the grand **Texas State Capital**, a granite structure that towers 302 feet. Take the guided tour if your timing is right, which is more fun than the self-guided tour.

Nearby is the **Bob Bullock Texas State History Museum**, where the story of Texas comes together under one roof with three floors of dynamic interactive exhibits, rare artifacts and special effects THAT chronicle the development of the Lone Star State. Check out the museum store, the café and Austin's only IMAX theater.



**Blanton Museum of Art**

where all those smart Austinites studied.

Head further north a few blocks to Austin's newest museum, the **Blanton Museum of Art**, located on the University of Texas campus. The Blanton is home to the nation's largest university-owned collection of more than 17,000 works of art. Styles range from Renaissance to masters to contemporary Latin American art. Nearby, hit the **LBJ Library and Museum**, the most visited of all presidential libraries, where former president Lyndon Baines Johnson's life and legacy are on exhibit. The museum also boasts one of the best views of the campus, in case you are wondering

Head south on foot, trolley or by car several blocks toward the sleek new City Hall (refer to your map). A stone's throw from City Hall—where on any given day you can experience live music or a fun art exhibit on the veranda—take in lunch at **Lambert's**. This cool, two-story café wafting of perfumed mesquite wood features gussied up barbecue entrees, simple chopped beef brisket sandwiches, Ranch chopped salad, broiled Gulf oysters, and more from a seasonal menu.

For boutique shopping, walk to nearby Second Street, downtown Austin's hottest new shopping district. Tucked among the gelato shops, **Cru Wine Bar**, and the lovely **Milk & Honey Spa**, you'll find **Cowboy Cool**, which carries a bastion of Texas-Euro fashions for jet-setting clubbers. Hollywood's Billy Bob Thornton has a few of his shirt designs on the racks.

At dusk before heading out for the evening, stop at the Congress Street Bridge to watch the famous evening bat flight (April through October only). Bats, that's right, and it's free!

For dinner, choose **Bess Bistro**, Sandra Bullock's cozy place in the downtown historic restored Stratford Arms building. The hearty fare is all over the map with selections ranging from chicken pot pie, to porcini-crust halibut, and pork tenderloin with German potato cakes. Nearby, **Ranch 616** is another hip, independent café with Texas favorites like margaritas, chicken fried steak, smoky grilled quail, and enchiladas with zesty tomatilla sauce. **Starlite**, in downtown's Warehouse District a few blocks east, features modern sophisticated fare such as olive oil-poached lamb strip loin or pan crisped wild striped bass. The refined setting is contemporary yet conversational and the global wine list will put stars in your eyes.



**Texas State History Museum**

Ready for some live music? An endless playlist of live music echoes from nearly 200 venues on any given evening. It's the music of the famous including Lyle Lovett, The Dixie Chicks, Joe Ely and Willie Nelson, plus numerous other musicians who play in the myriad clubs and outdoor stages that flourish here. The largest concentration of music venues is found downtown in the Warehouse District and along Sixth Street, a six-block stretch of bars and restaurants.

**Antone's** is Austin's famous blues club and appears as a shrine to music with all its vintage posters and memorabilia. The spirit of the late founder, Clifford Antone, suffuses the place, which offers a wide range of musical acts on a spacious stage, and double bars for the endless parade of thirsty patrons. **The Continental Club** is an international tourist attraction and one of the city's most celebrated, seasoned spots. The accumulated half-century's worth of history adds electricity to the rockabilly, roots rock, Tuesdays with Toni Price, or whatever else hits the marquee.

End the evening with a nightcap at the always happening **Cedar Street Courtyard**, where partiers crowd on the courtyard to meet and mingle or dance to live music on the weekends. **The Ginger Man** is a laid-back beer-quaffing haven with occasional live music; or hit swanky **Speakeasy** for cabaret, R&B cover bands, and rooftop views.

[Continue to Day 2](#)

## 72-HOUR VACATIONS



### Austin, Texas

## A Capital Retreat

Check Out the Southwest's Hippest City

[Day 1](#) / [Where to Stay](#)

[Day 2](#) / [Where to Eat](#)

[Day 3](#) / [What to See & Do](#)



Pat Green at the Austin City Limits Music Festival

### DAY 2

You've checked out the nightlife. Now it's time for to indulge in another of Austin's major attractions: Nature. Blessed with 300 days of sunshine a year, the city lives for the outdoors. Austin is home to the high-tech industry and countless state officials, and residents use any excuse to ditch the ties and suits. A diverse mix of nature trails, fields of spring wildflowers, parks and green belts create a verdant oasis in the heart of the Lone Star State.

For the first stop on your drive today, consider the venerable **Sweetish Hill Bakery** near the charming Enfield neighborhood on the western edge of downtown. Expect amazing aromas of stout coffee and authentic European pastries fresh from the oven. Grab to go or sit al fresco to enjoy the people watching. If you are craving a bigger hot breakfast, check out bustling **Magnolia Café** for ginger pancakes as big as your face.

At the heart of a network of more than 200 municipal parks lies the 360-acre **Zilker Park**, a must-see on your day of nature travel. Along with being a favorite venue for outdoor music events, the park is also home to **Barton Springs Pool**. Bring along your swimsuit because artesian springs feed this huge natural concrete pool, which remains a constant 68 degrees year-round. After a dip or a ride on the miniature park train, walk through the Zilker Park's **Botanical Gardens**. Anticipate a variety of lush gardens including The Taniguchi Japanese Garden and the newer Hartman



LBJ Library and Museum

Prehistoric Garden, installed in the area where dinosaur tracks were found in 1992.

Close to Zilker Park on Barton Springs Road, have lunch at casual **Shady Grove**, a breezy totally Texas spot under the grove of trees on the patio. The menu features a little bit of everything: chili cheeseburgers, chicken fried steak, veggie sandwiches, killer nachos and chocolate pecan pie. Then drive approximately fifteen minutes south on Mopac (Loop 1) to the **Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center**, a 178-acre botanical center (with myriad gardens and a gift shop) honoring the former First Lady's dedication to the environment. The most beautiful time of year is during the spring when wildflowers are in bloom.



**Barton Springs Pool**

Then drive to dramatically hilly Lake Travis in northwest Austin, which takes about 35 minutes from the Wildflower Center. Hopefully you will make it just in time for sunset cocktails at **The Oasis**. This landmark is located 450 feet above Lake Travis with multi tiered decks, so there is no better view of the breathtaking hill country or the sunset. There's a menu of Southwestern fare but dinner can wait. You will most likely be donning your sunglasses to check out the scenery and listening to the live music.

While venturing out in the lake area, choose **County Line Barbecue on the Lake** for a Texas-size dinner of tender ribs, peppery sausage, or slow-smoked beef brisket with rich tangy sauce and various sides. If seeking a little romance, reserve ahead and take a scenic hilly drive to **Hudson's on the Bend** overlooking Lake Travis. Enjoy fine wines and owner/chef Jeff Blank's exciting Hill Country cuisine of rattlesnake cakes, roasted wild boar, duck-stuffed tamales, fresh trout and Black Angus beef.

Optionally, if you would rather eat closer to your downtown hotel instead of the Lake Travis area, try **Hula Hut on the Lake** for "Mexonesian," a fusion of Tex-Mex and Polynesian fare. Uniquely situated on the banks of Lake Austin, there are two bars and outdoor dining built over the water. This is a cool perch for watching the boats and water skiers while noshing on chile-rubbed salmon tacos, beef fajitas or grilled Hawaiian chicken.

[Continue to Day 3](#)

## 72-HOUR VACATIONS



### Austin, Texas

## A Capital Retreat

Check Out the Southwest's Hippest City

[Day 1](#) / [Where to Stay](#)

[Day 2](#) / [Where to Eat](#)

[Day 3](#) / [What to See & Do](#)



State Capitol

### DAY 3

Rise and shine to some exercise at the **Town Lake Hike and Bike Trail** before breakfast. Town Lake bisects downtown with a refreshing waterway bordered by 10 miles of gravel-paved trails. You'll see every type of exerciser here from hard-core marathoners to moms with baby strollers and dogs on leashes.



**Joggers on the Town Lake Hike and Bike Trail**

Then indulge in the all-inclusive brunch nearby at the **Four Seasons Hotel restaurant, Trio**. Brunch is extravagant with a raw bar, mounds of shrimp, a meat carving station, omelets made to order, and free-flowing mimosas. Or visit **The Woodland** for a more rustic come-as-you-are scene and hearty Southern brunch with homemade biscuits, eggs Benedict, pancakes, pork chops and colossal cinnamon rolls. If you happen to be in Austin on a Sunday, the place to be is funky **Maria's Taco Xpress** for counter-service migas breakfast tacos with sinus-clearing hot sauce and a side of live gospel-blues tunes.

Pencil in a few hours to spend at the flagship **Whole Foods Market**, an Austin original located on the western edge of downtown. Here's the Eden of shopping and eating choices♦they even sell organic clothing♦plus you may catch some live music. If hungry, lunch on anything from sushi to Indian food, vegetarian salads and pizza, or just do a little sampling. Between the artisan cheese department, fresh baked breads, wines, organic produce, mega vitamins and bulk nuts and

granolas, you could drop hundreds of dollars in no time.

For more shopping, walk or drive to the Market District area, also on North Lamar next to Whole Foods. Fashionistas should migrate to **Emerald's** for unique jewelry or that extra sexy dress. Book buffs can browse **BookPeople**, Texas's largest independent with over 200,000 titles, while **Waterloo Records**, Austin 's favorite music store, will woo music mavens.

Ready for a lunch break? From downtown, drive a few miles south over the South Congress Bridge and emerald green Town Lake to SoCo, the epitome of a hip, urban neighborhood with denizens who run the gamut of tattoo-paved to trendy yuppies. Munch on Tex-Mex tamales, enchiladas, or al pastor tacos with house salsa verde at **Guero's**, an Austin tradition. Keep your eyes peeled for a visiting celebrity on tour staying at the San Jose Hotel next door. Or, you may choose to take a hamburger break at **Doc's Motorworks** across the street, a male magnet for the icy cold beer selection, nifty garage doors that open to a patio, and sports TV.



**Sailboat on Lake Travis**

After your respite, explore more homegrown shops on South Congress. **Parts & Labour** carry unique local Texas designer wear, shoes, home decorations and accessories. **Uncommon Objects** is the place for great antiques. Or get your candy on at **Big Top Candy Shop**. This nostalgic gem is designed like an old-fashioned circus with striped walls paved in deliciousness from candy bars to gummy bears. Who can resist an old-school soda fountain float or chocolate malt from a real soda counter?

If you have not departed Austin yet and are still moseying around SoCo in time for dinner, grab a bite at **Vespaio**, a bustling highly popular trattoria serving contemporary Italian food. We love it all from the wood-fired pizza, to grilled ahi over arugula salad, and linguine with littleneck clams. If that's too crowded, try nearby **South Congress Café**, a mod spot with homey Cajun-influenced selections.



**The Salt Lick BBQ**

We're saving the best for last. While not located in SoCo, you'll only need to drive a few miles east along Town Lake to East Austin to experience it. Cozy, crimson-colored **Uchi** is the place for matchless sushi and Japanese fusion fare from award-winning executive chef Tyson Cole. Expect genius pairings of pristine ingredients like citrus marinated salmon with tomatoes, peppers and Thai chilies; or petite pork ribs with pungent lemongrass ♦ kaffir lime glaze. "Hot Rock" is sear-it-yourself Wagyu beef on a Japanese river rock.

If you miss artistic Uchi, put it on your list of must-do places for your next visit to awesome Austin, the little big city steeped in history where the music is always cranking and everybody is welcome. As they say in Texas: Ya'll come back now, you hear? ♦

For more information, visit the Austin Convention and Visitors Bureau at <http://www.austintexas.org/>.

## MORE AUSTIN INFORMATION



[Austin Hotels](#)  
[Austin Restaurants](#)  
[Austin Attractions](#)  
[Travel Guide Texas](#)  
[Austin Convention  
and Visitors Bureau](#)

*\* Images courtesy of the Austin Convention and Visitors Bureau.*

**PSG022908**