





Small Towns to Visit Now

Find peace and vitality in these countryside escapes

ILLUSTRATION BY JUDY PAUL

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There was a time when most Texans lived over yonder. But over the past century, the percentage of Texans living in rural areas versus urban areas flipped: Today, 85 percent of us live in cities, while only 15 percent live in the country, according to the Texas Demographic Center. It's an understandable trend. With booming job markets, diverse cultural offerings, and fast-paced living, Texas' major cities project an undeniable metropolitan magnetism—catalysts for ever-expanding urbanization. But the more we congregate in big cities, the more we cast our longing eyes outward. Beyond the subdivisions and traffic jams, our state's small towns beckon travelers with the simple promise of room to breathe. Here we chronicle 15 such towns (no greater than 20,000 population) that are thriving with reinvention, revitalization, or recovery—places to visit now for both escape and discovery.



▲
In Comanche,
wet your
whistle at the
Stone Eagle
Beer Garden.

LEFT: Old Cora, the only remaining log courthouse in the state. BELOW: Unique Antiques & Collectibles.



Comanche

POP. 4,170

Comanche takes care of its history. Nearly every storefront around its tidy main square features a plaque from the Comanche County Historical Society. Aside from housing the only remaining log courthouse in the state, “Old Cora,” the town is known as the place where gunslinger John Wesley Hardin killed a Brown County deputy sheriff in a saloon in 1874. At the Comanche County Historical Museum, visitors can see a diorama of the scene.

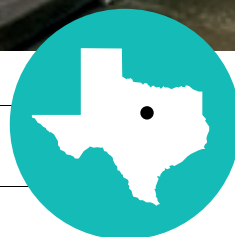
Within the last year, Revitalize Comanche has opened two shops on the square: a mercantile selling local goods and crafts, like soap and pottery; and an old-fashioned soda fountain, where you can enjoy a Dr Pepper float and listen to the jukebox.

“We like to say that we’re about an hour-and-a-half from everywhere: Abilene, Waco, Fort Worth,” Revitalize Comanche President Kristi Taylor says. “It’s an easy daytrip for a lot of folks—a quiet little town with lots of fun things to do.”—*Kimya Kavehkar*

Stay: The Rest-a-Spell vacation home offers three rooms, plus shared living areas and a wraparound porch where you can enjoy a bottle of the local Brennan Vineyards’ award-winning Super Nero red wine.

Eat: Harvest features chicken-fried steak, pecan-crusted chicken salad, and sandwiches. In the evenings, bow-tie-clad staff serve pasta and steak. Enjoy draft brews next door at Stone Eagle Beer Garden.

See: Brennan Vineyards offers visitors a peek into the production and bottling facilities, along with tastings of six wines, from rosé to port, for \$10.





Smithville

POP. 4,050



Smithville has well-earned bona fides for its photogenic vibe: To date, more than two dozen movies have filmed here since Sandra Bullock famously came to town in 1998 to make *Hope Floats*. In fact, it was the first town in Texas to be certified as “Film Friendly Texas” by the Texas Film Commission.

Two Austin darlings have recently built outposts here: Consuela, an ebullient, electric-hued handbag company with a flagship store on Austin’s South Congress, and Micklethwait Market & Grocery, a brick-and-mortar offspring of Micklethwait’s popular East Austin barbecue trailer.

After exploring the walkable downtown—featuring unusual shops including Bella’s Cottage Antiques, with its eclectic assortment of architectural elements and stained glass windows, and the nostalgia-inducing Smithville General Store—plunk down by the fireplace at The Front Room Wine Bar for a range of imaginative hors d’oeuvres, accompanied by a glass of wine or one of 17 single malts. —*Susan L. Ebert*

Stay: Slumber at the historic Katy House Bed and Breakfast, built in 1909 and restored in 1994, just a block from Smithville’s epicenter.

Eat: Start your day with an alfresco nosh at Olde World Bakery & Cafe and wind up with a late-night bite and brew at Honey’s Pizza.

See: Fish the Colorado River. The state record Guadalupe bass—17.25 inches, 3.7 pounds—was caught upstream from here. “The Smithville boat ramp provides access to almost 50 miles of nearly untouched water,” says Alvin Dedeaux of All Water Guides.



◀ **CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:** Smithville General Store; Jodi Douglass at Bombshell Betty Shop; The Royal Tomato; Micklethwait's Market and Grocery.



QUIET RETREATS

UNCERTAIN, POP. 93

Set among the moss-draped pines, towering cypress, and lily pad-strewn sloughs of Caddo Lake's western shoreline, Uncertain makes an ideal jumping-off point for fishing trips and paddling expeditions. Adding to the blissfully eccentric vibe—note the “sasquatch crossing” signs—is Spatterdock,

five whimsically decorated guest houses and a collection of mosaics and metal art on the lake shore. Proprietors Dottie and Billy Carter provide kayaks, canoes, and bicycles for guest use, and Billy's nearby Johnson's Ranch Marina offers guided lake tours, where you keep company with turtles, water fowl, and the occasional gator.—*June Naylor*

TURKEY, POP. 384

Looking up at the dramatic bluffs of the Caprock Escarpment, the little town of

Turkey is home to the historic Hotel Turkey, which has welcomed guests since 1927. The hotel serves catfish on Friday nights and steak and shrimp on Saturday nights, and it hosts live music both nights. Some bands are sure to break into Western swing, a style popularized by Turkey's most famous son, Bob Wills, “the King of Western Swing.”—*Jason Boyett*

PALESTINE, POP. 18,136

Established in 1846, Palestine boasts a plethora of

historical sites, a reputation for showy spring dogwoods and fall foliage, and the western station for the popular Texas State Railroad. A linchpin of downtown's architecture is the Redlands Historic Inn, built in 1915. The Redlands has 20 suites for overnight and extended stays, a restaurant and bar, and rich historical details, such as hexagonal floor tiling, an old elevator car, and black-and-white photos that recall Palestine's frontier railroad days.—*Susan L. Ebert*



▲
FROM TOP: Fort
Davis National
Historic Site; Blue
Mountain Bar
and Grill.



Fort Davis

POP. 1,201

Fort Davis started as a military post on the turbulent Texas frontier, but nowadays you'll find a decidedly laid-back town. Some streets remain unpaved, cell phones tend to fall silent, and folks still wave to each other on the street.

"It's a quiet little town," says Larry Francell, a retired museum director. "We spend a lot of time on our front porch. The town doesn't have a lot of tourist infrastructure."

It has the essentials, though, and attractions such as the recently made-over Indian Lodge and the nearby McDonald Observatory, which last year overhauled the Hobby-Eberly Telescope and George T. Abell Gallery.

A bonus: 5,050 feet of elevation makes Fort Davis the highest town in Texas and, on summer nights, one of the coolest.—*Melissa Gaskill*

Stay: The 1930s Indian Lodge, originally constructed by the Civilian Conservation Corps, features spacious rooms, dramatic mountain views, and priceless peace and quiet. In town, the 1912 Hotel Limpia transports guests back to the romance of the Old West.

Eat: Blue Mountain Bar and Grill at the Hotel Limpia serves "Texas frontier cuisine" in a European-style dining room and airy outdoor patio.

See: Hike between Davis Mountains State Park and Fort Davis National Historic Site for striking vistas and rock formations.

Palacios

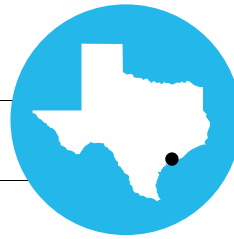
POP. 4,718

If you stand on the seawall in this quiet coastal town, the stillness of Matagorda Bay might bring on a sudden sense of calm. But the calm belies just how much nature is percolating beneath the surface: Crabs are clawing, fish are spawning, oyster reefs are growing.

Over the past couple of years, locals and newcomers have joined forces to educate, celebrate, and care for the ecosystem here at the Colorado River's confluence with the Gulf of Mexico.

The Matagorda Bay Foundation hosts regular education excursions to the bay and nearby beaches, and the chamber of commerce just released a new Top Ten Birding Hotspots flier. After all the nature action, grab a cold one at the regular music nights hosted by the Outrigger Event Center, an old lumberyard turned music hall.

"Palacios is a beautiful enigma," says Laurie Beck, the founder of Palacios' annual Birdfest. "You have to go out of your way to come here. This town makes you slow down."—*Clayton Maxwell*

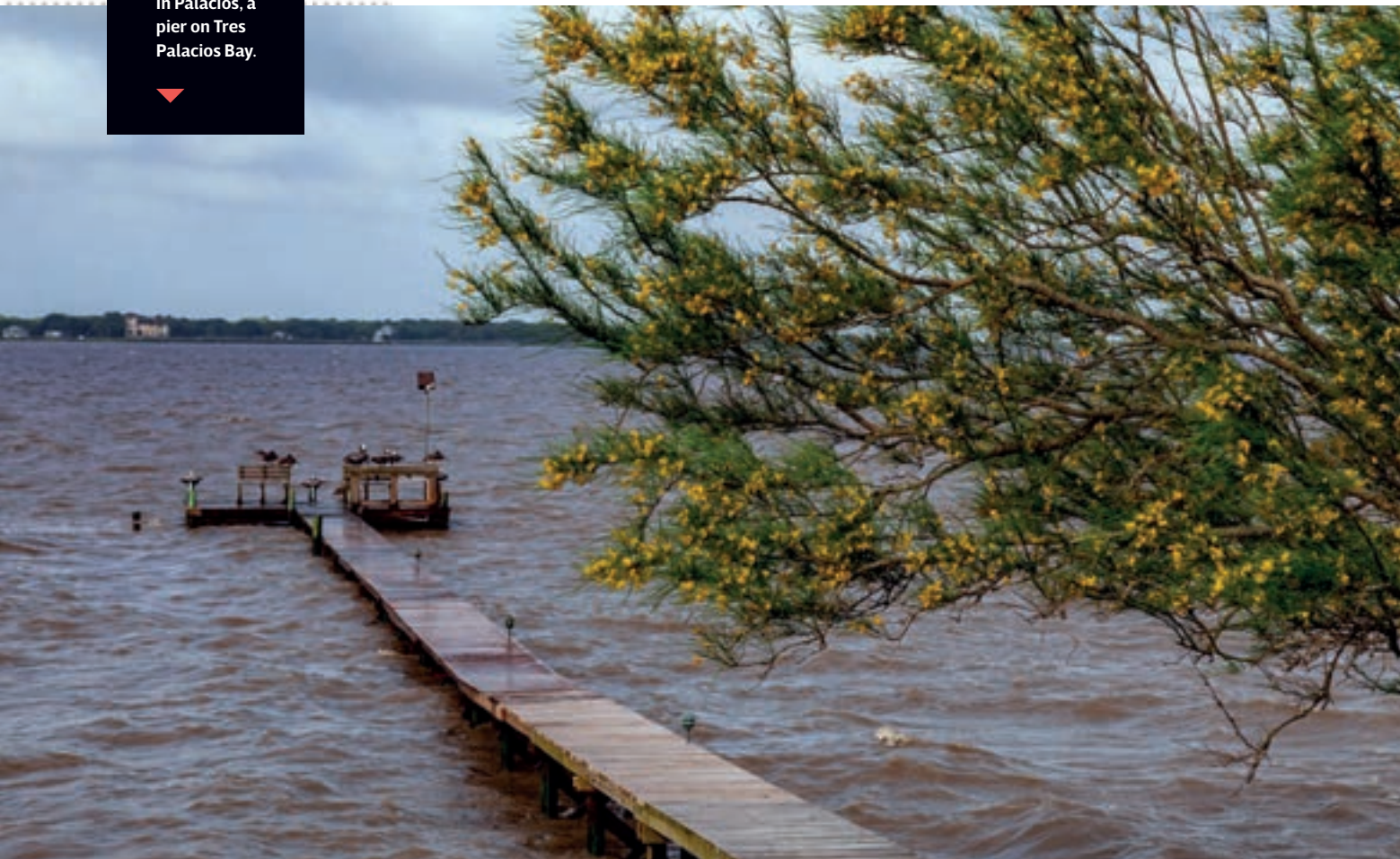


Stay: The Peaceful Pelican, a bed and breakfast, attracts outdoor enthusiasts from across the globe. The front porch is an idyllic spot to watch the bay and the birds that flock to it.

Eat: From morning to night, fishermen, shrimpers, birders, and beachcombers gather at the Point, a convenience store and Vietnamese/Mexican restaurant, satisfying cravings for both tacos and pho.

See: Birdfest is a rollicking March celebration of local ecology and culture that includes world-class birding, kayaking excursions, an art contest, and panel discussions—as well as a fanciful parade that would make the peacock proud.

In Palacios, a pier on Tres Palacios Bay.





FROM TOP: Piñatas at Mercadome Flea Market; a great blue heron at Pintail Lakes in Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge.

Alamo

POP. 19,679



Alamo's claim to fame as the "Refuge to the Valley" illustrates its symbiotic relationship with the adjacent Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge, an internationally renowned birding destination.

Santa Ana suffered a devastating flood in 2010, and last year it weathered a wildfire that burned 330 acres. But volunteers have helped with efforts to restore the subtropical thorn forest, which along with the carefully managed resacas, continues to draw birds such as tropical green jays, orioles, and chachalacas.

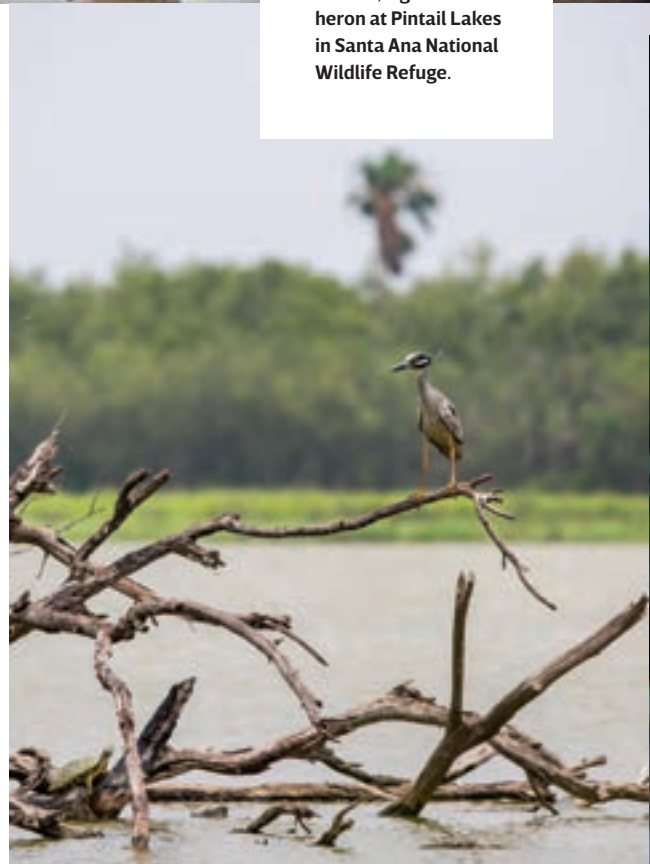
After exploring the refuge, check out the Mercadome Flea Market and Alamo Dance Hall, which draws thousands of weekend visitors to shop, eat, and move their feet to the sound of accordion-driven conjunto and norteño music.

"Santa Ana and the city of Alamo have a great partnership," says Gisela Chapa, refuge manager. "Together we're working to preserve the ecological and cultural heritage of the Rio Grande Valley."—*Daniel Blue Tyx*

Stay: The Alamo Inn Bed & Breakfast, Gears, and Tours, housed in a historic 1919 building, caters to outdoor enthusiasts with staff members who have a wealth of knowledge of local bird and butterfly hot spots.

Eat: El Dorado Restaurant serves up classic Valley Tex-Mex with homemade tortillas, salsa, and fresh-squeezed lemonade.

See: Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge is in one of the most biodiverse places in the country, with over 400 documented bird species, including dozens that can't be seen anywhere in the U.S. outside the Rio Grande Valley.





HAVENS OF HISTORY

PORT ISABEL, POP. 5,055

Searching for sunken treasure? You'll find it in Port Isabel at the Treasures of the Gulf Museum, home of shipwrecked booty from a 16th-century Spanish flotilla laden with gold. Uncover culinary riches at Joe's Oyster Bar & Grill, where everything is Gulf fresh, then walk off the meal with a visit to the Port Isabel Lighthouse State Historic Site (1852), for a walk up 75 winding stairs and rewarding views.

At the Port Isabel Historical Museum, a two-story fish mural on the building's façade—first painted in 1906 and recently restored—depicts more than 200 Gulf fish species. —*E. Dan Klepper*

NOCONA, POP. 2,981

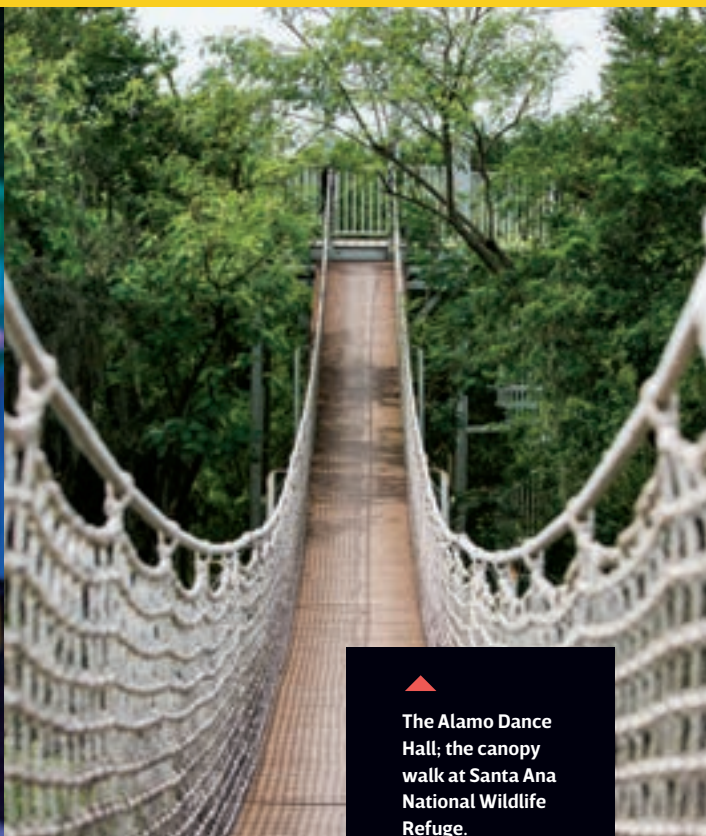
Some 6 million Longhorns tramped up the Chisholm Trail through Nocona—named for Comanche Chief Peta Nocona. In 1879, Joe Justin opened his first boot-making shop just north of town and relocated to Nocona in 1889 when the railroad arrived.

When “Daddy Joe” died, his sons relocated the Justin Boot Company to Fort Worth, but his headstrong daughter Miss Enid stayed put, launching her own boot brand, Nocona Boot Company, here in 1925. Nocona keeps its leather-working tradition alive at Nokona baseball gloves (maker of Nolan Ryan's favorite glove), and at the Fenoglio Boot Company, both of which offer tours. —*Susan L. Ebert*

SHAMROCK, POP. 1,822

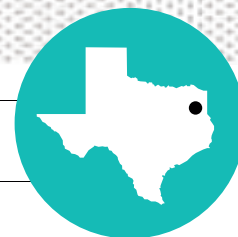
Shamrock, a Texas Panhandle town at the

intersection of legendary Route 66 and US 83, takes motorists back to the halcyon days of car travel with its cluster of neon-accented art-deco buildings from the 1920s and '30s. Examples include the landmark Conoco Tower Station and U-Drop Inn Café (now home to a museum and visitor center), the restored Magnolia Gas Station, and the Pioneer West Museum, which is set in a 1920s hotel. On March 17, thousands descend on Shamrock for the state's official St. Patrick's Day celebration. —*Jason Boyett*



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The Alamo Dance Hall; the canopy walk at Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge.

CLOCKWISE: Oil derrick reproductions in the World's Richest Acre; High Hill Farm; the East Texas Oil Museum.



Kilgore

POP. 12,795

Oil put Kilgore on the map in the 1930s, and this East Texas town still celebrates the boom today at places like Kilgore College's East Texas Oil Museum, which debuted a renovation in January. While on campus, be sure to check out the Rangerette Showcase honoring the school's legendary 79-year-old drill team.

The Texas Broadcast Museum, opened in 2016, displays an extensive collection of working equipment, including its newest highlight: one of the three original ESPN production trucks from the network's launch 40 years ago. Don't miss the 1949 Dumont Flexible Bus, formerly owned by WFAA in Dallas and claimed to be the oldest restored broadcast vehicle in existence.

"You can't find another Telecruiser like this anywhere in the world," says Dana Pearce, the museum's operations manager.—*Dave Wilson*

Stay: Head to Arp, about 20 minutes away, and find a little California in East Texas by visiting the vineyards and staying in the bungalows at High Hill Farm, a luxury bed and breakfast.

Eat: Right across from Kilgore College, the Back Porch serves up home-style burgers, hand-cut french fries, beans, and hush puppies.

See: Reproductions of derricks that once dominated the skyline occupy the World's Richest Acre in downtown Kilgore,

where 2.5 million barrels of oil were produced. Ride the "elevator to the center of the Earth" at the East Texas Oil Museum, or take a turn at the news desk on the Broadcast Museum's set with live mics, monitors, and a green screen for weather reports.





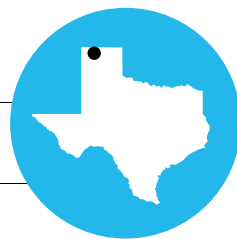
First built in the 1930s, the restored La Rita hosts a variety of shows.



Dalhart

POP. 8,346

A thriving economy—spurred by the Hilmar Cheese Company production plant—and a low cost of living have transformed Dalhart into more than just a Panhandle outpost on the way to the mountains. The resulting agricultural and dairy jobs have spurred a young, diverse influx of transplants. “When I moved here, I had total expectations of what it was going to be like,” says Julia Williams, owner of Purpose Coffee Co. and the local open-air farmers market. Originally from Dripping Springs, she and her husband arrived eight years ago from Washington, D.C. “Small towns have that stereotype that there’s only one kind of person. This community has definitely challenged my expectations. It’s a unique mix of people.” Despite the transformation, history is still on full display, from the exhibits chronicling pioneering ranchers at the XIT Museum to the stunningly restored La Rita Performing Arts Theatre.—*Jason Boyett*



Stay: Along with a lineup of chain hotels for travelers heading to New Mexico and Colorado, Dalhart’s locally owned Tri-State Motel will stoke your nostalgia for the mom-and-pop establishments of yesterday.

Eat: Ten in Texas Woodfire Grill serves the best hand-cut rib-eyes and burgers in town. Its screened patio is perfect for refreshingly cool summer evenings.

See: Rita Blanca Park offers miles of beautiful hiking trails around Lake Rita Blanca, a bird sanctuary just south of Dalhart. In winter, the bird-watching is spectacular.



Orange

POP. 18,595

Built on the Sabine River on Texas' upper coast, Orange had seen its share of drama before Hurricane Harvey. Once a hideout for Louisiana outlaws on the run, the timber industry brought prosperity in the late 1800s. By World War I, lumber shipping thrived in Orange, along with cotton, cattle, rice, and eventually oil. Prominent citizens erected stately Victorian structures, some of which stand today.

"We have always seen periodic hurricanes," says Ellen Walker Rienstra, historian and author of *The Long Shadow*, a biography of mill owner Henry Lutchter and his descendants. "But those early settlers sought the high ground."

Today, she says, the historic attractions of Orange are back online—and ready to be rediscovered.—*Dan Oko*



Stay: The Shangrila Bed and Breakfast, a 1927 two-story home, is conveniently located downtown.

Eat: Travelers hungering for cracklings, gumbo, boudin, or a fried-seafood sampler will want to make the easy, 12-minute drive from Orange to Bridge City for Judice's Cajun Café.

See: The Stark Foundation's Shangri La Botanical Gardens and Nature Center flooded during Harvey but has since reopened its peaceful paths through manicured landscapes and conserved pockets of cypress-tupelo swamp.



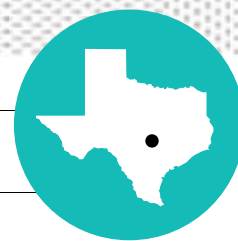
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A boardwalk at the Orange Travel Information Center on Interstate 10; Buck McCain's *The Invocation* at the Stark Museum of Art.

The Science Mill is just down the road from Bryans on 290.



Johnson City

POP. 1,656



At the corner of US 290 and Nugent Avenue in LBJ's friendly hometown, the words "Crossroads of Art & Science" adorn the gray façade of Echo, an art gallery and antiques store. This stoplight, with the always-humming Science Mill Museum on one side and a promenade of art galleries on the other, is literally the intersection of the art and science currents flowing strong through this Hill Country town, one already steeped in history and locally made wine.

With the recent opening of Variance—a workshop and studio space that designs living plant walls, interactive museum displays, and other marvels—in a shiny Quonset hut next door to the Science Mill, the creative juices keep flowing.

"For a tiny concentrated area, we are a hot spot of art and science," artist Catherine Massaro says. "With affordable rent and a friendly atmosphere, here you can live a creative life—and that creativity is felt in the whole community."—*Clayton Maxwell*

Stay: For cushy camping, try the luxury safari tents at Walden Retreats just 5 miles from downtown Johnson City on the Pedernales River. The Crossroads Inn, a bed and breakfast set in a limestone home, is ideal for porch-sitting. Keep an eye out for the deluxe

Carter Creek Winery Resort and Spa scheduled to open in August.

Eat: The Pecan Street Brewery is ground zero for a brew and a burger. For something more upscale, Bryans on 290 offers gourmet

fare prepared over an open fire along with a well-curated wine list.

See: The Last Saturday Artwalk is a laid-back way to ramble through the town's creative side, as are the regular community events at the Science Mill.





Rockport

POP. 10,759



Rockport's recovery since Hurricane Harvey nearly two years ago counts among the great feel-good stories in Texas history. Rebounding in stunning ways, this little art colony beloved by visitors since the 1950s for its fishing, bucolic bay setting, and frequent festivals feels fresh again.

Part-time resident Wes Williams, a fisherman from the Fort Worth area, notes that every sign of rebirth is greeted with gratitude. "The community has pulled together so well, and everyone shows such appreciation for returning visitors after what this town has been through," he says.—*June Naylor*

Stay: The Lighthouse Inn is unveiling its restoration gradually. At press time, ground floor rooms with balconies overlooking Aransas Bay were open once again.

Eat: Latitude 28°02' Coastal Cuisine & Fine Art is the place for blue crab cakes with chipotle remoulade sauce, served amid paintings and sculpture by local and regional artists.

See: Demolished by the storm, the Rockport Center for the Arts inhabits a temporary home and has secured a \$5 million grant that will fund a bigger venue and sculpture garden.





◀ **CLOCKWISE:** Copano Bay teems with birds; a carnival at the annual Fulton Oysterfest; St. Peter's Episcopal Church, built in 1871; Paradise Key Dockside Bar & Grill.



OUTDOOR ESCAPES

ATHENS, POP. 12,797

Start your day in this East Texas town with a visit to the Texas Freshwater Fisheries Center, home to a largemouth bass hatchery, fishing pond, walking trails, water wildlife displays, and a museum dedicated to fishing ephemera. After taking in the Dive Show at the underwater aquarium, try your own hand at scuba diving at Athens Scuba Park, where

clear waters fill an old brick quarry. Among the sunken treasures to explore: Ray Price's old tour bus. The park also offers swimming, snorkeling, and kayaking. —*Ashley Slayton*

SONORA, POP. 2,762

Locals tout the Caverns of Sonora, their subterranean National Natural Landmark, as the most beautiful show cave in Texas. They aren't exaggerating. See for yourself on a 1-hour-and-45-minute, nearly 2-mile tour of its crystal "palace." Or sign up for one of the cavern's tours featuring

rappelling, unique underground workshops, or photography. Above ground, explore the little-known, 37-acre Eaton Hill Nature Center & Preserve, a living classroom that studies the flora and fauna of the landscape's transition from the Hill Country to the Chihuahuan Desert. —*E. Dan Klepper*

BLANCO, POP. 2,012

Blanco calls itself the "Lavender Capital of Texas" as home of Hill Country Lavender farm and the annual Lavender Festival in June, complete with tours

of lavender crops, growing tips, and music. If swimming or fishing's your thing, head to Blanco State Park, where you can pitch a tent and stretch your legs along the Blanco River. At Real Ale Brewing Company, sip an unfiltered beer and toss washers. Each spring, the brewery hosts the popular Real Ale Ride, with Hill Country routes ranging from 15 to 80 miles and beer at the finish line. (This year, a weather postponement has pushed the ride to Oct. 26). —*Pam LeBlanc*

Salado

POP. 2,351



A historic Chisholm Trail stop and low-key artistic enclave, Salado suffered in recent years during heavy construction on Interstate 35. “The village was getting a bit draggy, a bit worn out, and now has completely renewed itself,” says Tyler Fletcher, a 40-year Salado resident and owner of Fletcher’s Books and Antiques. He pointed to a new generation of businesses like Barrow Brewing Co. and Chupacabra Kitchen drawing new visitors to the town as welcome signs of rebirth.—*Cynthia J. Drake*

Stay: The Stagecoach Inn, which dates to 1861, closed for a two-year renovation before re-opening in late 2018 with a popular restaurant and bar, and design nod to its midcentury days as a motor lodge.

Eat: Alexander’s Craft Cocktails and Kitchen at the Inn on the Creek offers an eclectic menu complemented by views of Salado Creek and a secret passage upstairs to a speakeasy bar and dining area.

See: Catch a summer evening production of *Salado Legends*, a long-running show about the history of Salado at the outdoor Tablerock Amphitheater.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Inn on the Creek; the shop at Salado Glassworks; a bicycle fence.



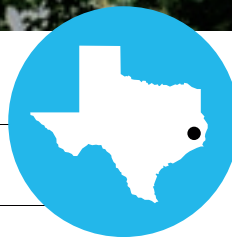


▲
The sandy shores of Village Creek near Lumberton.

Lumberton

POP. 12,692

Lumberton originally rose as a sawmill town but today has evolved into a fast-growing bedroom community for nearby Beaumont. Each spring, azalea blooms brighten its neighborhoods, and in balmy weather, outdoorsy types head outside to paddle or hike. In Village Creek State Park, crews are wrapping up renovations after Hurricane Harvey flooding two years ago. “To me, Lumberton has been rejuvenated,” says Ann Hansen, a social worker and business owner. “It’s not just a drive-through place now. It’s a growing community with young families.”—*Pam LeBlanc*



Stay: To get a real taste for the pine-shaded enclave, pitch a tent at Village Creek State Park, where campsites rub shoulders with magnolia and dogwood trees.

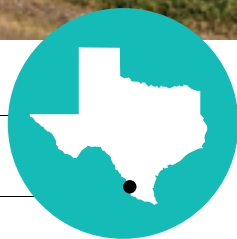
Eat: Hungry travelers should swing by the Catfish Cabin, a family business known for fried hushpuppies and catfish, as well as crawfish pie, fried shrimp, and oysters.

See: Take in a round of disc golf at Lumberton City Park, or hike the dense forests at Village Creek State Park. Birdwatchers listen for wood ducks, herons, owls, and woodpeckers; and paddlers guide canoes down a creek the color of café au lait.



San Ygnacio

POP. 667



A community of artists, rich history, and nature blend together in the tiny town of San Ygnacio along the Rio Grande. Artists have been drawn to the historic architecture since the 1970s. Noted painter and sculptor Michael Tracy created the River Pierce Foundation, which has worked to preserve San Ygnacio's historic buildings, including the 1830 Treviño-Urbe Rancho. Catering to birders, bed and breakfast Posada Paloma opened this year, along with the River Pierce Foundation Visitors Center & Museum. "It's a very historic town that just feels like it's out of this era," says Nydia Tapia-Gonzales, director of Texas Birding and a Preservation Texas board member. "It's quiet, and there are no stores and no traffic."—*Cynthia J. Drake*

Stay: Posada Paloma offers rooms and casitas for rent, with breakfast included.

Eat: You won't find any restaurants in San Ygnacio, but 15 miles away in Zapata, Tacos El Tejano is known for guacatacos and papas asadas, Mexican-style loaded baked potatoes.

See: Visit the town square to see historic buildings in various states of renovation, and bring your binoculars to try for a rare sighting of a Morelet's seedeater, which lives in the cane along the Rio.



▲
FROM TOP: Treviño-Urbe Rancho historic site; Christopher Rincon and Diane Uribe of River Pierce Foundation; Gil Rocha's *South Texas Phototaxis*.



CULTURAL TREASURES

HALLETTSVILLE, POP. 2,625

That fiddles, kolaches, polka, and sausage all have their own festivals in Hallettsville pretty much sums up the Lavaca County seat. This is Czech/German country, with a painted church (St. Mary's) and the impressive Lavaca Historical Museum. The best time to visit is on the fourth weekend of April, when the Knights of Columbus Hall hosts the Texas State Fiddle Championship, known as the Fiddlers Frolics. The KCs also host the state straight domino tournament, which started in the early 1950s and draws

upwards of 200 players in late January.

—Michael Corcoran

CARTHAGE, POP. 6,521

As the old homeplace of Tex Ritter and Jim Reeves, as well as one the best white bass runs in Texas, Carthage deserved to be recognized long before mortician Bernie Tiede shot wealthy widow Marge Nugent and stuffed her into her own freezer—the true tale behind Richard Linklater's 2011 movie *Bernie*. Regardless, the headliner for music fans is the Texas Country Music Hall of Fame & The Tex Ritter Museum, a 13,000 square-foot showcase of memorabilia such as one of singing cowboy Gene Autry's Western suits and the leather jackets and pants Kris Kristofferson

wore in the 1973 film *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid*.

—Susan L. Ebert

ARCHER CITY, POP. 1,744

Clinging to the wind-scoured Panhandle Plains, Archer City could well have fallen into obscurity save for native son Larry McMurtry, the Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *Lonesome Dove*. The 1971 film based on McMurtry's third novel, *The Last Picture Show*, was filmed in Archer City and precipitated the restoration of the Royal Theatre that starred in the movie's title role. Nearby, the 83-year-old McMurtry himself presides over Booked Up, a shop with nearly 200,000 books. "Booked Up exists because books improve the culture, wherever they

may be," McMurtry says.

"And the citizens of Archer City, my hometown, deserve to have books in their lives."—Susan L. Ebert

CLIFTON, POP. 3,453

A budding art scene in Clifton, a former railroad town located 33 miles northwest of Waco, radiates from Clifton Art Alley, a vibrant mural collaboration curated by local writer and farmer Kaye Callaway. The alley is also home to The Cell Block, a 1930s two-cell jailhouse converted into a boutique hotel. While in town, catch a film at the refurbished art-deco ClifTex Theatre and take a stroll to browse antiques at Bosque County Emporium and locally made goods at 219 Artisan Market.

—Veronica Meewes



◀ The San Ygnacio Bird Sanctuary.

CLOCKWISE:
Hancock Springs
Free Flow Pool;
Eve's Café;
Colorado Bend
State Park.



Lampasas

POP. 6,681



Swimmers have long flocked to Lampasas in the summer for the Hancock Springs Free Flow Pool—one of the oldest pools in Texas, dating to 1911, and one of seven mineral springs in this town on the northern edge of the Hill Country.

And over the years, the town has capitalized on the crystalline alkaline beauty of its springs with public art, such as the whimsical installations in the Hanna Springs Sculpture Garden. There's more quirky art, too: Between 2008 and 2017, artists designed eight murals around town that depict Lampasas' heritage and culture, first sketching them out as elaborate paint-by-numbers and enlisting the entire town to complete them. While downtown, stroll the courthouse square and tour the recently refurbished Lampasas County Courthouse.

Jamie Garrett grew up in nearby Bend and, except for her college years, has lived in Lampasas ever since. "Lampasas is full of hidden treasures and is intent on keeping its small-town identity," she says. "I can't imagine living anywhere else."—*Susan L. Ebert*

Stay: For about the price of a chain hotel, book a night at Jamie Garrett's restored 100-year-old farmhouse on [Airbnb.com](#).

Eat: Indulge in authentic German schnitzel at [Eve's Café](#) on the courthouse square.

See: At Colorado Bend State Park, 70-foot Gorman Falls awaits hikers who tackle the moderate 3-mile round trip. On the way back, head north to [Stoneledge Winery and Vineyard](#) for wine tastings and panoramic hill-top vistas.

Albany

POP. 1,937



With a fine art museum flourishing inside an 1878 jail building, Albany mixes cultural attractions both historic and modern with its down-home atmosphere. The Old Jail Art Center hosts a heady rotation of exhibits, along with pre-Columbian relics and works by American and European artists. New to the center are delightful oral history videos from founding families, telling stories of Albany's heritage, and from art historians detailing the town's wealth of art.

Nearby Fort Griffin State Historic Site chronicles the region's frontier history, an untamed era that comes to life with the community production of *Fandango*, an outdoor musical staged annually in late June for 80 years.

Shopkeeper Pati Jones says Albany exemplifies small-town simplicity: "Kids still play outside and people go fishing or just go walking down Main Street. You can see incredible art, and you can also see people on horseback at the Dairy Queen drive-through."—*June Naylor* 🐾

Stay: A comfy night's sleep is assured in the two-bedroom 1930s rock cottage called Dye Guest House, and there's a boutique hotel in the works on Main Street.

Eat: The Beehive is popular for steaks and a glass of wine or a cocktail. Find puffy tacos and fajitas at Los Cazadores Mexican Grill and a scoop of ice cream at Vintage Vanilla.

See: Me & Mrs. Jones stocks necklaces and earrings, along with casual clothing and embellished straw bags.



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FROM TOP:
Vintage Vanilla;
the Shackelford
County
Courthouse.