



TRAVEL

# Austin: making headlines

Cowboy-Hüte, Kakteen und sprudelnde Ölquellen? Weit gefehlt! ELIZABETH ZACH besucht die texanische Hauptstadt und entdeckt eine quirlige Metropole, in der die gängigen Klischees längst überholt sind.

**MEDIUM US AUDIO PLUS**



Floating downstream on the Guadalupe River



Foto: ELI DUPST/The New York Times/Reduxia/af

In the early 2000s, while living in Berlin, I got to know an American who told me she was from Texas. As a Californian who'd never visited the "Lone Star State", the first thing I thought of was the contentious election that took George W. Bush to the White House. I had stereotypes in my mind: cacti and a desert landscape, the Alamo, guns, cowboys, football, oil.

But as I got to know Denise, I learned that she was from Austin, the Texas state capital – and that's quite a different thing.

When I first met her, the city wasn't well known outside the state, apart from the fact that George W. Bush had governed Texas from Austin before he became president. Like most of Texas, the city was politically conservative. But as the years have passed, Austin has been making headlines in the rest of the U.S., especially in the Deep South, as an excellent example of a city with socially progressive ideas.

### A thriving capital

As Denise tells me, with great pride in her hometown, Austin was always socially progressive – it just didn't start advertising its attributes until the last 20 years. She notes that in the 1960s and '70s, Austin was a hippie mecca, with a thriving university population and music scene. Today, it's one of the world's live-music capitals, thanks to iconic venues like Stubb's Bar-B-Q, the Little Longhorn Saloon, Broken Spoke, and the Continental Club.

Every October, Austin welcomes thousands of visitors to its Austin City Limits Music Festival (ACL Festival). Willie Nelson has played Austin for years; Janis Joplin often sang here; and Stevie Ray Vaughan was a regular club performer, too. And in spring, since 1987, South by Southwest (widely known as SXSW or South By) has drawn just as many film fans from around the globe.

In the last two decades, the city has grown in population and also commercially: Tesla, Dell, Apple, Samsung, Google, VRBO, Facebook, Indeed, and

many other companies have set up offices in Austin, attracted by low state corporate taxes and skilled workers. While this expansion is admirable, it has also driven up the cost of housing and has led to a noticeable rise in homelessness around the city.

Denise married her German boyfriend, Jörn, and moved with him to Austin. In 2005, when they arrived, the metropolitan population was around 1.1 million; today, it's about 2.1 million. Construction sites and cranes straddle the downtown. For Denise and Jörn, the best side benefit of this is an international flair. Many Germans have moved to Austin for their work, creating a lively expat community here that enjoys going to soccer (football) matches together and visiting the city's many excellent beer gardens.

### Clear waters in the subtropics

The first time I visited Austin, it struck me as just another American city: sprawling, with five-lane highways drifting off to suburbs and strip malls. But this is Texas Hill Country, and I liked the hilly, lush landscape.



Day one of the Austin City Limits Music Festival at Zilker Park on October 6, 2017

#### Lone Star State

- Spitzname für Texas

#### contentious

- umstritten, knapp

#### cactus ['kæktəs]

#### cacti (pl.) ['kæktai]

- Kaktus

#### Alamo: the ~

- Schlacht von Alamo (1836) während des texanischen Unabhängigkeitskrieges

#### thriving ['θraɪvɪŋ]

- florierend

#### venue ['venju:]

- Veranstaltungsort; hier: (Musik)Kneipe, Club

#### corporate tax

- Körperschaftsteuer

#### homelessness

- Obdachlosigkeit

#### construction site

- Baustelle

#### crane

- Kran

#### straddle sth. ['strædɪl]

- etw. überziehen

#### side benefit

- positiver Nebeneffekt

#### expat (ifml.)

- ständig im Ausland lebende Person

#### sprawl ['sprɔ:ɪ]

- sich ausbreiten

#### suburb

- Vorort

#### strip mall (N. Am.)

- Einkaufsstraße

#### lush

- üppig bewachsen



South Congress Avenue is popular with visitors and locals alike



“Keep Austin weird” – the slogan that promotes small businesses in the city

Maeve Haven and Alysha Pretty of the Beckies, at the Austin City Limits Music Festival



**INFO TO GO**

Texas gained independence from Mexico in the 1835–36 Texas War of Independence and was called “The Republic of Texas.” In 1845, it became the 28th state in the Union, and the formal transfer of government took place in 1846.

The views around Lady Bird Lake and its bridges were lovely. So were the views along the 16-kilometer Ann and Roy Butler Hike-and-Bike Trail, which goes around the lake.

The lake is, in fact, a reservoir on the Colorado River. Created in 1960, it remains popular with locals and tourists. Fishing, paddleboarding, kayaking, canoeing, rowing – all are possible here. The waters are calm and the climate is subtropical, with hot summers and mild winters. The semi-evergreen oak trees stay green most of the year round.

On my most recent visit, it was late summer and the Texas heat was extreme, so I headed for the Guadalupe River, about an hour's drive from Austin. The river is 370 kilometers long, but the most popular stretch is from south of Canyon Lake to New Braunfels. You can rent inflatable rubber tubes here and float downstream. (Remember to bring sun screen, a sunhat, and water shoes!) I drifted around islands of limestone rocks, oak and juniper trees, while other tubers swung from ropes before plopping into the river. While several sections of the river were very busy, there were also places where the waters were clear and there were only a few other tubers.

### Tex-Mex and breakfast anytime

The next morning, I met Denise and some other friends at the Magnolia Cafe. Established in 1979 and still family run, it has kept its “true Austin feel.” The cafe clearly has staying power, having survived the recent pandemic and competition from many other restaurant upstarts across the city.

Its front sign reads: “Sorry, we’re open,” and a huge oak tree shades the cafe. The menu’s selection of “Tex-Mex” and the offer of “Breakfast anytime” left me with too much choice – and then there was the pancake selection: chocolate chip, gingerbread banana pecan, or jalapeño pecan. I settled on the huevos rancheros, a grilled tortilla with two eggs, chipotle sauce, and cheddar cheese, along with rice, beans, and tortillas on the side.



Live music at Ginny's Little Longhorn Saloon, one of Austin's iconic venues

As we ate, I talked with Jörn about getting used to Texas after growing up in Germany. He told me he first visited Austin in 2000, and remembered that the downtown area felt deserted.

“There used to be lonely country roads on the outskirts,” he told me, “but they’ve been rebuilt into highways or toll roads. There’s still almost no public transportation.”

Jörn was also struck by the influence Germans have had on the region. I later also read about Johann Friedrich Ernst, an Oldenburg native who arrived in New York around 1829. When he heard of Stephen F. Austin, who had recently settled in Texas and was offering land grants, Ernst headed for the Lone Star State and bought 4,000 acres in Austin County, making him one of the first German settlers in the area. He encouraged German friends and family to join him, telling them about the Mediterranean climate and cheap land for the taking.

### Top tips for bars

I talked to another person who’s moved to Austin from Germany: Hamburg native Stephan Pahlke. He came here

#### paddleboarding

► Stehpaddeln

#### kayaking

► Kajak fahren

#### canoeing

► Kanufahren

#### rowing

► Rudern

#### semi-evergreen

► halbbimmergrün

#### oak tree

► Eiche

#### head for...

► sich aufmachen nach ...

#### inflatable [ɪnˈflætəbəl]

► aufblasbar

#### rubber tube [tuːb]

► Gummireifen

#### downstream

► flussabwärts

#### limestone rock

► Kalksteinfelsen

#### juniper tree [ˈdʒuːnɪpər]

► Wacholderbaum

#### gingerbread

[ˈdʒɪŋɡərbred]

► Lebkuchen

#### pecan [piˈkæn]

► Pekannuss

#### settle on sth.

► sich für etw. entscheiden

#### outskirts

► Stadtrand

#### toll road [toʊl]

► Mautstraße

#### land grant

► staatliche Landzuweisung

#### taking; for the ~

► (frei) zur Verfügung



The Magnolia Cafe offers an extensive Tex-Mex menu and "breakfast anytime"



They were made to ride and ramble: get yours at Allens Boots, the iconic Texas boot store on South Congress Avenue



Classic Central-Texas barbecue tray of smoked meats



The Broken Spoke: established in 1964, it claims to be the “last of the true Texas dance halls”

in 2010. Working in technology for the company Salesforce in the downtown area before the Covid pandemic, Pahlke got to know the social scene, and was often on the lookout for where he might find good draft beer for himself and cocktails for his girlfriend.

His favorite for both is the Firehouse Hostel & Lounge, in Austin’s oldest standing fire station, which dates from 1885. There’s no sign on the outside of the building to let people know that there’s a bar inside. To find it, go into the hostel lobby and you’ll see a bookcase. Slide it to the side ... and you’re in the Firehouse Lounge. The furniture, the wallpaper, and the candles on the tables all make the place look like a Prohibition-era speakeasy – and the cocktails are very good. (They say the Old Fashioned is one of the best cocktails in the city.) The Lounge has DJs, live music, and events through the week.

Another pub nearby, DuMont’s Down Low, feels like “an old Mafia hangout,” says Pahlke. He recommends some other interesting Austin go-tos,

such as Small Victory, which serves drinks with specially shaped ice cubes, and the Roosevelt Room, with its fancy, well-stocked liquor display and relaxed jazz club ambience. According to Pahlke, the Live Oak Brewery has “the best Hefeweizen – the closest to Germany I’ve found in the United States.”

### Candies and rhinestones

The areas around East and West 6th Street and Rainey Street have grown in recent years, attracting party-going crowds on weekend evenings. You’ll find bungalow bars, food trailers, and clubs built into Old American West and early 20th-century storefronts.

The area was once poor, but one residential house recently sold for around \$10 million. On Saturday mornings, consider heading to lively South Congress Avenue (or SoCo), with its candy shops, tattoo studios, second-hand vintage boutiques, and barbershops – and to street vendors like Maya Star, a great boutique for women’s clothing, jewelry, bags and shoes; Allens Boots for

#### lookout: be on the ~ for sth.

- nach etw. Ausschau halten

#### draft beer [dræft]

- Bier vom Fass

#### fire station

- Feuerwehrhaus

#### bookcase

- Bücherregal

#### wallpaper

- Tapete

#### speakeasy ['spi:k,i:zi]

- Flüsterkneipe (mit illegalem Alkoholausschank)

#### hangout (ifml.)

- Stammkneipe

#### fancy

- ausgefallen

#### well-stocked

- gut bestückt

#### liquor ['li:kər]

- alkoholisches Getränk

#### display

- hier: Auswahl

#### rhinestone ['ri:nstoun]

- Strass, Glitzerstein

#### storefront (N. Am.)

- Fassade, Ladenfront

#### residential house

[,rezɪ'denʃəl]

- Wohnhaus

#### vintage boutique

[,vɪntɪdʒ bu:'ti:k]

- Secondhand-Laden mit Retro-Mode

#### barbershop

- Herrenfriseur

#### street vendor

- Straßenverkäufer(in)

Cupcake Airstream trailer on South Congress Avenue



cowboy boots; the Big Top Candy Shop, a circus-themed candy store with old-fashioned sweets; and Uncommon Objects for unusual things from around the world.

### Get the wild boar ribs

Despite Austin's contemporary and progressive feel, this is still Texas, and in the culinary sense, that means BBQ and steak. I asked Stephan Pahlke where he would recommend newcomers to go and eat.

"I like Perry's Steakhouse & Grille, on West 7th Street," he told me. "Get the fried asparagus, or the famous pork chop. Another solid option is Cooper's Old Time Pit Bar-B-Que. I love their sausage and brisket." You order by the pound, your meal is served on a paper plate, and you're welcome to share.

More upmarket is Lamberts Downtown Barbecue, in the heart of busy 2nd Street. Located in the beautifully restored historic Schneider Brothers Building, the restaurant serves slow-smoked BBQ and modern Texas food with local beers and wines. The place also features live music and a laid-back atmosphere. "Get the wild boar ribs," is Pahlke's recommendation.

One of the last places I visited in Austin was the Blanton Museum of Art on the University of Texas campus, with its rich Western American and Latin American art collections.

The most memorable work I saw there was the painting *Halt on the Prairie* by artist William T. Ranney, who fought in the Texas War of Independence in 1835–36. Pioneers, hunters, trappers, and explorers all interested Ranney, as did the lonely Texas landscape of his era. Today, that may be no more, but many of the traditions still live on in the Lone Star State's capital.

**asparagus** [ə'spærəgəs]  
• Spargel

**laid-back** (ifml.)  
• entspannt, locker

**pork chop**  
• Schweinekotelett

**wild boar**  
• Wildschwein

**brisket**  
• Rinderbrust

Downtown Austin seen from Lady Bird Lake

