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## **Family-Owned Businesses - Second Generations**

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# Roaming the Hill Country...you might easily forget you're right here in Texas

Story and Photos by Richard Varr

I know I'm in the Texas Hill Country but, for a few moments, I find myself whisked away to the English countryside. I'm walking amidst a circle of stacked stones that looks like prehistoric Stonehenge atop a grassy field. But, after a closer look – and a snap back to reality – I realize these stones aren't stones at all, but steel and plaster replicas.

"We call it our strange art installation," quipped Sarah Derousseau, executive director of the Hill Country Arts Foundation in Kerrville, when she explained the inspiration for so-called Stonehenge. It came after a local landowner visited the English monument.

Built on his property more than 30 years ago, the smaller replica was more recently relocated to the foundation's grounds.

What also might be considered unusual is to find a region of such hilly countryside in what's generally perceived as flat land. The Hill Country is where rolling hills stretch out to the horizon, carved by meandering creeks and rivers shaded by leafy Texas Live Oak and Bald Cypress trees. Lakes welcome boaters and anglers, and visitors splash in refreshing underground swimming holes and gentle streams.

In springtime, sprouting Texas bluebonnets add hues of royal blue, maroon and lavender within pastures and along high-

ways. Local vineyards are recognized worldwide for their bountiful wine choices. And, visits to the Texas Hill Country gateways of Austin and San Antonio enhance any trip with world-class museums, history and culture.

## Austin

While an Austin visit could include touring the pink granite State Capitol or a hike around Lady Bird (Johnson) Lake, dotted with kayakers and canoes, I begin my adventure at the Oasis on Lake Travis, a multi-level restaurant and shopping complex. Built on a bluff, platforms offer incredible lake-



*The Oasis, built on a bluff overlooking Lake Travis in Austin, is a popular multi-level restaurant and shopping complex - a favorite destination for locals and visitors alike.*



*The Texas State Capitol is the largest of all domed state capitol buildings and is second in total size only to the National Capitol in Washington, D.C. It was officially completed on December 8, 1888.*

side panoramas, especially at sunset.

Lake Travis is one of the Austin area's string of man-made lakes created through flood control dams along the Colorado River, starting 85 miles northwest of Austin and ending in the city. Others include Lady Bird Lake, Lake Austin, Lake LBJ, Inks Lake and the massive, 30-mile long Lake Buchanan. Most are popular for boating and fishing, while Lake Travis' popular beach areas fill up quickly on weekends.

## Dripping Springs

A short drive to Dripping Springs is where you'll find a 50-foot waterfall spilling over limestone outcroppings at



*This statue of Admiral Chester Nimitz stands in front of the National Museum of the Pacific War, one of Fredricksburg's most revered attractions. Admiral Nimitz served as the Commander in Chief of the U.S. Pacific Fleet in World War II.*





This “replica” of Stonehenge was built on private property more than 30 years ago after the landowner visited the English monument. It was later moved to property owned by the Hill Country Arts Foundation in Kerrville.



Marktplatz in Fredericksburg is centered with the rebuilt octagonal Vereins Kirche, now a local history museum. The 1947 structure was the town’s first public building.

the river-fed Hamilton Pool Preserve. The grotto-like pool with surrounding hiking paths was formed thousands of years ago when the dome over an underground river collapsed. The pale blue water can be super cold at around 50 degrees, and reservations are needed in the busy summer months.

### Fredericksburg

Next stop is Fredericksburg, considered to be the heart of the Hill Country, about 80 miles

from Austin on State Highway 290 West. German settlers founded the town in 1846, and their cultural legacy remains today. For example, Main Street or Hauptstrasse cuts through the center of town. German eateries serve up crispy pork schnitzel, bratwurst and sauerkraut, and shops sell German beer steins and nutcrackers alongside wine tasting rooms, antique shops and galleries. Marktplatz is centered with the rebuilt octagonal Vereins Kirche, now a local history museum. The 1847 original structure was the town’s first public building.

“Our ancestors really didn’t know what they coming to, but once they got here they were Americans and had to struggle to survive,” explained Evelyn Weinheimer with the Pioneer Museum.

“Fredericksburg became more of an isolated community, and I think that helped us keep our heritage as long as we have.”

The Pioneer Museum showcases this German heritage through original mid- to late-19th and early 20th century log cabins, homes and barns built by settlers. The buildings fea-

ture original furnishing, and descendants of families that once lived in these structures narrate explanatory recordings.

“I remember my mother used to cook on it,” said one recording when describing an old stove in the Fassel-Roeder house.

One of Fredericksburg’s most revered attractions, the National Museum of the Pacific War, tells the story of World War II’s Pacific theater. Fronted by a statue of native son Admiral Chester Nimitz, the museum complex includes the newly renovated Nimitz Gallery, as the museum was founded on the site of the family’s old Nimitz Hotel. The gallery details the life of Nimitz who served as Commander in Chief of the U.S. Pacific Fleet.

The main gallery features some monumental artifacts, including a captured Japanese midget submarine, a B-25 Bomber and an original atomic bomb casing.

Fredericksburg’s military and WWII presence are also seen at the airport, where a Douglas C-47 transport plane stands opposite the Hangar Hotel, built

to look like an airplane hangar with an aircraft observation deck and actual 1940s décor inside – old luggage, an original phone switchboard and wartime radio.

A short drive from Fredericksburg along Highway 290 East passes peach orchards, grassy pastures and roadside produce stands on the way to a string of wineries. With more than 100 vineyards in the Hill Country, the local industry touts this area as second only to Napa Valley. Tasting rooms, often adjacent to orderly rows of grapevines, offer samples of dry and fruity reds, whites and rosés.

Further along 290 East, I visit the birthplace and final resting place of the 36th U.S. president. The ranch, making up one location in the LBJ National Historical Park, includes what was Johnson’s “Texas White House,” a typical ranch home with a pool. It’s at the center of a more than 1,500-acre working ranch that also includes a schoolhouse LBJ once attended and his reconstructed birthplace home — just across from the Johnson Family Cemetery where LBJ and wife Lady Bird are buried.

In a hangar on the ranch is one of five Lockheed JetStar aircraft which LBJ often called “Air Force One-Half” because of its small size. Another building houses his two white 1966 and 1967 Lincoln Continental convertibles, as well as the West German-built lagoon-blue Amphicar. President Johnson often surprised — and even scared — passengers when plunging the amphibious vehicle into nearby Lake LBJ.

At a second location in the National Historical Park is the president’s boyhood home,

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## Texas Hill Country

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farther east in Johnson City. Other LBJ Hill Country points of interest include the nearby LBJ State Park and Historic Site and the LBJ Museum of San Marcos, highlighting his college years at what's now Texas State University.

The LBJ Presidential Library and Museum, and the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center, are both in Austin.

### Luckenbach

Just a 15-minute drive south-east of Fredericksburg leads to Luckenbach, a Hill Country jewel where country music legends once performed. With its worn, creaky-floored outdoor stage, beer saloon and legendary Dance Hall shaded by 500-year-old oak trees, Luckenbach is where Texas country rocker Jerry Jeff Walker recorded an album and where Willie Nelson held his annual Fourth of July picnics until 1999 when 13,000 fans simply overwhelmed the small hamlet.

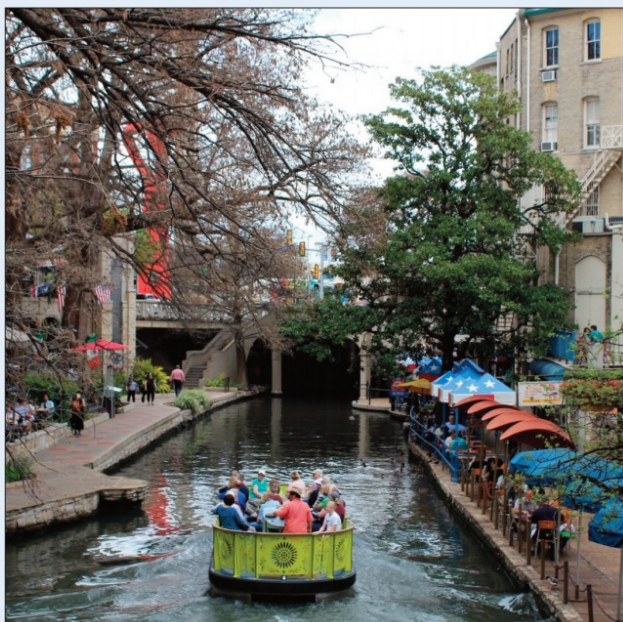
Visitors come to relax with a cold beer alongside wooden shacks emblazoned with license plates from all over the United States.

"There's nothing like it," said Kat Boss, a local event planner, after a tour of the Dance Hall and old post office and general store — selling T-shirts, cowgirl boots and cowboy hats.

Founded in 1849 by German settlers, Luckenbach remains a magnet for musicians and concerts seven days a week, and allows self-contained RVs (no water or power hook-ups) for a maximum two-night stay in the upper parking lot at \$20 a night.

### Gruene

A similar quaint village with strong Texas music roots is Gruene (pronounced green) Historic District, located within the New Braunfels city limit. A



*The San Antonio River Walk, looping along the banks of the San Antonio River, is lined with bars, restaurants, shops and towering hotels.*

water tower shoots up over the riverside Gristmill Restaurant and Bar with outdoor tables, and Shiner Bock and Lone Star longnecks chilling in ice.

Next door is the legendary 1878 Gruene Dance Hall, one of Texas' oldest, with wooden floors and bar walls studded with photos of musicians.

"People come all over the world to visit this place," notes the bartender, Brian Connor. "Artists that have come through and played here — George Strait, Lyle Lovett, Willie Nelson — all talked about this place once they became popular."

### New Braunfels

I drive through the central Main Plaza of New Braunfels, with its 1859 Comal County Courthouse, which was built in the Romanesque architectural style, typical of the elaborate designs of many of the state's county courthouses.

In nearby Landa Park, the Comal River flows gently, filled with fish darting amidst grassy water plants and with ducks and birds resting on small islands. But, the main draw to the area

is river tubing.

"It's on the Texas bucket list of things to do," said Molly Stillwell with Comal Tubes, a tubing rental business with shuttle service to designated Comal and Guadalupe river areas, some with fast water tube shoots. "We're always busy in the summertime with thousands of people down there. It's a great way to cool off and relax."

### San Antonio

Arriving in San Antonio, my first stop is the shaded River Walk lined with restaurants, bars, shops and towering hotels along the banks of the looping San Antonio River. At dinner-time, shrilling trumpets and strumming guitars echo along the riverfront as Mariachi bands serenade outdoor diners.

The Alamo is perhaps the city's most visited destination — hallowed ground with its central stone mission church, where Texas heroes, including William Travis, Jim Bowie and Davy Crockett, fought to the death in the War of Texas Independence. A small museum features original artifacts including Travis'

ring, a rifle and brush owned by Crockett; Sam Houston's shaving mug, an original Bowie knife and clippings of Crockett brown-blond hair in a locket.

Four other stone mission churches similar to the Alamo are spread across the city as part of the San Antonio Missions National Historical Park. Two of the city's most historic hotels — the 1857 Menger Hotel, which once hosted Teddy Roosevelt, and the 1909 Crockett Hotel with its landmark rooftop green neon sign — are just across the street from the Alamo grounds.

### Other Day Trips

Other Hill Country day trips include hiking up the treeless, massive pink granite dome of Enchanted Rock State Natural Area, just 18 miles north of Fredericksburg.

The giant cross of The Coming King Sculpture Prayer Gardens sits atop a bluff seen



from I-10 in Kerrville.

And, Austin's Bullock Texas State History Museum houses the recovered 300-year-old partial hull of French explorer La Salle's ship, La Belle, that sank in Matagorda Bay.

With culture, history and pristine natural wonders, there's something for everyone in the Texas Hill Country.

*Richard Varr is a freelance travel writer and photographer and longtime contributor to Houston Woman Magazine.*