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Texas Hill Country

Few would deny that digging into the ground of the 28th state would yield anything less than red, white, and blue dirt, so rolling into this part of the country on anything other than a Harley can feel a little like going to a cross-stitch party without any needles. That is until you approach a town whose welcome sign says, "Willkommen." You immediately know you are not in Kansas anymore . . . and perhaps not even in Texas!

Text and Photography: Joseph Trey

Fredericksburg silences the sights and sounds of cowboys and country music, and it replaces them with oompah bands and gingerbread-style architecture. Suddenly, our Bavarian Motor Works machines perk up as if they are returning to the fatherland.

Things get even stranger, in a good way, as we travel through time to a 1940's style hotel built to duplicate an airplane shelter. The Hangar Hotel is complete with parking for the flying machines and has big band music playing 24 hours a day. We ride back to East Main Street for a traditional "Abendessen" (dinner) of purple pickled cabbage, German potato salad, and Jaegerschnitzel at Der Lindenbaum restaurant.

Many visitors come to Texas Hill Country in the spring when deep blue (almost purple) tulip-shaped Bluebell flowers drape the landscape like a blanket. Arriving in August, accompanied by 100 degree days, makes any type of blanket seem most impractical! The trade-off is minimal traffic, which makes the terrain of Texas Hill Country much more enjoyable . . . as we are about to find out.

Ain't Nobody Feelin' no Pain

Coffee and homemade blueberry scones, compliments of the hotel, are enough to get us started on our day. We depart early to the Lyndon B. Johnson State Park & Historic Site where American Bison, Texas Long Horns, and white-tailed deer are abundant. We arrive at the working ranch before the farmers (around 8 a.m.), which is a tip off that it is only a replica. After admiring the animals and the construction of the old barns, we take off. As we pass through Grapetown and several wineries, we learn that this area of Texas is well known for its varietals.

However, a wine excursion on two wheels is not my idea of a good time, and is best left to the many tour companies around Fredericksburg.

Down a ways, we turn onto Ranch Road 1376 and enjoy the light hills and soft curves that bring us to Luckenbach, TX. Once a struggling trading post, this tiny settlement is often credited with driving much of the modern tourist traffic that

TOURS



passes through Fredericksburg each year. In the 1970's it was put up for sale in the local papers where ads read, "TOWN FOR SALE, dancehall and barbecue pit included."

Eventually, it was saved by the self-appointed "Imagineer," Hondo Crouch. He hosted "hug-ins," where people gathered, listened to music, and hugged ... a lot! His motto that "everyone is somebody" convinced people to trek to this musical oasis in the hills. Waylon Jennings furthered its fame, early in his career, by performing with Willie Nelson there on a porch wrapped around an old oak tree. Waylon's tune *Luckenbach, TX*, returned the early favor and helped drive tourism here. Today, guests are encouraged to grab a guitar and strum up on the porch should the moment strike them.

After visiting with the entire population of three (along with some friendly roosters,

chickens, and cats), we are back on the road. Our destination today is the Mexican border town of Del Rio. On paper, this appears to be a short journey through Texas' notoriously flat terrain. But, this is where Hill Country begins to earn its name. A brunch of Mexican scrambled eggs (huevos rancheros), and homemade tortillas at Lorenita's Restaurant & Cantina in Boerne, TX, readies us to hit the hills.

At the intersection of Highway 16 and Highway 83 is a solemn reminder of fatalities and a warning to "take it easy." We heed the advice, and our reward is safe navigation of the steep climbs and stunning drops.

The topography eventually flattens, and after we pass Laughlin Air Force Base, the police/border patrol presence is instantly made known by the increase in traffic. It is clear from the number of pulled-over

vehicles that in Del Rio 30 miles an hour means 30 miles an hour. We take a leisurely drive over to the Amistad Dam.

Making it the largest storage dam and reservoir on the Rio Grande River, the Amistad measures 6.1 miles long, stands 254 feet above the riverbed, and covers 65,000 surface acres! We traverse the dam and are stopped briefly while a young agent inspects our bikes and passports before waving us on. It is not quite *Jupiter's Travels* or *The Long Way Round*, but it is still exhilarating to ride our motorcycles across an international border for the first time.

Seconds later, we are confronted with another checkpoint. About a dozen young men in fatigues greet us pleasantly, but their automatic weapons are a gentle reminder that we have indeed traveled out of the United States. We exchange smiles, and they wave us on. After admiring the

view from Mexico, we turn back, feeling like we have accomplished our border-crossing goal.

Pulling into the Ramada, we are presented with complimentary breakfast certificates and lounge coupons. Upon learning of the hotel's free shuttle to nearby restaurants, I pause to envision the margarita that will be in my future. Manuel's Steakhouse provides wonderfully prepared Mexican dishes of steak, antelope, and quail. Even though our waitress assures us that the baby goat is delicious, we choose to pass.

The English Countryside of Texas

The next morning we enjoy fresh tortillas, made-to-order omelets, homemade beans, and salsas. Sadly, we are still full from the previous night and decide to mount up before sunrise while the temperature is still a "cool" upper 80! Motoring east, we pass through another immigration checkpoint just as the sun is rising.

Our first stop is Rock Springs where we hope to see Devil's Sinkhole National Landmark, which is home to about three million Mexican free-tailed bats. Unfortunately, the area can only be accessed by way of a nightly scheduled bus tour. Disappointed, but not discouraged, we fuel up and continue on.

In reality, it is a mere 90 miles to Kerrville via I-10. That is why God made Ranch Roads 335 and 336. On a map they appear as two giant inverted V's that bypass I-10 before reconnecting outside of Kerrville. It is a shame Ben and Bill missed the second detour as their GPS was set to the shortest route instead of the scenic one I had planned. With massive dips, climbs, and vistas beside slow moving rivers, the landscape is stunning and peaceful, but commands respect with its hairpin turns and lack of guardrails. I particularly like the warning: "Cattle and Curves— Please Drive with Care."

Cruising through the canopy-like trees that line the green tinged rivers is a highlight of my day. The shade is a welcome companion after being in the more barren morning landscapes. Once in the open again, I am compelled to stop and admire "Boot Hill" in Hunt, TX. Travelers have left hundreds



A beautiful day, luscious blue basin, and me without my water wings; perhaps the dam is a better way to get to Mexico.

A front porch and a "geetar" are all I need to be strumming among the Texas trees.

Just then Ben radioed Bill to say, "I just can't get the theme from CHIPS out of my head!"

TOURS

of boots on top of the fence posts over the years!

Moments later, I come to Stonehenge II, a mini reproduction not created for the legendary band Spinal Tap as some might believe, but rather constructed in the yard of a Hunt, TX, resident named Al Shepperd. The mission started with a single, propped-up, monolith-style limestone slab given to him by his neighbor Doug Hill. The two men began adding stones made of plaster and graphite-covered metal mesh and steel, and before long they had made a replica that is 90 percent as wide and 60 percent as high as the original.

Thankfully, when Al passed away and new owners of the property wanted to destroy the Stonehenge creation, the arts council of nearby Ingram stepped in and rescued it. They relocated it just off Highway 39 where visitors can stroll through it by day or enjoy a Shakespearean play within it at night. The accompanying Easter Island heads, also constructed by Shepperd and Hill, serve as ushers.

In Kerrville, Bill, Ben, and I are reunited at the Y.O. Ranch Resort. It's named for Youngs O. Coleman, a cattleman from the mid 1800's. We decide on the Grape

Juice Wine Bar & Bistro for dinner, which provides us the opportunity to try some of the local varietals from the Texas wineries we have passed en route. The wine paired nicely with antelope nachos and quail/crawfish tacos.

Discovering the Bat Cave!

Our last day is a short ride back to Germany, uh, I mean Fredericksburg. We take several detours through tree lined, single lane, farm paths before we eventually find Enchanted Rock State Park. Discovering only hiking trails, and that we cannot continue beyond the entrance gate, we return to town to absorb more of the local flavor. At the Ausländer Restaurant and Biergarten we are served up hearty traditional German meals alongside a large selection of German tap beers.

Later, at the Hangar Hotel, we pose our bikes with planes and swap stories with pilots. In the late afternoon, we set out to Old San Antonio Road toward an abandoned train passageway at the Old Tunnel Wildlife Management Area. A ranger here comments that we are a little early for "the show" and recommends dinner at the Alamo Springs Café. We are greeted by a familiar but altered motto of "where everybody is nobody!" Homemade jalapeno

bread wrapped around amazing burgers with hand cut onion rings gets us started. Common sense convinces us to stop eating mere minutes before the homemade Peach Crisp arrives!

We return to the park, just as it is getting dark, and pay the \$5 entry fee (you can watch from up top for free). Minutes later we are surrounded by the beautiful sight of three million Brazilian free-tailed bats exiting the tunnel. (The terms Brazilian and Mexican are used interchangeably; they are the same species.) Each night the bats will travel 25 to 30 miles and consume up to 25 tons of insects.

The next morning it's time to return home to Colorado. As we are packing our bikes I remember something . . . the Alamo! We soon find ourselves heading due south on Old San Antonio Road for more great riding, courtesy of Texas Hill Country. After all, the most direct route anywhere on a motorcycle is the opposite direction . . . isn't it? RR



To be honest, it's more of a mass ascension than a crossing!



LODGING: The Hangar Hotel



A rare treat of a hotel housed in a replica hangar next to an active airstrip. Outdoor rocking chairs provide a view of planes coming and going. Great dining in downtown Fredericksburg is minutes away. The lounge offers complimentary snacks and a full range of refreshments. USO style, 1940's music piped throughout the facility completes the trip back in time. Find it at: Hangar Hotel, 155 Airport Rd, Fredericksburg, TX, (830) 997-9990, www.hangarhotel.com.

LODGING: Ramada Del Rio



Minutes from Del Rio and less than ten miles from the Amistad Reservoir (with dam access into Mexico), the hotel offers free Wi-Fi, complimentary breakfast, and evening drink coupons. The energetic lounge is popular with the locals and a great place to learn about the area. A friendly, courteous staff, indoor/outdoor pools, and saunas make the Ramada Del Rio a great stop on your trip. Find it at: 2101 Veterans Blvd, Del Rio, TX, (830) 775-1511, www.ramadadr.com.

Good thing none of these came in pairs. I might have been tempted . . .

Facts & Information

Texas

Total Mileage
Approximately 556 miles

In General

Texas Hill Country is a unique fusion of Spanish and Central European (German, Swiss, Austrian, Polish, and Czech) influences. Food, beer, architecture, and music form a distinctively "Texan" culture separate from the state's southern and southwestern influences. Travel in the spring is preferred for the best landscape of Bluebell flowers in bloom. Temperatures are moderate, but traffic is heavy. Our late summer tour saw temperatures in excess of 100 degrees, but minimal traffic. Cruise elevations ranged from 984 to 2,461 feet. Regardless of the season, Luckenbach, Amistad National Recreation Area in Del Rio, and the Old Tunnel Wildlife Management Area (with its nightly bat flights) are all great places to visit.

How to Get There

The Austin and San Antonio airports offer easy access to Hill Country. Road warriors can enter from the north or south on I-10. Several more adventurous options can be found easily on any area map.

Food & Lodging

In general, food and lodging to fit any budget can be found throughout the area. Be aware that prices increase during the springtime flower viewing. Fredericksburg is famous for its traditional German meals, which can be obtained at both chain hotels and independent establishments.

Well-known restaurants dominate Del Rio, however, there are a few hidden gems such as Manuel's Mexican Steakhouse. Much of Kerrville caters to foodies, but familiar fast food is also available. Lodging closer to town is mostly chain oriented, but more distinctive local options are found just outside. For those who like to stop more often, there are vast numbers of motorcycle-friendly cafes throughout Hill Country.

Roads & Biking

A combination of long stretches of desert interspersed with the famous Hill Country climbs, dips, and twisties offers something for everyone.

Contact Information

- Hill Country Visitors Center
www.hill-country-visitor.com
- Hill Country Handbook
www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/ryh02
- Y.O. Ranch Hotel
2033 Sidney Baker, Kerrville, TX,
(888) 300-1093,
www.yoranchotel.com

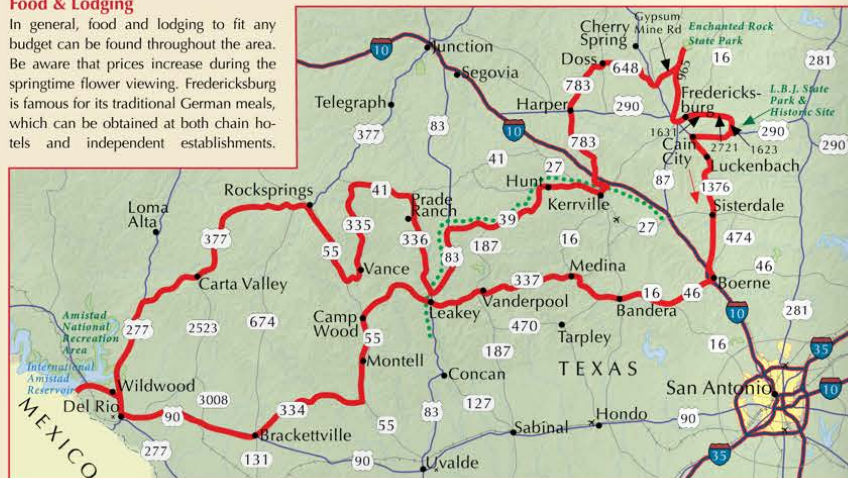
- National Geographic Rides
<http://travel.nationalgeographic.com/travel/road-trips/hill-country-texas-road-trip>
- Texas Hill Country Wineries
www.texaswinetrail.com

Books & Maps

- The Biker's Guide to Texas: 25 Great Motorcycle Rides in the Lone Star State* by Dorothy Waldman, Maverick Publishing, ISBN 978-1893271364, \$18.95
- Scenic Road Trips of Texas 26 Great Drives* (U.S. Regional Touring Map: Gulf States: Part 2), Mad Maps, ISBN 978-1933911366, \$14.95

Motorcycle & Gear

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Jacket: Hein Gericke Timbuktu Air Jacket
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