

# Travel



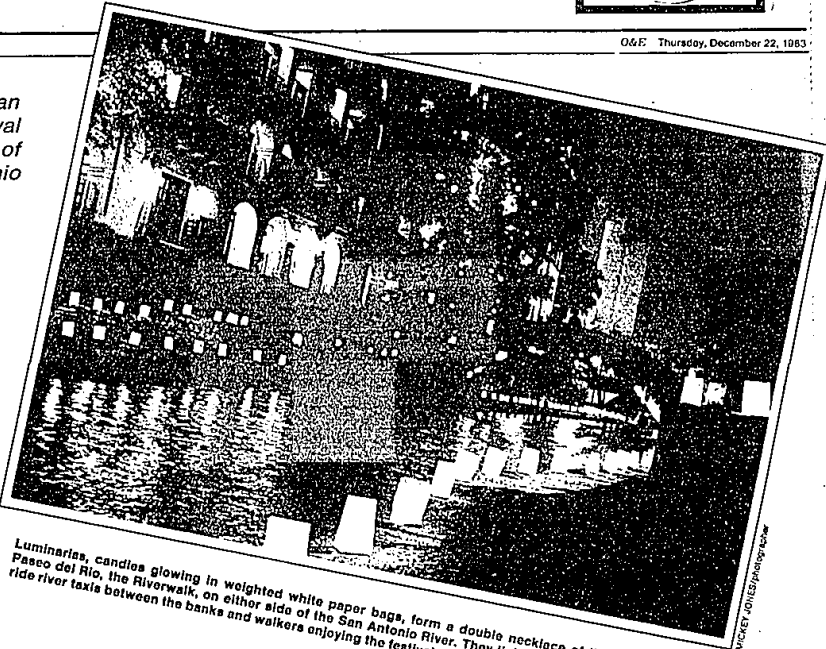
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O&E Thursday, December 22, 1983

One of the best-kept secrets in American travel is San Antonio, a city which loves fiestas. The Christmas festival starts with the Fiesta de las Luminarias — the festival of lights — along the Riverwalk adjoining the San Antonio River.



San Antonio enjoys festivals and music. The music is most evident at the two principal festivals, the spring festival in April and the Christmas festival.



Luminarias, candles glowing in weighted white paper bags, form a double necklace of lights along the Paseo del Rio, the Riverwalk, on either side of the San Antonio River. They light the way for carolers who ride river taxis between the banks and walkers enjoying the festival.

## Holiday treat: Christmas in San Antonio

**F**RIENDS OFTEN ask me where I go on vacation, or the name of my favorite travel destination outside of Michigan. I know all kinds of undiscovered exotic places. I usually answer either "Algonquin Park, Ontario" or "San Antonio, Texas."

I go to a cottage in Algonquin Park sometimes in summer. It is a wooden cabin with an outhouse, a wood stove, kerosene lamps and a canoe, on an island bristling with rocks and trees. Three days of sunning on the dock, reading murder mysteries read many times before, and my city tension disappears. This magic doesn't happen anywhere else, and it doesn't seem to be transferable.

Winter is the wrong time of year to tell you about Algonquin Park, al-



**1-of-a-kind traveler**  
**Iris Jones**  
contributing travel editor

though I have heard wonderful tales of cottagers snowed out across frozen lakes in the moonlight. Winter is, however, the perfect time of year to tell you about San Antonio, Texas, especially at Christmas time.

I CONSIDER San Antonio to be one of the best-kept secrets in American travel, especially among Midwest cravers who flow regularly to other warm-weather destinations south. It is one of the oldest and newest cities in

the U.S., its historic Spanish cultures blended gracefully into everyday American life.

You can attend mass at an old Spanish mission, visit the Alamo, walk the restored streets of La Villita, play along the Riverwalk and tour two of the most interesting museums in the country: the Institute of Texan Cultures and the contemporary San Antonio Museum of Art.

San Antonians also love fiestas, especially the spring festival held in April and the Christmas festival held in December. That is my favorite travel memory this time of year: Christmas in San Antonio.

It is a month-long affair, starting with the Fiesta de las Luminarias, the festival of lights, and Las Posadas, the search for the inn, in mid-December, and ending with a miracle play called Los Pastores early in January.

**THE SEASON** begins when the luminarias, candles glowing in weighted white paper bags, form a double necklace of lights along the Paseo del Rio, the Riverwalk on either side of the San Antonio River.

They light the way for the carolers, who ride river taxis between the banks every evening at dusk, and for the procession of Las Posadas.

The procession traditionally begins with hot chocolate and Mexican pastries in the courtyard of La Mansion del Rio, an historic hotel with graceful arched balconies overlooking the riverwalk. La Mansion was built as a boys' school in 1852, and renovated as a luxury hotel in 1968.

Excitement grows along the river as children dressed as Mary and Joseph come through the flowered doorway of the hotel and move across a stone bridge. Angels cluster behind them. The mariachi music begins. Local celebrants, and travelers, in street clothes up and down the river, light their hand-made candles and follow.

**Anytime you party in San Antonio, you always end up on the Riverwalk.**

**CHRISTMAS LIGHTS** twinkle red and green from the bridges and the high trees as the procession makes its glowing passage through the night, stopping several times so that the singers can plead: "In the name of heaven, I ask for lodging." Each time lodging is refused until the procession winds uphill to La Villita, where the Holy Family is finally invited to rest.

There is one final song of entreaty, when the children ask for the pinata, then the fun begins. Christmas carols, hot chocolate and cookies. Children swinging at the paper-pinata with its treasure of candy.

Fun lovers move to nearby hotels and cafes, and back downhill to the eating and drinking places that hum with life along the river. Voices rise in greeting. "Feliz Navidad. Merry Christmas."

Christmas is also celebrated in Market Square when children traditionally gather for the Blessings of the Pets by the Bishop of the Archdiocese of San Antonio, and where pinata parties make constant patches of color amid the carnival atmosphere of the market.

**THE BLESSING** of the Pets is preceded by Pancho Claus, Santa in serape and sombrero, and followed by a boisterous party amid the shops and stalls of the mercado.

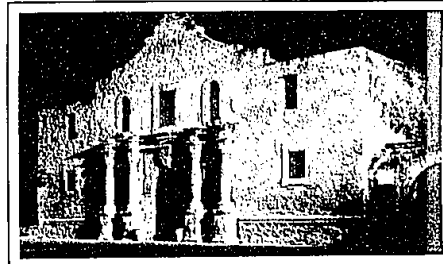
Anytime you party in San Antonio, you always end up on the Riverwalk, where restaurants, hotels, boutiques and sidewalk cafes are found along the restored walkways and arched bridges beside the river.

The river is within a few minutes walk of the Alamo, the restored streets

of La Villita and the 750-foot-high Tower of the Americas. From the top of the tower you can see the Spanish Governor's Palace, the marketplace, and the Institute of Texan Cultures in the streets below, and you can see downriver towards San Jose, where mariachi mass is held every Sunday.

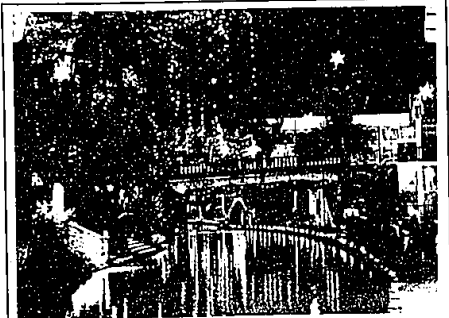
If you are an armchair traveler to San Antonio this year, as I am, you can close your eyes and dream about Spanish dancing in the plaza. If you prefer to dream summer, consider a little fantasy about sunning on a dock in Algonquin Park, Ontario.

Merry Christmas.



MICKY JONES/photographer

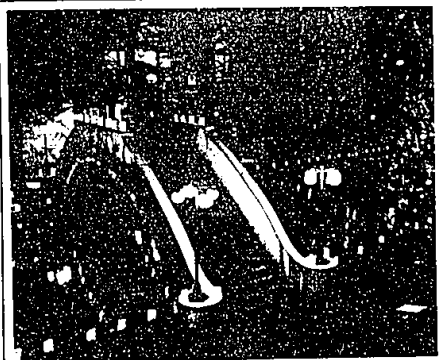
The Alamo is one of San Antonio's historic attractions. This is the facade of the San Francisco mission where less than 200 Americans fought thousands of attacking Mexicans before being killed.



The Riverwalk features twinkling red and green lights strung along trees and bridges. Celebrants move on to nearby hotels, cafes and nightspots that hum with life along the river.



A Franciscan priest leads costumed children carrying clay figures — of the Holy Family during Las Posadas, the "search for an inn."



San Antonio has restored the walkways along the San Antonio River and placed arched bridges over the river.

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