

TRAVEL

It's interesting. It's entertaining. It's San Antonio

BY PAT FITNER
SPECIAL WRITER

San Antonio is a colorful mix of big-city glamour, cultural excitement and small-town warmth. I loved the Spanish flavor and multi-cultural heritage of San Antonio when we visited the HemisFair in 1968. Just recently, however, I was delighted to see that this grand old city just keeps getting better.

San Antonio is the No. 1 visitor destination in Texas. There is something for everyone to do. Whether you are a history buff, an art lover, a gourmet, or family that enjoys theme parks, you'll find your niche in San Antonio.

Our three-day visit was planned as a reunion with old friends from Michigan who now live in Arlington, Texas. The only agenda was "let's stay near the River Walk and just hang out." We did that and a lot more.

What to see

The Alamo - most people think of the Alamo as the city of San Antonio simultaneously, and that is how it should be. Spain established Mission San Antonio de Valero (later called the Alamo) more than half a century before the founding of the United States. It was the first of five Spanish missions founded in San Antonio to Christianize and educate resident Indians.

The Alamo became known as the "Cradle of Texas Liberty" based on 13 days of siege in 1836 when 189 Alamo defenders fought a Mexican army of thousands led by General Santa Anna. The Alamo defenders - including Davy Crockett, Jim Bowie, and William Travis - all died. The church structure and Alamo Museum are open daily, but don't make a common visitor mistake of going there first. It is helpful to see the 45-minute IMAX docudrama "Alamo - The Price of Freedom" before you visit the Alamo site.

The IMAX Theater is at Rivercenter on Crockett Street just around the corner from the Alamo. The story of the fight for Texan independence puts you visually in the middle of the historic action with dramatic sight and sound. After seeing the movie you'll understand what happened during the battle and be better prepared to appreciate where it happened. For IMAX ticket information, call (210) 247-4629.

Military bases

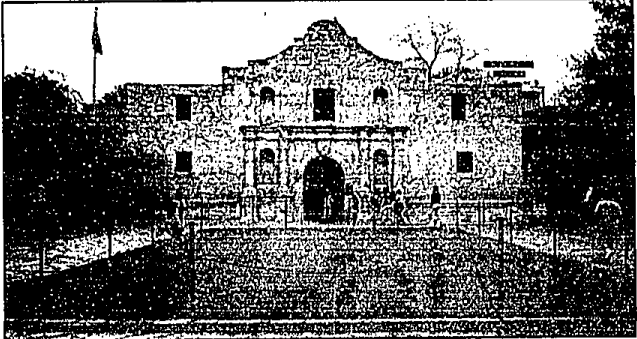
Since the city's founding as a presidio in 1718, the military has been an integral part of San Antonio. There are four Air Force bases and the historic Fort Sam Houston. In addition, you can visit one of four military museums.

Fort Sam Houston is two miles north of the city between I-36 and the Harry Wurzbach Highway. The museum is in building 123. Visiting the museum would make a nice follow-up to a visit to the Alamo, since the museum chronicles the history, uniforms and equipment of Fort Sam Houston from 1845 to the present.

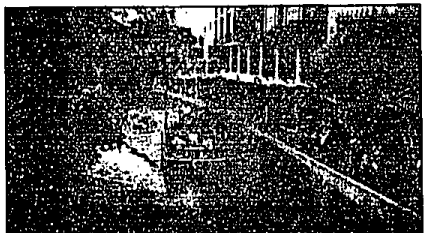
Botanical gardens

We spent a delightful afternoon at the San Antonio Botanical Gardens just north of Fort Sam Houston. The gardens consist of 93 acres of formal gardens, pools, fountains, and natural areas and the Lucile Halsell Conservatory, a 90,000-square-foot complex of below-ground greenhouses.

If you visit the gardens, be sure to allow plenty of time to tour the conservatory, which could easily be missed since only the pyramidal glass roofs are visible from above ground. Once you descend the steps, you will be able to view a tropical house, a desert house, a palm house, and a fern room all surrounding a courtyard insulated by the earth.



Historic: The Alamo earned its name as the "Cradle of Texas Liberty" in 1836 and is still the heart of San Antonio.



Getaway: The River Walk meanders for 2 1/2 miles along the San Antonio River, offering a beautiful cool oasis on a warm Texas day.

shaded cobblestone walkways consist of authentic adobe houses, small restaurants, arts and craft shops and a museum complex of early American culture.

Picturesque El Mercado at Santa Rosa and Commerce Streets is the largest Mexican market outside of Mexico offering imports of clothing, jewelry, pottery, wood carvings, wrought iron and leather.

For great Mexican food, mariachi music and unsurpassed people watching, try La Margarita. But just go to eat and laugh; it is much too noisy to talk. You can reach El Mercado (Market Square) by streetcar from the Alamo for 50 cents or just walk the 10 blocks.

River walk

San Antonio's premier visitor experience is actually one level below the busy streets of downtown. The walk meanders for 2 1/2 miles alongside the San Antonio River (called Yanguanna by the Indians) and Paseo del Rio

Lunch at the gardens is inexpensive, tasty and beautifully presented with edible-flower garnishes. You can visit the botanical gardens online at www.sabot.org

Interesting stops

La Villita is a restored Mexican village beside the river in the heart of downtown San Antonio. The buildings along the

in Spanish). The natural beauty of the area and formal design includes giant cypress trees, tropical foliage and flowering shrubs.

A scenic riverboat cruise called the Yanguanna Cruise is well worth the small fee. It is not only a beautiful and captivating journey, but the guides do a wonderful job of relating the history of the river. They call it an odyssey - not just of distance but of the heart. And it truly is.

The River Walk was designed in 1921 by a brilliant and visionary architect named Robert Hugman. He worked with far-sighted residents who sought to save the river from being paved-over and turned into a storm sewer after a series of destructive floods. It was not until the late 1960s that the walk began to flourish commercially with hotels, restaurants, sidewalk cafes, and art and gift shops. It is possible to spend a whole mini-vacation at the River Walk.

Other neat stuff

If you have the time and interest, check out San Antonio Museum of Art housed in the historic Lono Star Brewery, the San Antonio Zoo with the largest animal collection in northern America, HemisFair Park, Sea World of Texas, or Six Flags Fiesta Texas.

If you still have some energy after a full day of sightseeing, walking, shopping and dining, San Antonio has plenty of nightlife. Go to see a sporting event featuring the Spurs, the Missions, or the Dragons; visit the Rivercenter Comedy Club, or hear the finest jazz. We especially liked the live jazz at the Landing in the Marriott.

San Antonio is older than our country, but definitely young in spirit. In fun, it's unique, and it is a fiesta. Viva San Antonio!

Pat Fitner is a Troy resident. Where have your travels taken you? Send travel stories for consideration in The Observer & Eccentric! Newspapers to Keely Wygonik, 36251 Schoolcraft, Livonia, MI 48150, or e-mail kwygonik@oc.homecom.net Or call Wygonik (734) 953-2105 with information about your trip, so we can interview you for a story.

If you're planning to go to the home of the Alamo ...

Where to stay: There are dozens of hotels in downtown San Antonio. Pat Fitner recommends staying on or near the River Walk.

Choices range from the five room A Yellow Rose Bed and Breakfast, 229 Madison (210-229-9903) to the luxurious Marriott Riverwalk, 711 E. Riverwalk (210-224-4555), or the Adam's Mark Riverwalk (600-444ADAM).

She enjoyed the historic Camberly Gunter at 205 E. Houston

(210-227-3241).

Where to eat: Part of the fun of getting away is experiencing food from new locations. San Antonio has world-class Spanish, Mexican and German restaurants as well as wonderful seafood, and, of course, steaks you will never forget.

Some of Fitner's favorite restaurants were: Rio Rio Cantina for great Mexican food and roof-top dining for people watching; Paesano's for authentic Italian treats and a good place to

visit quietly with friends, and the Little Rhino Steak House with perfect steaks and the best view on the River Walk.


Little Rhino is on a historically rich site. Coahuiltecan Indians founded a settlement there before 1600. Spanish soldiers established a village on the site in the early 18th century, and the Mexican General Santa

Anna encamped there during the battle of the Alamo.

During the late 19th century German immigrants settled the area and thus the name Little Rhino. The restaurant building was constructed around 1847 as a home. It offers fine dining inside and on a terraced bank overlooking the river. The outdoor dining is especially charming at night, with candles on all of the tables and waiters who expertly navigate the hillside in the semi-darkness. The steaks are enormous and grilled to perfection.

Helpful Web sites: Visit the San Antonio Visitors Bureau www.sanantoniocvb.com and the San Antonio Texas Guide www.alamocity.com

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