

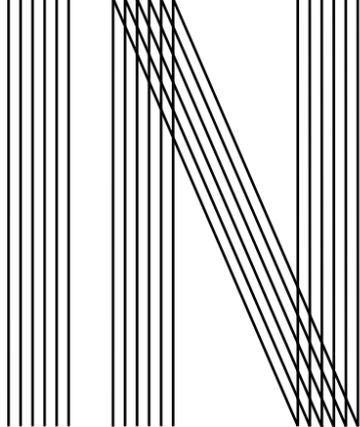
DEEP IN
THE HEART OF



MARKING ITS TRICENTENNIAL THIS YEAR, SAN ANTONIO IS GEARING UP TO PARTY LIKE IT'S 1718. BUT FOR ALL ITS HISTORY, THE SOUTH TEXAN CITY HAS AN EVEN MORE INTRIGUING PRESENT, AS A RECENT VISIT ATTESTS.
BY JOE YOGERST PHOTOGRAPHS BY MATTHEW JOHNSON



A morning jog on the Mission Reach section of San Antonio's River Walk. Opposite: Oaxacan-style enchiladas with mole negro at chef Johnny Hernandez's Frutería restaurant in Southtown.



AN ANCIENT BUILDING ON THE OUTSKIRTS OF SAN Antonio, a mariachi band struck up a waltz-time version of “*El Justo Florecerá*” (The Righteous Will Flourish). This was no ordinary performance, mind you, but rather the Sunday mariachi mass at the church of Mission San José y San Miguel de Aguayo, one of the oldest structures in the state of Texas and still an active place of worship. Like the regular churchgoers around me, I soon found myself tapping a beat on the nave’s venerable floor tiles as the service got underway.

Later that same day, over on the north side of town, I witnessed a much different rite: the tagging and release of hundreds of black-and-orange monarch butterflies in the central plaza of the old Pearl Brewery. It was the climax to a three-day festival celebrating the insects’ annual migration to wintering grounds in Mexico, and the square was packed. There were kids sporting rainbow-hued butterfly wings and fuzzy pipe-cleaner antennae, hipster parents with thousand-dollar strollers and designer dogs, and enthusiastic eco-volunteers helping butterfly novices like myself launch our fluttery creatures into a cloudless South Texas sky.

Mariachis and monarchs—that seems to sum up San Antonio today, a riverside city with one foot planted firmly in the past and the other striding confidently into the future. It’s this heady mix that lured me back to a place that I had last visited with my parents when I was a kid. Ahead of its 300th anniversary this May, I wanted to find out what made San Antonio tick, and how its rich Hispanic culture has come to define it more than any other large American city.

“San Antonio began as a knee-jerk reaction,” said ranger Albert Sambrano as we walked the grounds of Mission San José, one of five 18th-century Spanish outposts that comprise the San Antonio Missions World Heritage Site. “In order to keep the French from claiming Texas, the Spaniards had to settle a large area along the Gulf of Mexico very quickly.”

Located about halfway between the Rio Grande and the borders of what was then French Louisiana, San Antonio was tabbed for a cluster of fortified Franciscan missions that would solidify Spain’s claims to the region. “They didn’t have time to bring in European colonists,” Sambrano continued, “so they decided to convert the local Native Americans and make them citizens of Spain—something that didn’t happen anywhere else in the New World.”

San Antonio’s most famous mission, of



Above: Bartender Justin Hernandez at the historic Buckhorn Saloon. Opposite, from top: The Alamo; a Vanity Pear cocktail at Sternewirth, featuring bourbon, spiced pear liqueur, coconut, and mole bitters.

course, is the Alamo, site of the famous battle in which Davy Crockett and a small band of volunteer soldiers fought a hopeless last stand against Mexican forces in 1836 (Texas by that time being part of Mexico). When I first explored it as a kid, the Alamo had seemed larger than life, a thing of myth and legend. But visiting decades later, I was struck by how small it actually is, easily overshadowed by the high-rise towers of downtown San Antonio. Apparently this is a common reaction; the Alamo features on several lists of the “most disappointing” landmarks in America. That’s because the large fortified compound that once surrounded the site’s iconic limestone chapel—where most of the fighting took place in 1836—disappeared long ago as downtown San Antonio took shape.

Running the gauntlet of souvenir peddlers, soapbox preachers, and horse-drawn carriages that rove Alamo Plaza, I slipped through the chapel to the gardens out back, where I found an “encampment” of re-enactors dressed as Alamo defenders. That was all well and good—especially the ear-shattering flintlock rifle demonstration. But like so many visitors, I found myself longing for a more visceral (and visual) account of a battle that changed American history and that so many Texans consider the wellspring of their very existence. But help is on the way. The state agency that manages the Alamo



THE DETAILS

Getting There

From its hub at Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport, American Airlines (*aa.com*) has multiple daily flights to San Antonio, some 400 kilometers to the south. A faster option from Hong Kong and Singapore is flying direct via Los Angeles or San Francisco, respectively.

What to Do

San Antonio commemorates its tricentennial in 2018 with a yearlong calendar of art and cultural events. Visit SanAntonio300.org for details.

Where to Eat & Drink

Alamo Street Eat Bar
Southtown; alamostreeteatbar.com.

Buckhorn Saloon
1-210/247-4000; buckhornmuseum.com.

Haunt
St. Anthony Hotel; 1-866/716-8136; thestanthonyhotel.com.

Jazz TX
Pearl; 1-210/332-9386; jazztx.com.

The Frutería at Southtown
1-210/251-3104; chefjohnnyhernandez.com.

Where to Stay

Hotel Havana
A grand Mediterranean Revival mansion dating from 1914 that now houses 27 rooms outfitted in rustic-chic furnishings, retro Smeg refrigerators, and artfully tiled bathrooms. 1-210/222-2008; havanasanantonio.com; doubles from US\$155.

The St. Anthony
1-866/716-8136; thestanthonyhotel.com; doubles from \$229.

Hotel Emma
1-210/448-8300; thehotellemma.com; doubles from US\$350.

The church at Mission San José. Opposite, from top left: Pastrami beef rib with sauerkraut at Granary 'Cue & Brew; the entrance to Hotel Havana; pointing the way to Alamo Street Eat Bar; Sarah Zenaída Gould at the Institute of Texan Cultures.





has announced an ambitious and controversial plan to evict the kitschy tourist attractions that besiege the site and replace them with a proper historic district.

Whether that plan goes ahead is another matter; even its most ardent proponents say it is years away from fruition. But one thing that's definitely happening in time for the city's 300th anniversary (which celebrates the founding of the Alamo on May 1, 1718) is Alamo Reality, an augmented/virtual reality version of the battle uploadable to smartphones or tablets. I got a sneak preview from developer Michael McGar, who drafted historians to help create an app that gives a more balanced view of the battle. "A lot of political undertones run through the Alamo story," McGar related as I watched virtual Mexican soldiers breach a portion of the mission's wall on his tablet. "It's often portrayed as the story of brave Texian settlers versus the evil Mexicans. But the reality is much more complicated." A good number of Alamo defenders were in fact Tejanos (Mexican Texans), fighting for the same thing as their gringo counterparts.

And then there's the triumvirate of Alamo heroes: Davy Crockett, Jim Bowie, and Colonel William "Buck" Travis. McGar says Crockett was the real deal. As for the other two, "People think Bowie and Travis were gods made in marble. But they were not good people. Bowie

the Rough Riders, a military unit that fought in the Spanish-American War. One of their favorite hangouts was the Menger Bar, which nowadays doubles as a mellow drinking hole and shrine to "T.R." and the troops who fought alongside him.

This being Texas and a Saturday afternoon in the fall, the bar was filled with orange-clad University of Texas college football supporters watching the Longhorns play on wide-screen TVs. And being Texans, they were more than happy to converse with a stranger about American football, the Second Amendment, armadillos, and just about anything else that came to mind. One lady was kind enough to direct me to yet another storied drinking establishment, the Buckhorn Saloon, just a couple of blocks away.

Established in 1881, the Buckhorn was another Rough Rider hangout and allegedly the place where bandito-turned-patriot Pancho Villa planned the Mexican Revolution. As I stepped around the Buffalo Bill lookalike who ushers patrons through the front door, I was hit by the sensation that I'd been there before. I had—on that long-ago family vacation that first brought me to San Antonio. Suddenly, I remembered my nine-year-old self guzzling root beer and gawking at the saloon's menagerie of mounted animal heads while my parents sipped mugs of Lone Star lager.

was a slave trader, Travis a deadbeat. If they were living next to you today, you'd probably call the cops on them. But because they died at the Alamo, they're enshrined as heroes. The history we tell in Alamo Reality comes from original sources and not from myth or conjecture or the John Wayne movie."

I stumbled on another American hero across the street from the Alamo. Teddy Roosevelt came to San Antonio in 1898 to organize a ragtag group of cowboys, ranchers, miners, and college athletes who had volunteered for



Left: *F.I.S.H.*, an installation by New York-based sculptor Donald Lipski, dangles beneath the interstate overpass along the Mission Reach portion of the River Walk. Opposite, from far left: Lunchtime at Fruteria; brisket sliders from a food truck at Alamo Street Eat Bar.

"This is definitely beer country," said gregarious bartender Justin Hernandez as he poured me an Alamo Golden Ale from the tap. "It goes back to all the German immigrants to this area—have you noticed how a lot of the town names around San Antonio are actually German rather than Spanish? New Braunfels, Niederwald, Luckenbach. They brought beer-making with them, and it stuck."

My bar hop continued at Haunt, a cool little spot inside the historic St. Anthony hotel. The signature cocktails here are named for ghosts that allegedly inhabit the establishment: the Jilted Bride, the Lady in Red, the Pixie, the Crooked Wig. Haunt also hosts live music, and on this particular night the act was a ginger-haired crooner by the name of Ruby. Appropriately—given the venue and the fact it was just before Halloween—her repertoire that evening was songs from the hit Netflix show *Stranger Things*.

San Antonio, it turns out, is quite the music town. Blues legend Robert Johnson may have sold his soul to the devil in Mississippi, but the majority of his recordings were cut here in 1936, at a makeshift studio set up in room 414 of the old Gunter Hotel. The alt-rock Butthole Surfers were born along the banks of the San Antonio River and not some California beach. And the surrounding countryside—especially small towns like Gruene and Luckenbach—is a hotbed of the Texas "outlaw" sound originally inspired by Willie Nelson and Waylon Jennings.

I learned more about the city's music scene from Sarah Zenaida Gould, who's both an avid supporter of local bands and a curator at the Institute of Texan Cultures. "Forget Austin," she told me. "San Antonio has been making music for more than a hundred years. And our musical heritage is much more diverse than Austin's. Everyone knows about the local Tejano scene. But did you know

that San Antonio was once a huge place for heavy metal?"

She herself favors *conjunto* music, an upbeat sound with roots in both Mexican ballads and the polka introduced to South Texas by 19th-century German and Czech immigrants. "It's more old-school than Tejano, played with accordions, guitars, and drums. It's also one of the things we consider *puro San Anto*—Pure San Antonio."

Another object of local pride is the celebrated River Walk, a serpentine, cypress-lined path along both sides of the San Antonio River. As early as the 1930s, conservationists began lobbying for a transformation of the river from an unsightly, polluted, and flood-prone watercourse into a green ribbon through the heart of the city. That vision was realized after World War II, and the waterfront promenade became a full-blown tourist attraction with HemisFair '68, the World's Fair that commemorated the city's 250th birthday.

Flanked by scores of outdoor bars and eateries, the original downtown portion of the River Walk—especially the horseshoe-shaped loop near the Alamo—proved a bit too touristy and commercialized for my taste. More to my liking were the newer extensions: Mission Reach, which follows a 13-kilometer stretch of the river south past trendy Southtown and four of the old Spanish missions, with a dozen canoe/kayak access points along the way; and Museum Reach, which meanders northward past the Tobin Center for the Performing Arts and the San Antonio Museum of Art to Brackenridge Park and the natural history-focused Witte Museum. Landscaped with native flora and trickling water features, the route features art installations at each bridge it passes under, including Donald Lipski's eye-catching *F.I.S.H.* exhibit.

The River Walk's Museum Reach also edges the Pearl district,

Mariachis at Market Square in downtown San Antonio. Opposite: The Tower Life Building, an eight-sided landmark complete with gargoyles and green-glazed clay roof tiles, looms above the San Antonio River.





Left: The eastern facade of the erstwhile Pearl Brewery's 19th-century brewhouse, now the centerpiece of the redeveloped Pearl district. Opposite: Inside Sternewirth, the cavernous bar at Hotel Emma.

The Pearl is widely credited with sparking the cultural, culinary, and architectural revival that is currently sweeping San Antonio. "That's where it started," confirmed local celebrity chef Johnny Hernandez. "The Pearl created a lot of resources for developing local chefs and new restaurants. It also set an example [for urban transformation], showing politicians and business leaders what can be achieved in a short amount of time. People started to think, 'We can do this in other places around town.'"

Those places include the neighborhoods of Southtown, where I met Hernandez for breakfast at his trendy Frutería restaurant. "Six or seven years ago, this was a largely abandoned part of town," he said. "The building we're in now was originally an ironworks that closed down years ago." Restaurants, art galleries and studios, boutiques, and other businesses have moved into the area's old factories, while warehouse and loft conversions have drawn new residents.

"San Antonio is finally starting to develop a distinctive urban cuisine," Hernandez continued, "and Southtown is the cutting edge." From its roots in old-time *taquerias*, the food scene here has evolved into a diverse eating adventure that includes a gourmet food-truck gathering called the Alamo Street Eat Bar, the various restaurants that populate the riverside Blue Star Arts Complex, and the retro-Mexican dishes at Frutería—things like chicken-and-avocado *torta* and mole-smothered *chilaquiles*.

"It's exciting to see how it's evolved in just a handful of years. Not just the food scene, but the whole community," said Hernandez. "People who haven't been to San Antonio in years come back and say, 'Wow! It's not the same city.'"

Before leaving town, I had to give the Buckhorn one more pass, for no other reason than nostalgia and the memory of what it was like traveling with my parents on our summer road trips.

Justin was behind the bar again, trying to convince a couple of skeptical German tourists that the saloon's most prized trophy—the head and rack of a 78-point whitetail buck shot in 1890—was the real McCoy and not some cleverly constructed counterfeit. Which reminded me ...

"Is it true," I asked him, "that you guys still trade drinks for horns and antlers?" I had read that the Buckhorn's original owner, Albert Friedrich, began the practice in the late 19th century.

"For sure. You can bring in any type of antler or horn for a glass of beer or shot of whiskey. Deer, moose, jackalope, you name it. Or rattlesnake tails. We trade for rattlers too." Then he launched into a story about how a few years back, during the annual cattle drive through downtown San Antonio—

"Wait a sec," I interrupted. "There's a cattle drive through downtown?"

"Every year. Before the stock show and rodeo. They herd like a hundred longhorns right down Houston Street past the Buckhorn. Anyway, this rancher realized that something was spooking the cattle in the back of his truck."

That something was a huge rattlesnake, which the rancher promptly dispatched with a shovel. He then marched into the Buckhorn, slapped the rattler on the bar, and got his drink.

"You bring one, it's the same deal," Justin said as I finished my drink and headed for the door, glad that in a rapidly changing city like San Antonio, some things remain the same. ●

a pedestrian-friendly redevelopment project spanning the nine-hectare site formerly inhabited by the aging Pearl Brewery complex, which shut down in 2001. Combining old industrial buildings and new-built structures with landscaped public spaces, the area now thrums with life. Apart from the aforementioned butterfly festival, the Pearl hosts a popular weekend farmers' market, riverside yoga sessions, and roaming street musicians. It's also home to the Texas campus of the Culinary Institute of America, as well as a handful of restaurants and bars like buzzy barbecue joint Granary 'Cue & Brew, which occupies a former cooper's house; and Jazz TX, a moody basement club where I caught a lively salsa session one night.

Nobody knows the Pearl better than historian and trivia whiz Sissie Henges, whose free one-hour walking tours of the complex blend history, art, architecture, and the sort of brewery gossip that would do TMZ proud.

"Otto Koehler, the man who founded the brewery in the 1880s, was having affairs with his wife's day nurse and night nurse," Henges told me as we walked past a fountain fashioned from old beer tanks. "Seems that all three were named Emma. The day nurse eventually found out Koehler was cheating on her, too, and shot him dead." With a chuckle, she added, "They say you can have two Emmas, but the third one will kill ya."

Hence the name of Hotel Emma, a 146-room property set inside the original brewhouse. It's industrial-chic as can be, with exposed brickwork, old machinery, and vaulted ceilings given a smart urban edge by New York-based design studio Roman and Williams. Particularly characterful is Sternewirth, the hotel's tavern and clubroom, where a repurposed bottle labeler serves as a chandelier and banquet seating has been fashioned from iron fermentation tanks. And the signature cocktail? A gin- and sherry-based concoction called the Three Emmas, which tastes a lot sweeter than you'd think.

