

AUSTIN ON A BUDGET

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Austin on a budget

by Becca Hensley



(Photo: Live, Love, Paddle)

Austin for pennies? It can happen. A city full of students, politicians, artists and start-up entrepreneurs demands affordability without sacrificing any of its signature cool. While the city's ongoing success and popularity tends to drive up the price point for entertainment, city leaders, business mavens and cultural activists have collaborated to deliver an urban scene chock-full of low-priced and free amusements that set the tone in this town.

Nature abounds here, and the use of it remains free. A plethora of nature trails at the Barton Creek Greenbelt around downtown and the miles of trails that encircle Lady Bird Lake require only a pair of shoes – though the occasional barefoot walker bears out Austin's eccentric reputation. From April to October, Austin's animal kingdom puts on a complimentary spectacle.

You'll be awed at dusk when the exodus of more than a million Mexican free-tailed bats turns the sky black. They flutter out from beneath the [Ann W. Richards Congress Avenue Bridge](#) over Lady Bird Lake in the center of downtown. The best ways to take advantage of the show are to lay out a blanket on the lake's grassy shore below the bridge, cruise the lake in a canoe, or stand on the bridge with the crowds who come to watch the bats set off on their nightly search for food.

Just south of the bridge, a crazy quilt of snazzy galleries, antique stores, food trailers, boutiques, bars and eateries line both sides of South Congress Avenue, filling the district called SoCo. A treat for shoppers and window gazers, the neighborhood draws hordes of people on the first Thursday of each month, when vendors turn the sidewalks into a veritable street party.

Live music accompanies deep discounts on cocktails, food, art, jewelry and other merchandise, and stores offer myriad free samples and stay open until 10pm. As cool as a hipster's fedora, the nostalgic Austin Motel in SoCo puts guests to bed in single rooms starting at \$95.

Concert tickets can easily add up, but Austin's pervasive music scene refuses to strike an elitist note. Many clubs don't charge a cover fee, and, throughout the year, a slew of free performances bring in world-class musicians. In summertime, picnickers spread their blankets on the vast, green expanse of [Zilker Park](#) to listen to free Blues on the Green concerts, sponsored by 107.1 KGSR radio.

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