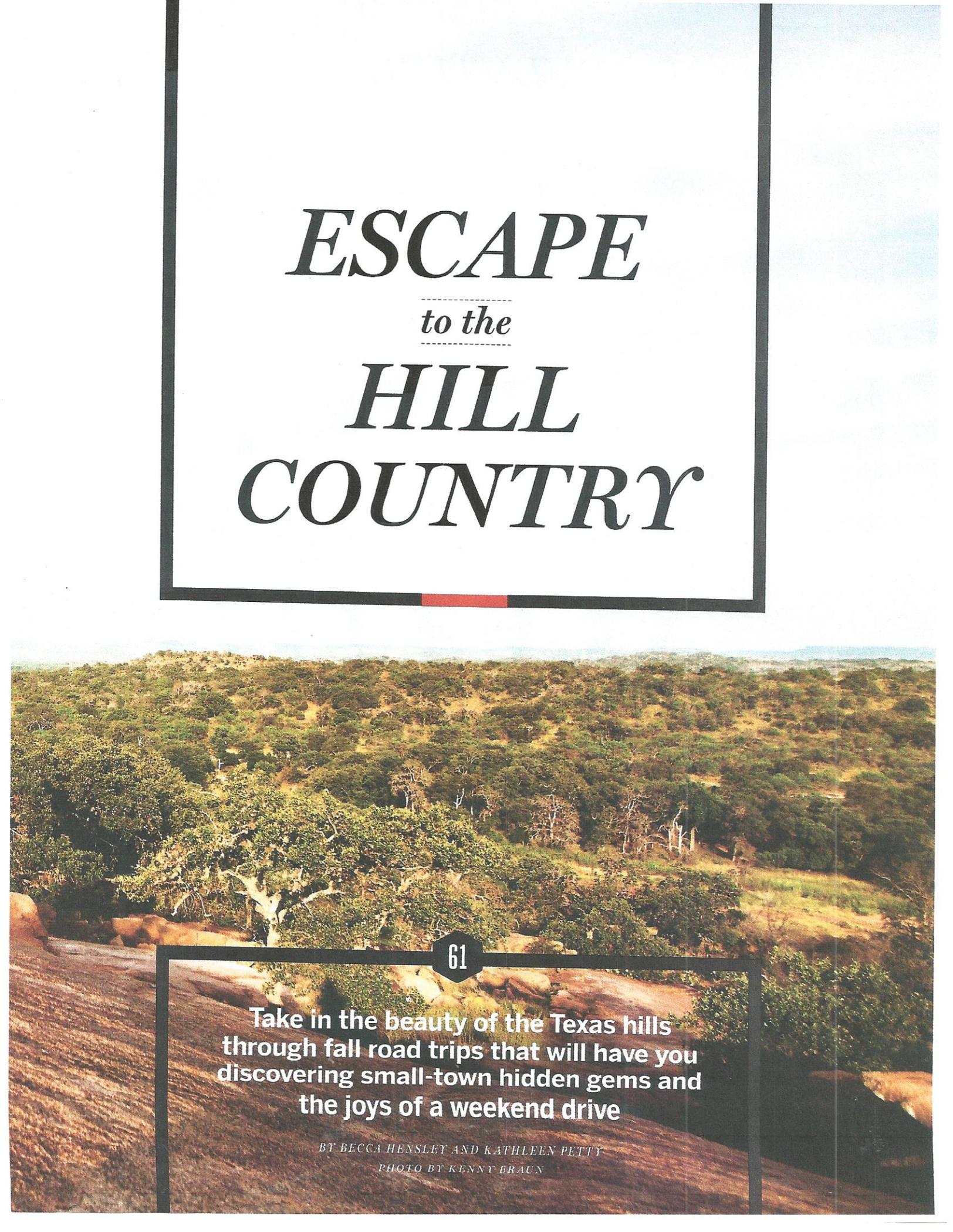


ESCAPE

to the

HILL COUNTRY

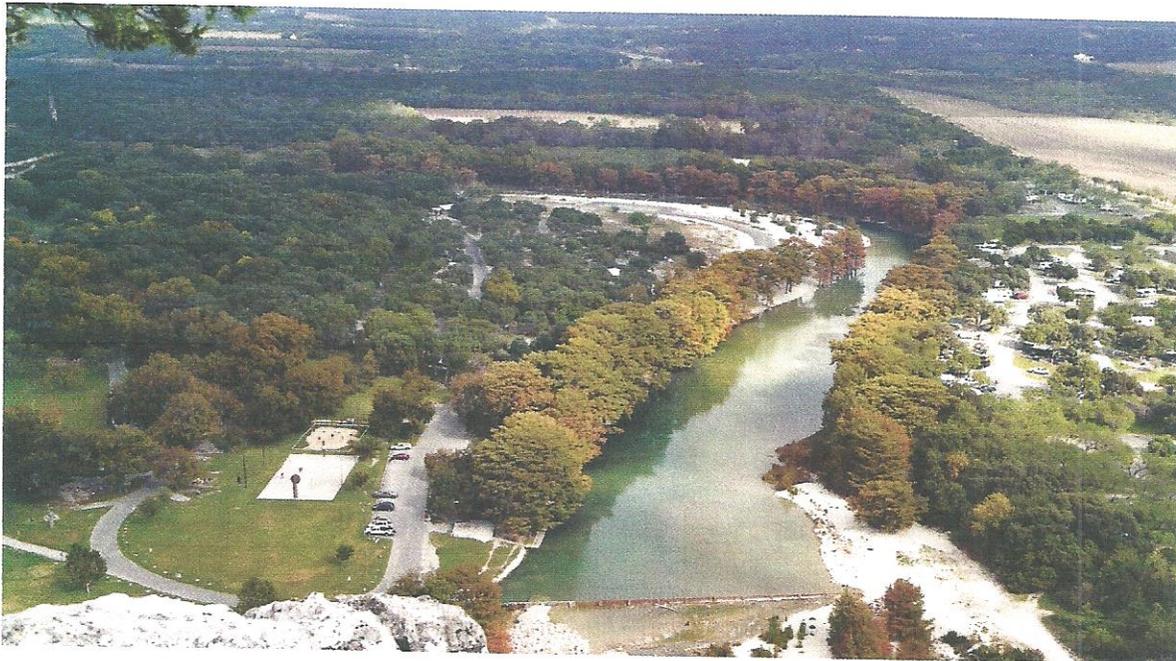


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Take in the beauty of the Texas hills through fall road trips that will have you discovering small-town hidden gems and the joys of a weekend drive

BY BECCA HENSLEY AND KATHLEEN PETTY
PHOTO BY KENNY BRAUN

OUTDOOR ADVENTURE



FRIDAY AFTERNOON

GET LOST IN GARNER

The folks at Garner State Park describe their canyon and cliff-filled land as dramatic, and it takes but a few minutes of exploring to know they're not exaggerating. Arrive early in the afternoon, and acclimate yourself to the land with a hike up to Painted Rock for a wide-spanning view of the steep limestone walls in the Balcones Canyonlands. Continue toward Crystal Cave for another breathtaking perspective—make sure to wear tennis shoes or



hiking boots fit for tackling the rocks and altitude of the trail. Both spots show off of the lush foliage that dots the landscape. Come back later in the season to see the leaves in rich fall hues. Lookouts provide birders the opportunity to spot doves, bluebirds, the endangered golden-cheeked warbler and more. Down near the Frio River, dip into the clear waters to cool off or rent a kayak or paddleboat to take in the full 2.9 miles of river that rambles through the park. Civilian Conservation Corps, put together by President Franklin Roosevelt to provide jobs during the Great Depression, constructed the initial stone buildings at this state park west of San Antonio. Many are still in use, including the concession building and dance pavilion where summer jukebox dances have been hosted through Labor Day weekend since the

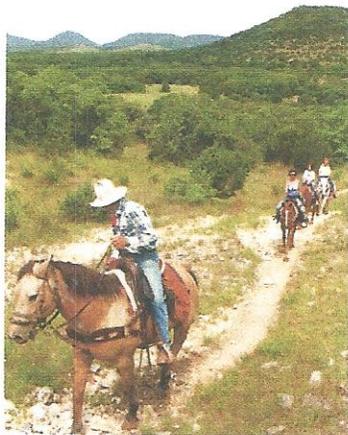
1940s. Take your partner for a spin under the stars before turning in at your tent site or a less-primitive cabin. tpwd.state.tx.us/state-parks/garner



SATURDAY MORNING

FIND YOUR COWBOY SIDE IN BANDERA

Louise Merrick donated her family's Merrick Bar-O Ranch to the state in the 1970s with one stipulation: that it "be kept far removed and untouched by modern civilization." It's a request that's been more than honored since the 5,300-plus acre terrain known as Hill Country State Natural Area was opened to the public in 1984. The land that includes 40 miles of trails is rugged and so remote that you can't even use your cell phone on the property—which is perfect for a morning ride. The trails, which reach an elevation of up to 2,000 feet, are ideal for hiking, running and biking, but Bandera residents say the area is best experienced on horseback. Bring your own horse, or book a trail ride with one of a myriad of guides who bring trained horses to the park and brief guests on the basics of riding. Jeanne Beauxbeannes (known as Jeanne B) has traversed the trails with visitors for more than 20 years and says it's the best place to fall in love with Central Texas. "You're not going to find anywhere else to ride that's going to display



WHAT TO PACK



Tubes

To truly relax in the waters at Garner State Park or Krause Springs, bring a tube (and life jacket for the kids) so you can float with ease.



Water shoes

The ground beneath the river and springs can be rocky and slimy in areas. Bring some shoes or sandals that you can wear into the water.



Tent

Garner State Park has cabins available for rent, but if you don't snag a cabin, make a reservation at a campsite.



Smart phone

Geocache (go on a digital scavenger hunt) at Garner State Park and Enchanted Rock. geocaching.com



(Opposite page, from top) At Garner State Park find the best of the Hill Country: trails for hiking, the Frio River for cooling off, and plenty of open spaces for camping. Horseback ride through remote trails at Hill Country State Natural Area. (Left) Splash around at Krause Springs.

climb anywhere, you won't find a view that rivals Enchanted Rock. "It is a destination in itself," says Mitchell. "It's not just for the climbing ... there's so much history and beautiful formations." The rock formation that rises some 425 feet high is the result of a pool of magma that rose from below the earth's surface an estimated 1 billion years ago and then hardened while (slowly) cooling into its present granite state. Beginner climbing sessions must be booked through a third party before arriving at the park and typically include a safety briefing, a hike to the climbing area and the chance to scramble up a rock multiple times with the help of a guide. Mitchell says the view you'll enjoy from the side of the rock isn't much different than what's visible from the summit of the hiking trail, but the added element of pride that comes from looking out over the Hill Country after a climb is well worth the extra effort. tpwd.state.tx.us/state-parks/enchanted-rock



SUNDAY MORNING

RELAX IN THE SPRINGS OF SPICEWOOD

Walk carefully down the stone stairs etched into the hillside at Krause Springs and you'll feel like you've been transported into another world. With decades-old Cypress trees towering overhead, natural springs running between moss-covered rocks and a massive natural pool, complete with a waterfall tucked into the rocks at one edge, this 115-acre property is an oasis. Owned (and named for) the Krause family, the private land is listed on the National Registry of Historical Sites and is open for a day of lounging amid the water or for overnight camping in tents and RVs. As a natural spring, the water is refreshingly cool, even on fall days when the heat is thick, and there's a rope to swing from a tree and into the water below. Families will enjoy the 70-foot, man-made and spring-fed pool at the top of the property, which is situated near stone picnic tables perfect for lunch breaks. It's easy to head straight to the water upon arrival, but the entrance boasts one of the best nooks on the Krause's property: a butterfly garden. Wander through blooming flowers as you listen to the water nearby. If you stand just still enough, a fluttering butterfly might even land on your shoulder. krausesprings.net—KP

*Total mileage for trips calculated using the San Antonio International Airport as starting and ending point.

the Hill Country as well as Merrick Ranch," says Beaubeannes, who provides private rides through her Desert Hearts Cowgirl Club. "It's the gem of Texas." tpwd.state.tx.us/state-parks/hill-country



SATURDAY AFTERNOON

LET YOUR ADRENALINE FLOW AT ENCHANTED ROCK

Texans have long known Enchanted Rock as a premier camping and hiking spot. But once you've traversed the trails of the pink-hued granite by foot, it's time to discover the state park north of Fredericksburg in a whole new way—from the perspective of a climbing harness. "Texas isn't exactly known for its climbing compared with Colorado or Utah," says John Deas, owner and head guide at Texas Climbing Adventures. "But in Central Texas, we're pretty spoiled. Enchanted Rock is a great spot." Unlike the limestone trails that are common in the Hill Country, Enchanted Rock offers granite courses that, while often more difficult, offer a truly traditional climb. Adam Mitchell, owner of Rock About, which like Texas Climbing Adventures, offers beginning climbing courses, says while you can learn to

TOTAL MILEAGE:
360 miles*

STAY:
Book a villa at Trois Estate near Enchanted Rock. troisestate.net

SPOT TO STOP:
Stop for lunch at the Old German Bakery and Restaurant in Fredericksburg. oldgermanbakeryandrestaurant.com

HISTORICAL PILGRIMAGE



TOTAL MILEAGE:
182 miles

FRIDAY NIGHT

DANCE AND DRINK AT LEGENDARY GRUENE HALL

When Pat Molak first walked into Gruene Hall in 1975 it was, put simply, kind of a mess. Junk was strewn all over the historic stage. Random hay bales and chairs were stored on what is now the dance floor and old advertising signs from the 1940s and 50s were collecting dust. Molak, however, saw something magical. "It didn't take a whole lot of imagination to figure out that it could be a cool joint," says the San Antonio native. "Fate put us together."

Built in 1878 by Henry Gruene (whose father Ernst was the first to settle in Gruene after immigrating from Germany), Gruene Hall touts itself as the oldest dance hall in Texas. Initially, it hosted everything from community dances to badger fights. Since Molak cleaned up the hall and started booking music acts, it has hosted everyone from Garth Brooks

STAY:
Walk to Gruene Hall from The Gruene Mansion Inn, H.D. Gruene's former Victorian home. gruenemansioninn.com

DETOUR:
Between Johnson City and Fredericksburg, stay at Grape Creek Vineyard's B&B. grapecreek.com

and George Strait to Little Richard, who stood atop his piano stool while singing "Good Golly, Miss Molly." The hall hasn't changed much. The long wooden bar offers bottled beer and wines while nearby wooden picnic tables beckon customers. Families in the large yard outside can listen to the music with less commotion and inside dancers still scoot along the original wooden floor—get there early to break it in or be willing to two step among a tight crowd later in the evening. The best part for music lovers, according to Molak, is the ability to squish in close to the stage and connect with the artist in ways that simply aren't possible at major arenas. gruenehall.com

SATURDAY MORNING

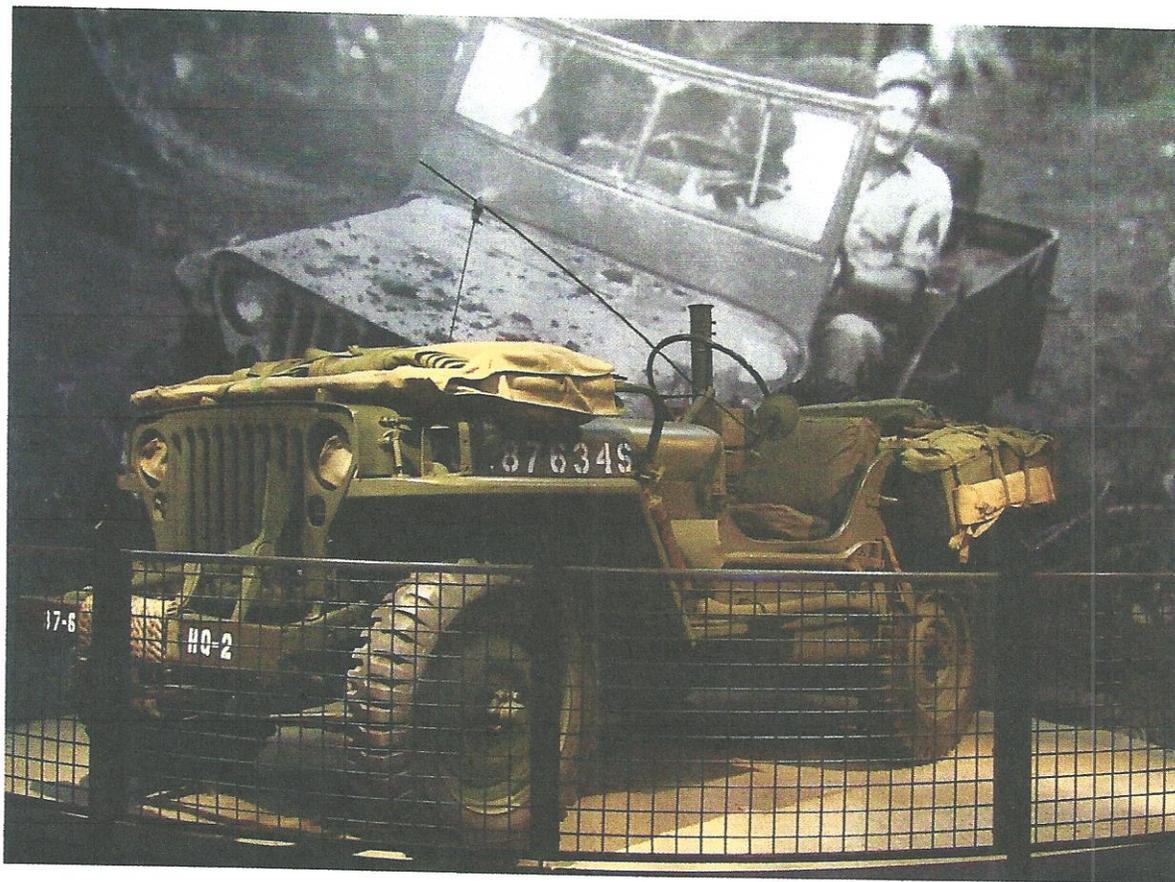
BE YOUR OWN JUDGE IN BLANCO

The Old Blanco County Courthouse that stands at the center of town was only an official courthouse for four years. After the stately two-story limestone building opened in 1886, voters agreed to move the county seat and courthouse to nearby Johnson City in 1890. But it's precisely because its days as a courthouse were short-lived that its history is so deep. The courthouse went on to house offices for lawyers, doctors and other professionals. When the local school burned down in 1893, students relocated to the courthouse. In 1937 the area needed a hospital, and the courthouse was converted to house patients (it remained a general hospital until 1961). After the structure fell into disarray, the Old Blanco County Courthouse Preservation Society took it over in 1986. More than a decade was spent restoring it to its former glory, and the building opened for visitors in 1998. It is now recognized as a Texas Historic Landmark. Guests can browse the Preservation Society's historic photo collection and learn about the history of the courthouse and the Hill Country farming town in which it sits. One modern fun fact: Scenes from the 2010 movie *True Grit* were filmed there. The old courtroom is now a ballroom where weddings often are held and the lawn still serves as a meeting point for the community, playing host to everything from monthly Market Days to the city's annual June Lavender Festival. 300 Main St., 830-833-2211, historicblanco.org

SATURDAY AFTERNOON

GET TO KNOW PRESIDENT LYNDON B. JOHNSON

Few places capture a person's essence more than their home



(Opposite page) Gruene is filled with vintage small-town charm. (Above) See military artifacts at the National Museum of the Pacific War. (Below) Visit Junction School, where President Johnson was educated as a young boy.

and there's no better proof of that than the Lyndon B. Johnson National Historical Park. Start your journey at the one-story house where President Johnson lived from the time he was 5 until he finished high school. Restored to its

1920s state, it includes original furniture as well as pieces akin to what the Johnsons would have used. Fourteen miles to the west, the Johnson Family Ranch provides a glimpse of all that inspired Johnson while in office. At the one-room Junction School visitors can stand where the president signed the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in 1965 and also see what the classroom looked like when Johnson attended as a young boy. Farther into the property, take a tour of the 1894 home that became known as the "Texas White House." Visitors can walk through the office where Johnson sat when he decided to send troops to Vietnam. The closets in the couple's bedroom suites still contain clothes and the living and dining room areas have been restored to their 1960s motif. Outside, walk where Johnson often held "lawn chair" meetings with executive staff and stop at the hangar and airstrip that he relied on when traveling to and from Washington. (Note: Drivers must obtain a permit from the LBJ State Park and Historic Site and purchase tickets for the Texas White House tour at the airstrip.) *Lyndon B. Johnson National Historical Park Visitor Center, Ladybird Lane and Avenue G, Johnson City, 830-868-7128, nps.gov/lyjo; LBJ State Park and Historic Site Visitor Center, Hwy. 290 and Park Road 52, Stonewall, 830-644-2252, tpwd.state.tx.us/state-parks/lyndon-b-johnson*



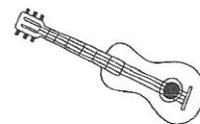
SUNDAY MORNING

HONOR WAR HEROES IN FREDERICKSBURG

In Fredericksburg, history buffs will find one of the world's premier World War II museums. Opened in 1971, the National Museum of the Pacific War is the only institution in the United States dedicated exclusively to the Pacific Theater battles. Admiral Chester Nimitz, a Fredericksburg native for whom the original museum is named, served as commander-in-chief of the Pacific following the attack on Pearl Harbor. He insisted if a museum was going to honor his story that it also honor the lives of those who fought alongside him. The facility does that and more. Its six acres include the Nimitz Museum honoring Admiral Nimitz, a Japanese Peace Garden, a Memorial Courtyard and the George H.W. Bush Gallery, which features some 900 artifacts—including a B-25 plane from the Doolittle raid—as well as hundreds of photographs and dozens of media installations. Just east of the main building, visitors can take docent-led tours of larger

artifacts, such as a restored PT Boat. And several times a year (Oct. 11-12 and Nov. 8-9 this fall), live re-enactments portray a combat scene between U.S. Marines and Japanese defenders. *pacificwarmuseum.org—KP*

WHEN TO GO



Fridays:

Arrive at Gruene Hall between 4 and 7 p.m. to experience the "Friday Afternoon Club" that includes a happy hour and a live broadcast by KNBT. *gruenehall.com*



Aug. 27:

Recognize President Johnson's birth during the annual wreath laying ceremony at the Family Cemetery. *nps.gov/lyjo*



Sept. 20:

Shop and visit with vendors during Blanco Market Days on the lawn of the Old Blanco Country Courthouse. *historicblanco.org*



Sept. 20:

Attend the 2014 Annual Symposium at the National Museum of the Pacific War. *pacificwarmuseum.org—org*

GOURMAND'S TOUR



FRIDAY NIGHT

INDULGE YOUR SWEET TOOTH WITH MENARD PIES

There's a saying in Menard, a centuries-old Spanish settlement at the junction of Highways 83 and 190, that goes way back: "Everybody passes through here some time or other." It's kind of true. And, if this little town is the heart of the Hill Country, then Sideoats Café & Bakery must surely be its unofficial living room. At this county seat, meet some of the locals, who sit side-by-side

with tourists to enjoy the inviting creations from this family-owned cozy kitchen. The eatery is as well known for its 12-ounce ribeye steak as the house-made, creamy cilantro lime salad dressing. But what draws most eager eaters are the desserts, all made from recipes passed down for generations. "People have been known to argue over the last bite," says one Menard resident. Some folks get simply *verklemt* over the Tuxedo Cake, a sybaritic fusion of moist chocolate cake, sweetened whipped cream and a dribbled crown of dark chocolate ganache. From satiny Chocolate Cream Pie

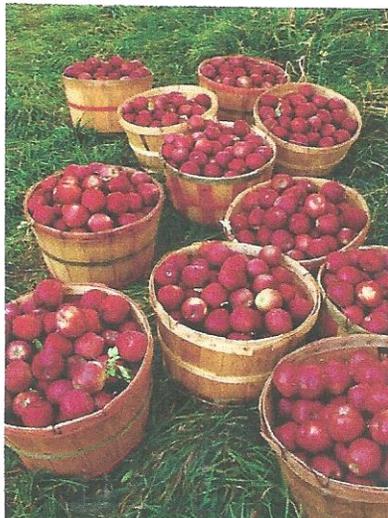
to melt-in-your-mouth Buttermilk Bourbon Pie and tart Key Lime Pie, the crusty sweets are blue ribbon worthy. 509 Ellis St., Menard, 325-396-2069, sideoatscafe.com



SATURDAY MORNING

LUNCH ON BARBECUE IN LLANO

Once a stopover for settlers heading west, Llano, 105 miles from San Antonio, sits smack dab in the heart of the Hill Country. Born from a smattering of log cabins erected on the banks of the spring-fed Llano River, the picturesque small town, awash with mom-and-pop owned shops and a historic jail, which boasts the original hanging gallows tower within, still exudes the frontier spirit. Taste it at Cooper's Old Time Pit Bar-B-Que, a perennial favorite on best barbecue lists, located on the main drag. Cooper's now has restaurants in New Braunfels, Fort Worth and Austin, but Llano is the original and still the best. Enter and peer through the smoke at an immense serving pit, chockablock with meats. Aided by the grinning pit master, choose from cabrito, brisket, crusty ribs and chicken. Whatever



PLAN YOUR NEXT TRIP



Eat: Pie

In: Brooklyn

Indulge in a slice of salted caramel apple at Four and Twenty Blackbirds or a peach cobbler at Pies 'n' Thighs. birdsblack.com, piesnthighs.com



Eat: Barbecue

In: Memphis

At Charles Vergo's Rendezvous Charcoal Ribs, try the obvious (Memphis-style pork ribs). hogsfly.com



Drink: Wine

In: Walla Walla Valley

The wine region known as the Napa Valley of Washington has 125-plus wineries. wallawallawine.com



Eat: Apples

In: Pennsylvania

Visit in October for the annual National Apple Harvest Festival in Biglerville. appleharvest.com

COURTESY COOPER'S BBQ; VINEYARD: BLAKE MISTITCH; APPLES: SHUTTERSTOCK



(Opposite page) Cooper's Old Time Pit Bar-B-Que draws tourists to Llano for its famous pork chop; pick apples in Medina and eat apple pie in Menard. (Left) Alamosa Wine Cellars is the only Texas winery that exclusively grows warm climate grapes, native to Italy, Spain and the Rhone.

you order, add a 2-inch-thick succulent pork chop, the saliva-inducing house specialty. The pit master will plopp your sustenance on a red, plastic tray, only stopping to ask one question: "Sauce?" You won't need it as the meats define tender, but a dab of the piquant dip is worth a try. As for sides, don't be shy. Potato salad, cole slaw and beans prevail. For dessert, dig into a cobbler in apple, blueberry, peach and pecan varieties, just like grandma used to make. 604 W. Young St. (Hwy. 29), 325-247-5713, coopersbbqllano.com

▲▲▲
SATURDAY AFTERNOON

SIP SAN SABA VINO

It's all about the terroir—even in Texas. You've heard about the wineries near Fredericksburg, but drive a bit farther afield to the Hill Country's northernmost corners and a cadre of 12 distinctive vineyards called the Way Out Wineries await. North of Austin, ambling toward the Dallas-Fort Worth metroplex, the rural roads that lead to them wriggle around unexpected portions of the state. It would take a weekend warrior's oenophile-fueled will to tipple at all these wineries in one afternoon. A more relaxing plan

TOTAL MILEAGE:
431 miles

STAY:
Through Star of Texas Bed & Breakfast, reserve a cottage or enjoy the outdoors with a night in a tipi. star-of-texas.com

DETOUR:
Visit the Old West at The Museum of Western Art in Kerrville. museumofwesternart.com

would be to pick one, and spend a languorous day with the wine makers—who are almost always in attendance. A best bet is Alamosa Wine Cellars, a 10-acre, award-winning vineyard near Bend, where you can relax on the ranch-style winery's dog trot porch and watch the sun set in a burst of orange behind the horizon's ridge of hills—glass of wine, of course, aloft and ready to toast. Touted by magazines such as *Wine Spectator*, San Saba County-located Alamosa Cellars sits at an altitude of 1,200 feet, a short distance from the Colorado River and in the ideal place for growing warm climate varietals like those created in Tuscany. Master winemaker Jim Johnson makes stunning strides with aromatic viognier, but also try the sangiovese blends for a taste of Tuscany. Enjoy a glass on the veranda looking out onto the rows of grapes. 677 CR 430, Bend, 325-628-3313, alamosawinecellars.com

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SUNDAY MORNING
PICK FRUIT IN MEDINA

They say everything's bigger in Texas, but not the apple trees in Medina, a farming town just a short drive from Bandera. Here, in the early 1980s, local growers invented a brilliant form of dwarf-sized fruit trees that miraculously produce full-sized apples. Nowadays, the orchards here overflow with apples, producing around a dozen varieties, from Red Delicious to Pink Lady to Fuji. Crisp, colorful, sweet, these apples mature in July, but visitors can typically pluck them from the orchard through August at Love Creek Orchards. (This year, the summer apples were picked clean in July, but a late crop of Pink Lady and Granny Smith will be ripe for the picking by the end of September.) There's plenty of fruit to last through fall, too. Fertile Medina grows all sorts of goodies available for picking. Persimmons and figs reign in the autumn, as do pumpkins. During October, families relish Love Creek Orchard's Pumpkin Patch. Choose your Halloween pumpkin, pet farm animals, ride a hay wagon and tour the orchards, where you can learn home gardening tips and even pick out your own tree in the nursery. Love Creek is also home to The Apple Store. An homage to the fruit, not the electronics company, this apple-themed boutique hawks fresh baked pies, famous for weighing in at four whopping pounds. It also offers apple strudel, apple ice cream, jam, preserves, turnovers, cookies and bread—not to mention T-shirts, recipe books, artwork and apple-of-your-eye doodads of every imaginable kind. 13558 Hwy. 16 N., Medina, 830-589-2588, lovecreekorchards.com—BH

SHOPPING EXCURSION



TOTAL MILEAGE:
326 miles

STAY:
Mason's Lindsay Ranch is a topaz-packed enclave that also has a B&B. A two-night stay earns you the rights to wander their land, tools in hand. lindsayranch.net

NEED TO KNOW:
Bring cash to Market Days. Not all vendors take credit cards.

FRIDAY AFTERNOON

DISCOVER MODERN-MEETS-VINTAGE JOHNSON CITY

Like the wave of nostalgia that comes from finding a tattered, black-and-white photo in your grandma's bedside drawer, Johnson City recalls small-town Texas from decades past.

At the crossroads of Hill Country traffic, it remains a sleepy pint-sized hamlet at first glance, but like the U.S. president who hailed from here, Johnson City boasts a plethora of modern-minded edges. A blend of barn-style buildings and classic 20th-century downtown

brick-and-mortar, within its interiors the old-school burg's center boasts trendy businesses—a microbrewery, colorful galleries and eateries on the urbane-side of gourmet. While touristic offerings, such as the LBJ Ranch, will intrigue, visitors should plan enough time to linger in the town proper, investigating the antique stores, mom-and-pop emporiums

Grab your wallet. It's time to shop.



and artist's ateliers. Pore over Pieces of the Past (open on weekends and by appointment during the week), a repository of vintage building accessories, from doors and reclaimed lumber to copper switch plates and column pedestals. Celebrate your discoveries with a chilled Chain Gang Oatmeal Stout (or other housemade beer) at Pecan Street Brewing, where Texas bands croon their tunes every few nights. *Pieces of the Past*, 104 Hwy. 281, Johnson City, 830-868-2890, pieces-of-the-past.com; *Pecan Street Brewing*, 106 E. Pecan Drive, 830-868-2500, pecanstreetbrewing.com



SATURDAY MORNING ANTIQUÉ IN WIMBERLEY

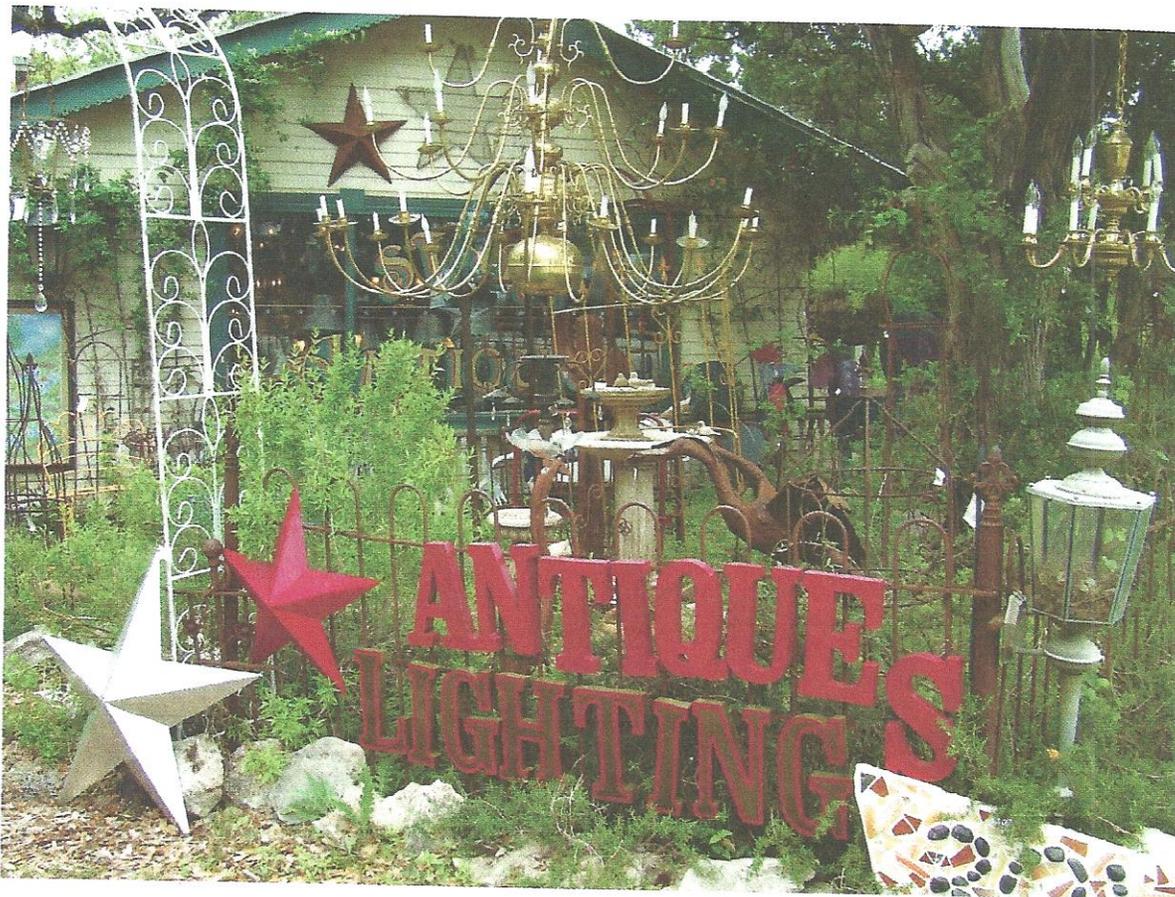
Tranquil Wimberley sits on the banks of crystal-clear Cypress Creek and the rushing Blanco River near Austin. A long time artist's bailiwick, the quaint town attracts creatives in search of an atmosphere that fuels their craft. With eclectic shops and galleries clustered in the town square and lining the streets of Olde Towne Plaza, Wimberley has many spots capable of draining your wallet's reserve. Find vintage light fixtures and other decor at Star Antique or pick up a new piece of art at The Gallery on the Square. Ideally, plan your foray for the first Saturday of the month to experience Market Days. Hosted by the Lions Club, this quality, open-air flea market brings together more than 450 diverse vendors with jaw-dropping bargains and immense variety. The festival occurs the first Saturday, March through December, when the weather makes outdoor shopping less arduous.

Star Antique 301 River Road, 512-847-9970, starantique.com; *Gallery on the Square*, 314 Wimberley Square, Ste. A, 512-847-9904, galleryonthesquare.com; *Lions Field*, 601 FM 2325, Wimberley, shopmarketdays.com



SATURDAY AFTERNOON STROLL COMFORT'S MAIN STREET

Renowned 19th-century architect Alfred Giles used to visit the German community of Comfort by stagecoach to check the progress of elaborate homes he had designed for wealthy clients. His legacy—along with dozens of other examples of period architecture—comprise the stunning Comfort Historic District today. Like a living museum, Comfort's preserved architectural marvels incorporate much of the town, which radiates from two main squares. Note the fairytale-



(Opposite) Antiquers know Comfort is one of the best shopping stops in the Hill Country. (Above) Search for hidden treasures at Star Antique. (Below) Find vintage building accessories and more at Johnson City's Pieces of the Past.

like fachwerk structures on Main and High streets, which use rough-hewn timber and limestone for a gingerbread effect, and ogle buildings that evoke Queen Anne, Italianate, Greek Revival and classic Victorian characteristics.

The restored structures

hold an array of shops and galleries—ideal for passing long, lazy afternoons. Step into Blackbird Antiques & Interiors, a jewel box of found items, arranged with a curator's eye. Rugs, herbs and plants, furniture, art and a plethora of repurposed marvels sit under the watchful eye of the owner's eager pug pups, whose presence ensures a home-like aura. Nearby, Architectural Mercantile, set in a decades-old chapel, holds all sorts of vintage accoutrements for home revamp projects, including old light fixtures, iron grill work, knobs, cresting, capitals and pediments. End the day with dinner at 814. *Blackbird Antiques & Interiors*, 409 7th St., Comfort, 830-995-2550, blackbird-home.com; *Architectural Mercantile*, 501 Broadway, Comfort, 830-995-5602; *814 A Texas Bistro*, 713 High St., Comfort, 830-995-4990, 814atexasbistro.com

SUNDAY MORNING

DISCOVER MASON'S GEMS

Leave your purse at home—and shop in nature's boutique. Texas' state gem, topaz, pops up all over the raised granite

outcroppings of Mason County, located in a westernmost swatch of the Hill Country. Glimmering bits of the gem, which ranges in color from amber to sapphire, attracts treasure hunters of all ages for long days spent prospecting like a miner of yore. Easily discover scintillating stones in Mason County's stream beds, ravines and, sometimes, simply atop the soil—like the Hill Country's own scattered bits of buried pirate treasure. Pry large pieces from the earth using a pick and shovel, or sift the soil for tiny gem slivers with a wire mesh screen. Though the ranch land near Streeter and Grit are most abundant with topaz, the fenced, privately owned expanse can't be accessed without permission. Thankfully, some ranch families open their gates to eager seekers, charging a small fee for entrance and equipment rental. Try Bar M Ranch Services or Mason Texas Topaz on the Seaquist Ranch, which both welcome amateur geologists, families, school groups and jewelers throughout the year. Or avoid blisters and sweat with the air-conditioned interior of Mason Country Collectibles, where you can purchase topaz outright or in rings, cross necklaces and more. *Bar M Ranch*, 830-



203-1611, barmranchservices.com/topaz; *Mason Texas Topaz*, 325-347-5413, masontexas.com/topaz.com; *Mason Country Collectibles*, 424 Fort McKavitt St., 325-347-5249, masoncountrycollectibles.com—BH ★

SHOPPING

BREAKS



Museum Stop

Travel back in time at Blanco's Buggy Barn Museum, which features 100-plus authentic horse-drawn carriages, buggies and wagons. buggybarnmuseum.com



Bird Watch

Many migratory birds spend time in the Hill Country. Look for rare painted buntings along Hugo Road off RR 12. visitwimberley.com/ourbirds



DIY

Blackbird owner Karen Frias hosts occasional workshops on techniques for repainting antiques. blackbird-home.com



Refuel

Sip coffee or wine while browsing at High's, a cafe meets gift store on High Street in Comfort. highscfeandstore.com