

Escape

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48 hours in San Antonio

JOHN BISHOP

SAN Antonio in southwest Texas is a special place, an interesting blend of Spanish, Texan and now Mexican influences where the cowboy tradition is strong and the battle cry of "Remember the Alamo" still resonates.

A visitor can easily fill 48 hours. Begin your day with breakfast: you've got choices. It might be Mexican – huevos rancheros, for example – or Texan – eggs, very crispy bacon, breakfast potato in some form, and biscuits with gravy or grits, plain or with cheese, shrimp and more. And coffee.

Move on to the Alamo, a stirring story of sacrifice and heroism; the Texan equivalent of Gallipoli. It's at this mission station that 136 men including Davy Crockett and Jim Bowie tried to hold out against Mexican general Santa Anna, with 3500 men, who was trying to put down the rebellion against Mexican rule of Texas.

All the defenders died but Santa Anna was later defeated and Texas became its own republic. The story lives on.

Next to the Alamo is the Menger Hotel, which opened in 1859 and is still operating beautifully preserved. This is where Teddy Roosevelt recruited some of his roughriders for the Spanish American War of 1898. He wasn't president then but his charge up San

Juan Hill with his rough and ready cavalry has been made into one of the great feats of American arms.

Another and earlier part of the story of San Antonio can be found at the San Jose mission that Spanish Franciscan monks established on what is now the edge of town in 1718.

In the 1700s the Spanish Empire called New Spain ran west from Florida across the south of the United States and up as far as San Francisco and up the Mississippi to St Louis.

Local Indians came to the station for protection, education and medicine. The price of that was conversion to Christianity but 70 per cent of them were dead within 10 years from European diseases against which they had no natural protection. The mission closed in 1820 but the buildings are now preserved.

A river cruise is a good way to get some appreciation of early San Antonio when it was regarded as the Venice of America. The riverbank is a parade of outdoor restaurants, bars and hotels.

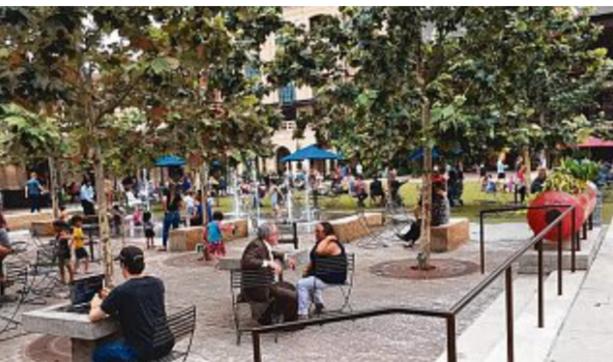
The ecology of the area is different from the rest of Texas and it's certainly a demanding environment.

This is cattle country and visitors can relive the stories of the pioneer men and women who developed the ranches and managed the large cattle drives of up to 2000 head to markets in Kansas and later on the trails to New Mexico and



FINE DINING: Restaurants and cafes can be found all along the San Antonio River.

Pictures: John Bishop



The Pearl River Square where farmers' markets are held every Saturday.



The beet soup adorned with seeds at the PharmTable restaurant in San Antonio.

up to Colorado.

I had two of the best meals I've ever had in America in this town and they were complete contrasts. At the Granary, where the style is best described as sophisticated modern barbecue, the meal was meat heavy although there were plenty of side dishes.

In complete contrast is PharmTable, an eco-political

venture where the focus is on healthy, environmentally friendly food, mainly vegetarian, although meat is available as a side dish.

"It's Texas and I have to have meat on the menu," owner Elizabeth Johnson says.

At the Alamo Brewery a solid throng of drinkers crowd the bar and tables as David Tilker, the director of opera-

tions, talks me through a sampler tray. There's golden ale, an easy-drinking beer; an amber lager, designed to accompany food; the 1816 Pils, a typical Czech lager; a North Wall pale ale, which is sharp, bitter and hoppy; and a forgettable watermelon lager.

Locals enjoy their connection to the land and their history. There are 27 farmers'

markets in San Antonio: five on Sunday and 11 on Saturdays, with the others spread throughout the week.

At the Pearl Market I enjoy some freshly shucked oysters and a cold beer looking out at kids enjoying themselves running in and out of the water fountains. Then it's off to a sophisticated jazz club called Jazz Texas.

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