

TRAVEL

Where the strudel meets the stirrup

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A bottle of Lone Star beer raised in one hand and his guitar in the other, Fred Andrews, the lead singer of Honeybrowne, toasted the crowd gathered around the old wooden stage in Gruene Hall with “Here’s to all the ladies.”

A roar of approval went up from the hundreds of country-music fans ready to kick up their heels and down some brews in the oldest continuously used dance hall in Texas. Built in 1878 by Henry Gruene (pronounced “Green”), a German immigrant, it is the centerpiece of historic Gruene, now part of New Braunfels, the first German settlement in Texas.

The Germans colonized what is today Texas Hill Country in the heart of the state, roughly west of Austin and north of San Antonio. It’s where the strudel meets the stirrup, so to speak.

Gruene originally was called Goodwin until Henry Gruene, a successful cotton farmer, began to build a grist mill and mercantile buildings. The mercantile is now the General Store filled with candy, toys, souvenirs and a soda fountain. His Victorian home is Gruene Mansion Inn, on the National Register of Historic Places. The old mill is a restaurant, but the saloon-dance hall remains much as it was in the 1880s.

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To get the best look at the hall, visit during the day when it's not wall-to-wall two-steppers. The swinging screen doors open into a space that makes you wish you had ridden into town on a horse. Bare light bulbs, ceiling fans and worn wood floor planks patched with old Texas license plates add to the charm. Surrounding streets are filled with tourists and shoppers browsing the antiques mall, sipping samples at the Grape Vine Texas Wine Bar or stopping into the Great Texas Pecan Candy Co. for pecans prepared any way you like them – spicy, sweet, chocolate-covered or plain. Jeff King and his family have run the business for 15 years, making and packing the pecan treats themselves.

New Braunfels, founded by Prince Carl of Solms-Braunfels, also is famous for Wursthfest. Each November, it hosts one of the country's largest German-heritage festivals, which includes a contest for the best of the wurst.

Among other activities in town, water recreation abounds in the town's two rivers – the Guadalupe and Comal – with tubing the favorite summer pastime. No effort required. Plop in a tube and let the very slow Comal carry you on a lazy afternoon drift. Tube-rental spots are available at several locations in town. The Prince Solms Tube Chute, which bypasses a dam, gives riders a very quick white-water thrill. Schlitterbahn Waterpark and Canyon Lake also offer respite from the summer temps that can hover near 100 degrees in the summer.

If you want to get back in the saddle again, head west to Bandera, known as “The Cowboy Capital of the World,” where each week anyone with a horse is welcome to ride through town. Many of the dude ranches saddle up their guests and join residents on the ride. They generally end up at the 11th Street Cowboy Bar (billed as “The Biggest Little Bar in Texas!”), which has a real hitching post for ponies and the cigar-store Indian doesn't seem contrived. Named one of the 10 best cowboy bars in the country by Cowboy Magazine, it has a tiny bar festooned with bras and a big dance floor.

Another stop for riders is a Hill Country honky-tonk called Arkey Blue's Silver Dollar Bar on Bandera's Main Street. Locals say it's the second-oldest dance hall in Texas. A little red door leads visitors down a staircase into a timber-framed basement where antlers decorate the walls and live music, dancing and drinking make it a party. Across the street is OST (Old Spanish Trail) restaurant. Saddles line the bar instead of stools, but most patrons opt to use the tables. Serving breakfast, lunch and dinner, it's a Texas-style diner.

This small but popular town was founded by Polish immigrants, so expect a little polka in these cowpokes.

“There's something about this place that just keeps you coming back,” said Chris, an Englishman who ended up moving to Bandera after one too many visits.

North of Bandera is Johnson City, the hometown of our 36th president, Lyndon B. Johnson. Outside town is the LBJ Ranch, now part of the national park system and the final resting place for Johnson and his wife, Lady Bird. Park rangers conduct tours of what by today's standard is a humble home. The airstrip behind the home, Johnson's Texas White House office, and the one-room schoolhouse he attended are some of the attractions.

Another German town in Texas Hill Country is Boerne (pronounced “Bernie”), which is about 30 miles northwest of San Antonio, between Bandera and New Braunfels. Even the street signs are in German.

If German means good beer and bratwurst, then nearby Fredericksburg is a perfect place to stop for both. Real microbrews and more expansive shopping are just some of what the city has to offer. The Adelsverein (a society of German nobles who wanted to create a new Germany in Texas in 1842) sent 120 Germans from New Braunfels to colonize the area. This group was responsible for the Prussian population explosion in Texas at the time. Fredericksburg was named in honor of Prince Frederick of Prussia and is the home of Texas German, a dialect spoken by the first generations of German settlers who refused to learn English. The University of Texas runs the Texas German Dialect Project, which is building a dialect archive.

The town's perfectly maintained 19th-century buildings and the trendy chic of the coffee shops, the gluten-free bakery, ice-cream parlors and breweries makes it feel a bit like a Texas version of the Hamptons. No lobster shorts, but lots of opportunities to spend and send postcards.

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