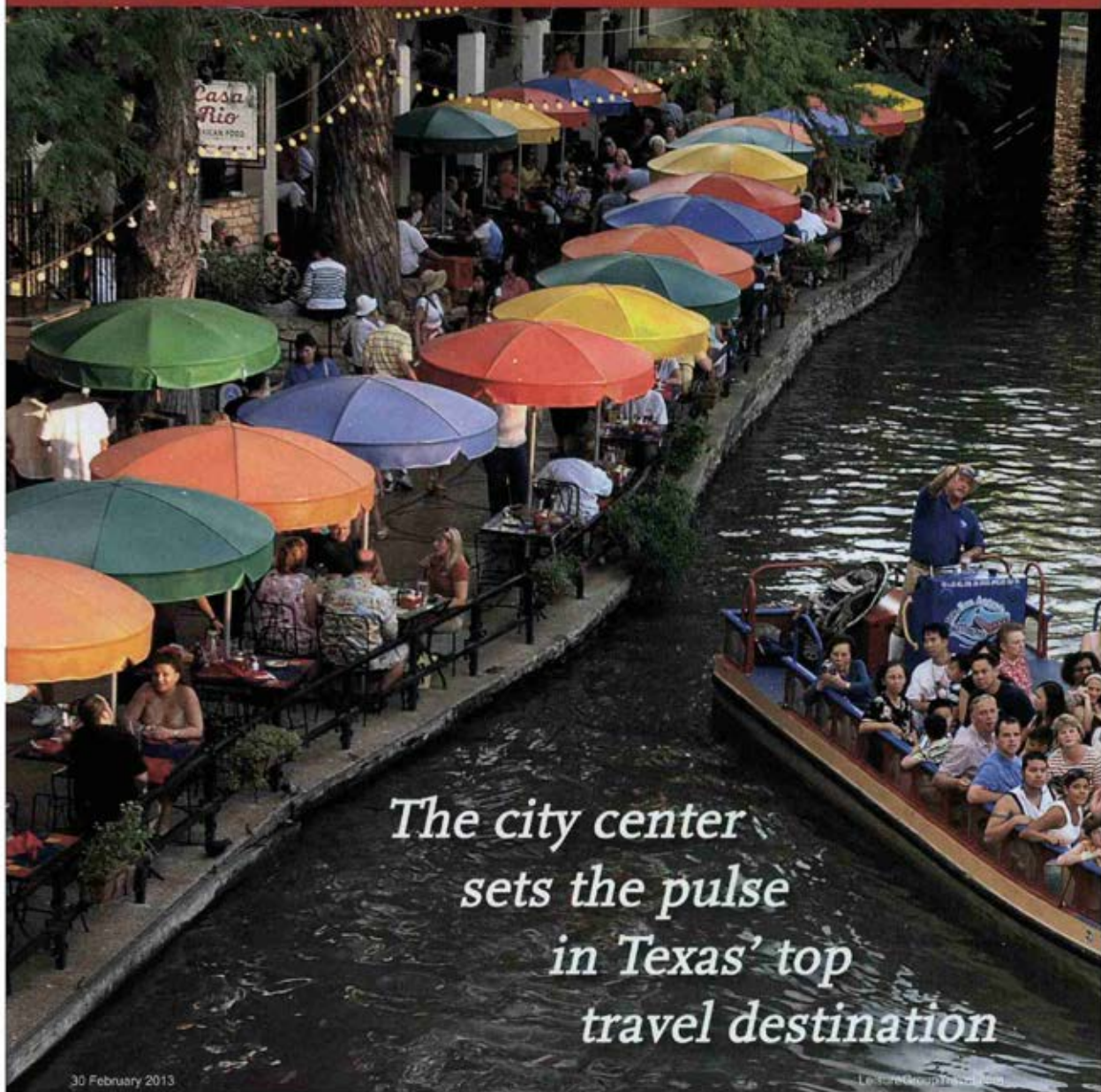


on location: west ❖ randy mink

Deep in the Heart of SAN ANTONIO



*The city center
sets the pulse
in Texas' top
travel destination*



It may be America's seventh largest city, but **San Antonio** has a comfortably compact downtown.

Tourist-friendly and highly walkable, the heart of this vibrant metropolis with a Mexican accent abounds with so many intriguing sights that a group could spend several days without straying beyond its central core.

From my base at The Westin Riverwalk, San Antonio, I found a treasure chest of attractions just blocks away. The **River Walk**, right outside my door, is indisputably the crown jewel of downtown San Antonio. Landscaped with palm and banana trees, cypress and magnolias, the cobble walks along the meandering San Antonio River create a scene no other American city duplicates. Twenty feet below street level, away from the noise, groups can enjoy a meal at a riverside cafe or an open-air barge tour that glides past festive umbrella tables and under arched pedestrian bridges. You can even arrange a moving feast, with narration, aboard one of the boats of Rio San Antonio Cruises. Our group's floating dinner was catered by Boudro's, one of the River Walk's premier restaurants. During the magical evening, the private barge made several loops, each time stopping at Boudro's to pick up a course (and give people a chance to use the rest room). At one point we cruised right between entertainers performing on the stage of the Arneson River Theatre and, on the opposite bank, the audience.

Backing up to the Arneson is **La Villita**, a block-square shopping village with about 20 artsy shops housed in 19th century cottages. A National Historic District, the "Little Village" is a delightful pedestrian zone with brick lanes and benches on shaded patios. The Spanish settled here in the late 1700s, but most of the stucco and stone structures date from the 1850-1880 period when European immigrants, many of them German, built modest abodes and commercial buildings.

German heritage flavors the **King William Historic District**, just 10 minutes south of downtown via the River Walk. Known in the 1800s as Sauerkraut Bend for its riverside location and dense German population, the gracious residential neighborhood captivates visitors with its collection of exquisitely preserved mansions lining the leafy streets. Built by prosperous German merchants, bankers and millers, the stately homes represent a variety of architectural styles, from Greek Revival and French Second Empire to Victorian with gingerbread trim. Some, like the 1876 home of lumberman Edward Steves (open for tours), are built from the local limestone, a familiar building block in San Antonio and Texas Hill Country. The 1876 Villa Finale, of Italianate design, is the neighborhood's other

Rio San Antonio Cruises offers narrated sightseeing trips that showcase the River Walk in downtown San Antonio. Above: The Alamo Rangers are a private police force that guards the shrine to Texas independence.

historic house regularly open to the public for guided tours.

A stroll across the Johnson Street pedestrian bridge over the River Walk, steps from the Steves mansion, leads to the 1859 **Guenther House**, one of my best San Antonio discoveries because it combines my love of history and comfort food. In a tranquil setting overlooking the river, the museum/restaurant/gift shop occupies the home built by German entrepreneur C.H. Guenther, who operated a flour mill. That factory, Pioneer Flour Mills, is still adjacent to the house, and as the country's longest continually family-owned mill, supplies the flour in the pancakes, biscuits and pastries served there. The mill's castellated concrete tower (1923) used to be the city's tallest structure.

A stellar breakfast place, the Guenther House is renowned for its pancakes, waffles, and biscuits and gravy. In the home's former tea room and under the ironwork canopy outdoors, guests savor lunch specialties like champagne chicken enchiladas and salads with the signature strawberry chipotle dressing. Groups can reserve the adjacent, redwood-paneled room, once the family dining room. The sky-lit Roof Garden also is available for groups.

From the restaurant's bakery counter I got a square of streusel-topped coffee cake and a cinnamon roll the size of a brick. The cobblers and strudels also were tempting. The Guenther House gift shop, in the former music room, sells kitchen gadgets, baking supplies and bags of the popular sweet cream pancake and waffle mixes in cloth sacks, plus biscuit, gravy and other mixes.

Across the road from the flour mill is the **Blue Star arts complex**, a converted industrial site in Southtown, a neighborhood emerging as a center for cuisine and art. The collection of galleries and studios is anchored by the Blue Star Contemporary Art Gallery. Blue Star Brewing Co. was the city's first full-scale brewpub.

Market Square, also on the edge of downtown, spotlights San Antonio's Mexican heritage. The two-block area, billed as the "largest Mexican marketplace north of the Rio Grande," turned out to be one of my favorite places, and I'm glad I had two hours to soak it all in. A beehive of activity, San Antonio's former produce marketplace bristles with street life and offers more than 100 stores in the El Mercado and Farmer's Market Plaza buildings, where you'll find every kind of Mexican-made souvenir, from color-splashed serapes and

handbags to paper flowers, embroidered blouses and bottles of vanilla. On the main plaza outside El Mercado, caricaturists ply their trade, Mexican singers and mariachis serenade shoppers, artisans offer their wares, and outdoor vendors cook up gorditas, taquitos and sizzling fajitas. Photo possibilities abound. But stores post signs that warn "No pictures with hats on" (aimed at those who want to pose in a floppy sombrero).

The Cortez family runs the 500-seat **Mi Tierra Restaurant & Bakery**, reputedly the largest Mexican restaurant in the country, and adjacent Mariachi Bar, plus two other large restaurants on the block. Actually, they own 90 percent of Market Square and are keen on preserving its authenticity. It was here that San Antonio's legendary "chili queens" operated stands that sold chili con carne, the spicy meat and bean mixture that now is the state dish of Texas.

For the best in Tex-Mex food, try Mi Tierra's beef enchilada, tamale and taco plate served with refried beans and Spanish rice by waitresses in traditional dresses in the colors of the Mexican flag. Request a song from strolling freelance musicians and admire the Mural Room's art, including images of celebrated Mexican-Americans and President Bill Clinton jogging in a Mi Tierra T-shirt. A corner shrine remembers the late pop singer Selena. For the road, get a cream puff or fruit-filled empanada from the bakery counter. Founded in 1941, the 24-hour restaurant is now in its fourth generation of family ownership.

For aerial views of San Antonio, take a ride to the observation deck of **Tower of the Americas**, the city's tallest structure. Located in downtown's HemisFair Park, the 750-foot landmark, built in 1968 for the HemisFair world exposition celebrating the 250th anniversary of San Antonio's founding, offers indoor and open-air viewing areas. Eight panoramic photo panels help locate attractions below, and wall panels with audio narration illustrate various periods in Texas history. The tower also has a bar and the revolving Chart House restaurant.

The top-notch **Institute of Texan Cultures**, in the shadow of the tower, spotlights the contributions of many ethnic groups, from Chinese and Japanese to Dutch, Polish, German and

Jewish. Exhibits include vintage photos, musical instruments, liturgical items and videos. Guests can peek inside a 1930s kitchen of a Czech family in Texas and an African-American sharecropper's home from about 1910.

Finally, a group cannot visit San Antonio without a stop at the **Alamo**, downtown's tourism magnet. Anyone who has seen one of Hollywood's Alamo movies knows the names of heroes like Davy Crockett, Jim Bowie and Col. William Travis, who perished along with about 200 valiant men defending the former Spanish mission against Gen. Santa Anna's 3,000 Mexican troops. Visitors to the "Cradle of Texas Liberty" must remove their hats, and no photography is allowed inside the hallowed shrine, once a chapel. The Long Barracks and another building on the grounds have museum exhibits on the storied siege and struggle for Texas independence, and a film is available.

The best movie, however, is *Alamo...The Price of Freedom*, shown almost hourly at the IMAX theater in nearby **Rivercenter Mall**. To satisfy the whims of tourists, commercial attractions, like **Ripley's Believe It or Not!**, **Guinness World Records Museum** and **Louis Tussaud's Waxworks**, surround Alamo Plaza, lending a festive, if somewhat gaudy aura, to the environs of one of America's most revered shrines.

Offering ethnic flair, an easy-going personality, a wealth of attractions and tons of Texas lore, San Antonio is an obvious choice for groups looking to experience the best of the Lone Star State.

For tourist information, contact the San Antonio CVB, 210-207-6700, visitsantonio.com **LGT**



Donald/Neilson/SCVB

Mi Tierra Restaurant in Market Square is the perfect place to sip a margarita, enjoy Tex-Mex dishes and be serenaded by mariachi musicians.



Al Rendone/SCVB

Tower of the Americas offers a bar, restaurant and observation deck offering panoramic views of San Antonio.



Marko Memon/S4CYB

Mexican-flavored eateries and shops lend a festive air to San Antonio's Market Square.



The Guenther House's covered patio provides a lovely setting for breakfast or lunch.