



*INTRIGUING*  
**SAN**  
**ANTONIO**

Mark Twain recognized San Antonio's distinctiveness over a century ago when he named it one of only four unique cities in the United States, along with San Francisco, New Orleans, and Boston. Only after San Antonio hosted the 1968 World's Fair, held in conjunction with the 250th anniversary of its founding, did people start taking notice.

by **Jeff Heilman**





Alamo Heroes Monument

Attracting some 26 million tourists, conventioners, and other visitors last year, San Antonio's parochial outpost days are long past. In fact, it is now America's seventh most populous city, its growth fueled by a recession-resistant economy presently ranked among the nation's strongest. Laid back, low key, and liberal minded, its time-capsule heritage and cultural fusion—Spanish, Mexican, and German being predominant layers—make it foundational in Texan, American, and world history. And lest I forget, it is home to the Alamo.

Those are its primary credentials as a visitor destination. For the LGBT travel story, however, it's more intriguing.

While Priscillas and other desert queens should probably think twice before invading the state's smaller, remoter locales, the LGBT scene is flourishing in Dallas, Houston, Austin, and Gulf Coast destinations like Galveston and Port Aransas—but where is it in San Antonio?

As I would learn in inspiring, often moving ways, it is very much here: you just have to seek it out. Brad Parman is a local real estate developer who moved here 37 years ago. "San Antonio has been around for a long time, and has always relied on a strong spirit of self-reliance and self-invention," he informed me by phone before I arrived. "This is not a city that needs to brag and flaunt its assets," he continued. "Instead, it is a city that invites active discovery. Come here ready to participate, and you'll get a good story in return."

How right he was. I'll get to where the LGBT scene is, or at least offer some coordinates and clues on where to start looking, but the story starts with time travel, and how the scene came to be. By far the most surprising, startling even, discovery about San Antonio is its under-recognized landmark role in the national gay movement. Never mind that the city's namesake Saint Anthony of Padua may have been gay: spiritually tied to the legacy of the Battle of the Alamo, it's a tale about the achievements of pioneering men who never quite got the recognition they deserved.

Originally a Coahuiltecan Indian village, the city was founded in 1718 when Franciscan monks, who front lined Spain's colonization efforts, constructed Mission San Antonio de Valero here. Four more frontier missions would follow, but come 1794, their local control weakened by repeated Comanche and Apache assaults, the colonizers secularized San Antonio de Valero and turned it into a fort. In the early 1800s, it was garrisoned by a Spanish cavalry unit that named it after their hometown of Alamo de Parras, or the Alamo.

At first glance, the Alamo's façade may seem less than memorable. Arrayed along the San Antonio River starting some three miles south of downtown and its four fellow missions: Concepción, San José, San Juan, and Espada comprise the **San Antonio Missions National Historical Park** today and make grander impressions.

To be fair, only the chapel and its "long barracks" survive from the original San Antonio de Valero mission; all else at Alamo Plaza postdates the Texas Revolution. Make no mistake, though, the "Shrine of Texas Liberty" is a spiritual place of the highest order. For 13 days in 1836, this was where 189 Texians (pre-Texans), Tejanos, patriots, and colonists made their last stand against a Mexican force of 4,000 men. Vanquished to a man (and boy), their valiance famously inspired the "Remember the Alamo!" battle cry that accompanied the response just 46 days later, when outnumbered Texian and American volunteers defeated the Mexican army at San Jacinto, just outside present-day Houston.

Thus was born independence for Texas, 176 years ago, along with the spirit that has animated the Texas personality ever since. Which brings us to the story of gay San Antonio, a connection that I did not divine on my own, but with the gracious guidance of local artist,

activist, and singular personality Gene Elder, a pioneer for four decades and the city's foremost LGBT historian.

You have to dig for discoveries in San Antonio, and Gene is a treasure trove. Now 63, he arrived here in 1970 from Dallas to study art at Trinity University and has called San Antonio home ever since. Home, by the way, includes his wondrous backyard. Routinely drawing photographers, curiosity seekers, and other gawkers, Gene's wildly overgrown Eden features tree stump tables and broken-down wicker furniture with comfy old pillows. Reclined like Romans, Elder the senator and I the scribe, he takes me back in time.

We begin with part of a prayer, an excerpt from the "personal Declaration of Independence" Gene quilled in ink and handed out at the San Antonio auditorium where Anita Bryant spoke in 1978 on her anti-gay rights "Save Our Children" tour:

*'Remember the Alamo' is not only our call to arms, but a constant reminder that our forefathers fought for freedom from opposite sides of the church walls. The blood runs deep into our soil on both sides, and we are slowly learning how to live in peace, and to love each other once again. Forgive us for not taking up your sword against our gay brothers and sisters. We cannot afford to once again tear our city into pieces.'*

Gene did not stop there, publishing the document and mailing it to the Pope, Dan Rather, and many others. "The Alamo was not an Anglo-Hispanic conflict, but a fight for liberation," he explains. "That spirit is ingrained in San Antonians—there is room to be a radical or maverick here." That said, being gay in early 1970s San Antonio, then, as now, a major military town, was no easy thing. "When I got here, there was a barracks-style joint just outside city limits code-named The Country, where lesbians danced on one side and gays on the other," Gene continues. "A red light went on when the MPs or cops came, and everybody changed partners."

In 1973, Gene and his beloved friend Arthur "Hap" Veltman made an investment that would set the stage for the future of the gay scene in Texas. "We opened a disco called the San Antonio Country, which became known state wide for its artful décor and lively, liberated atmosphere," says Gene, who co-owned and managed the disco. "In Dallas and Houston, gays congregated in warehouses. In San Antonio, we created the state's first sophisticated nightclub for gays."

There were raids and paddy wagons and arbitrary arrests and trumped-up charges and Stonewall-style resistance, but Gene, Hap, and the gay and lesbian community, drag queens included, all carried on undeterred. Case in point: Angered by police and military harassment, Gene penned and organized a cockette-style "protest ballet" in 1974 called the Fairies' Fiasco. "It was a three-day performance about 12 seasonal fairies living along the San Antonio River, with reincarnation as the theme," he recalls. "Daring stuff in those days, needless to say," he adds.

The club danced along until 1980, when energy giant Valero paid top dollar for the building following a slanderous dispute. "That's when Hap made his big move," Gene says.

Born in San Antonio in 1936, Veltman was the consummate visionary and pioneer. "Before succumbing to AIDS in 1988, Hap was instrumental not only in advancing our community's cause, but in shaping the future of San Antonio itself," Gene tells me, inspired to this day by the memory of his dear friend.

Nightlife entrepreneur, real estate developer, art patron, and conservationist, Hap (short for Happy, the childhood nickname given by his moth-





Photo: Rob Wilson

## The most recent census figures show that the number of same-sex households in San Antonio far outstrips the national average.

er) served on the San Antonio River Walk Commission, lending his energies to the early development of what is the city's signature tourist attraction today. Opened in 1968, his Kangaroo Court restaurant was the River Walk's first significant new nightlife business in over two decades, followed by other restaurants including Big Bend and the Greenhouse. In 1985, Hap and a partner bought the Blue Star Distribution Center, a run-down tire warehouse from the 1920s, and transformed it into the Blue Star Contemporary Art Center. Opened in 1986, Blue Star today is one of the city's leading creative centers.

For the gay community that Hap so passionately championed, his most visible legacy arose from San Antonio Country's closing. Searching downtown for a new club space, he located a neglected historic building right behind Alamo Plaza. It was the former Turnverein, or Turner Halle, a German athletic club built in 1891. Beautifully rendered in limestone, granite, and brick, it also features a gymnasium and grand ballroom. It became the instant darling of the San Antonio social scene upon opening in 1892. The magic lasted until the Great Depression, after which the building fell into ignominious use and decline.

"Hap had not only found his new nightclub, but he was about to make a major statement for the gay community, not only in San Antonio and in Texas, but across the nation," Gene says. "He was going to open a gay club right behind the Alamo."

Opened in 1981, **Bonham Exchange** had signifying status already in hand. "Because it resided within the Alamo Plaza Historic District, which is listed on the National Register of Historic Places, the building came with landmark status," Gene explains. "In one daring stroke, Hap had created a gay landmark right next to the Alamo, a move that would surely elevate San Antonio's role in the national gay movement."

Well, not exactly. Named for Alamo hero James Bonham, who rode through enemy lines to find help before returning to defend the fort, the Bonham was a sensation, attracting hot crowds, headline acts, and major buzz. Yet, it never fully lifted San Antonio into the national spotlight, and what should have been a significant entry in the annals of the gay movement is today a footnote at best.

"Funny how little credit San Antonio ever got for our efforts," muses Gene. "I suppose it somehow related to our being too removed from the communication lines with New York and Los Angeles. Or perhaps it was about the power struggle with Dallas and Houston. But you know what? San Antonio has always had a different destiny, and has never mindlessly followed the party line. We know what we did, and the Bonham is still here, three decades later, and that's our story."

The community-focused Bonham is indeed still happening, especially on Fridays (Caliente night, with the midnight Shake Your Ass show) and Saturdays. The crowd is mixed, the locals are fun, the vibe is ener-



Giant Boots at North Star 2 Mall

Photos: Jeff Heilman

getic, and the dance floor is hot. Weekday nights are appealing too, with draws like Joan Riviera's Open Mic Comedy Show.

The action is entirely different in the back of the club, where Gene brings me one afternoon. Here, I discover the wellspring of Elder's fountain of knowledge: file cabinets, shelves, display cases, tables, and boxes filled with the voluminous, multitudinous archives of the HAPPY Foundation, named for Hap and established in his will. Written by Gene, the Foundation's mission statement is "dedicated to Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness, the preservation of GayBLT history, encouraging contemporary art, and promoting ballroom dancing."

As Chief Archivist, he takes his preservationist role very seriously. "This is our story," he says, pointing to the impressive collection of documents, photographs, recordings, artifacts, and myriad other memorabilia. "This is our permanent record." The priceless nature of the collection, especially the personal narratives, photos, and personal effects, is instantly and poignantly apparent—it is a memorial to many lost friends.

Quiet moments pass as Gene shows me additional items from the archive, but then it dawns on me. Putting fairy wings on anger. The days and nights of joyful abandon, freely expressed in art, music, and dancing, each flourish a step closer to liberation and freedom. The courage and the persistence. The Alamo.

The Bonham may not stand with the Stonewall in memory or status, but Hap, Gene, and their friends, taking their own valiant stand against injustice, not only put San Antonio on the map, but helped weave the GLBT community into the very fabric of the city's life.

Started eight years ago, Pride San Antonio's annual "Pride Bigger Than Texas" block party and parade has grown from a 15-minute walk to an all-day celebration attracting thousands. Founded in 2007, the San Antonio LGBT Chamber of Commerce's growing membership generates some \$4 billion in economic output. The most recent census figures show that the number of same-sex households in Bexar County (with San Antonio as its seat) far outstrips the national average. There are anti-gay incidents from time to time, and homosexuality sits uneasily with area Baptists and Catholic conservatives, but for the most part, being gay in San Antonio today just ain't no big thing.

The gay community in San Antonio is visible, vocal, and mixed right in. Save for North Main and San Pedro Avenues just north of downtown (home to **Heat**, **Pegasus**, and a handful of other gay dance clubs and bars), you won't find a gay village in San Antonio.

"Since arriving here 30 years ago, I have watched the steady assim-



La Gloria Ice House

ilation of our community," informs Michael Bobo, owner of San Antonio's popular W.D. Deli Café with his partner Wayne Beers. "And with more and more gays and lesbians moving to the city, it will only get more balanced."

There are assorted other gay establishments, such as cruising bar **Annex**, home base for the Bears of San Antonio and the leather-loving Chain of Command, but once you've exhausted those, "LGBT specific" pretty much departs the itinerary. Unless, of course, you remembered to come here in search of a good story, and are in the mood to dig a little. Then you might uncover San Antonio's gay vampire, who provides dental implants for his fellow bloodsuckers, or legendary hairdresser Karlos with a K, his New Year's and other parties still the rage, or San Antonio's popular and growing version of the Guerilla Queer Bar Invasion.

The city's growing appeal to travelers includes a wonderful cultural scene with signature institutions like the **McNay Art Museum** in suburban Alamo Heights. Bequeathed by oil heiress Marion Koogler McNay in 1950 and housed in a complex that includes her splendid Spanish Colonial Revival mansion, the collection goes from medieval to modern and includes Picasso and Rodin, as well as superb prints and drawings from a variety of artists. The grounds are lovely, outdoor sculpture included, and Chief Curator Rene Barilleaux is kind to show me pieces from the exceptional Tobin Collection of Theatre Arts.

Downtown, the Smithsonian-affiliated **Museo Alameda** is the nation's largest Latino museum, with an upcoming exhibition on the history of tequila. The museum sits on the edge of historic Market Square. Touristy but fun, this lively heritage district, originally the Mercado, features strolling mariachi players, shops (ten percent discount for cash!), and the landmark **Mi Tierra Restaurant & Bakery**. Awash in art galleries, San Antonio is also renowned for theater and the performing arts, with shrines including the Moorish-style Majestic Theatre, a dazzling survivor of vintage vaudeville days. Local companies include the Alamo City Men's Chorale, Ballet San Antonio, and the Guadalupe Dance Company. For campy theatre and drag shows, the historic **Cameo Center** is well worth checking out.

An absolute must is the **San Antonio Museum of Art (SAMA)**. Located in the historic industrial-size Lone Star Brewery complex just north of downtown, the museum is the largest center for Asian art in the southern US. Expansive, light-filled galleries invite leisurely exploration of an extensive global collection, while the shaded pavilion, esplanade, and terrace along the adjacent San Antonio River are pleasant retreats.



River Walk, which came to SAMA via the Museum Reach extension in 2009, is currently undergoing a \$358.3 million project to lengthen it from three to 15 miles, with the Mission Reach extension connecting San Antonio Missions National Historical Park to downtown. Lined with hotels, restaurants, and bars in its downtown core, River Walk is a major visitor magnet. If you are sensitive to tourist hordes, especially the boisterous nighttime variety, then pursue its quieter branches.

It is easy to work up an appetite and thirst in hot San Antonio: the city highly satisfies both. “Our culinary scene has advanced more in the last two years than in the last decade,” Chef Johnny Hernandez tells me over lunch at his lively, angel-adorned **La Gloria Ice House**. Born and raised in the city’s Mexican-American Westside neighborhood and schooled at the Culinary Institute of America, Hyde Park, he created *La Gloria* (the heavens) to showcase authentic Mexican street fare, which along with his customized margaritas and the spirited atmosphere makes for a perfect lunch or evening out.

The restaurant is part of the **Pearl Brewery Complex**, a mixed-use revitalization success just north of SAMA along the River Walk. Anchored by Culinary Institute of America, San Antonio, this landmark from 1883 is the city’s culinary center. Featuring dishes from South America, Latin America, and the Caribbean, the CIA’s new Pan-Latin **NAO** restaurant was a rewarding adventure in unique New World ingredients and tastes. Also at Pearl are Il Sogno Italian Osteria and the Sandbar Fish House and Market, both by acclaimed CIA graduate and James Beard Award-nominated Chef Andrew Weissman, as well as refreshing cocktails at Blue Box Bar. There are outdoor movies on Fridays and the popular Farmers Market on Saturdays—with much more ahead, including a grand hotel planned for the brewery’s historic main building.

Another hot area is Southtown, an eclectic trio of neighborhoods (King William, Lavaca, and Blue Star) just east of downtown. Here, amid galleries, coffeeshops, and vintage clothing stores, **Feast** is the city’s closest thing to Soho or Hamptons-chic. With a uniquely organized small bites Mediterranean-meets-American menu, it’s a “white party” in terms of owner and designer Andrew Goodman’s décor; staff and clientele were also feasts for the eye.

Urban sophisticates will also like Monterey and Bliss; pink and impossible to miss, Liberty Bar is among several Southtown watering holes; and Tito’s and Rosario’s are local standbys for satisfying Mexican fare.

When it comes to accommodations, there are some 43,000 rooms area wide, including 13,700 downtown. Of the mainstream River Walk properties in the downtown core, the luxury all-suite Hotel Contessa is a comfortable choice for couples and partners with children.

In 1986, the circa-1906 Fairmount Hotel reportedly became the largest structure ever moved on wheels, when it was relocated to its present home next to La Villita National Historic District and across from Hemisphere Park, site of the 1968 World’s Fair. Louis XIV would have felt right at home here, with 37 opulently created suites featuring chandeliers, antique furnishings, and other European-style touches.

Close by, the **Arbor House Suites Bed and Breakfast** is a charming hideaway, offering eight suites, some with balconies, in a cluster of restored circa-1903 cottages. Another great escape is the 27-room **Hotel Havana**, hotelier Liz Lambert’s utterly authentic transformation of a former residence hotel from 1914 into a hip Cuban-inspired haunt. The minimalist elements of my room’s design (overhead ceiling fan, metal-frame bed, painted white brick, naked light bulb, vintage refrigerator, and shuttered windows) inspired fantasies of being a spy, assassin, and great nov-

elist all in one afternoon. Listed on the National Register of Historic Places, the hotel’s Ocho restaurant and lounge is one of the city’s hot spots.

Another fantasy awaits on the edge of Texas Hill Country (itself spoked with small-town escapes like Comfort, Fredericksburg, and Greune) in booming northwest San Antonio, some 20 minutes north of the airport. Locals themselves are still discovering the 165-room **Éilan Hotel Resort & Spa**, an intriguing \$500 million boutique property anchoring a Tuscan-themed residential development nestled in the La Cantera hills.

Quickly earning Leading Hotels of the World designation after opening in 2011 (only the second hotel in Texas so honored), the hotel looks and feels outrageously luxurious. Venture warily to the pool: while its private cabanas are great, the crowd there, presumably local residents, was not in line with the hotel’s luxury promise. If you are game to explore and splurge, though, absolutely do go for the spa (the Turkish Razul, private mud painting and rinse for two, is a must), the cocktail bar, and Sustenio, celebrity chef and original “Texas Mafia” member Stephan Pyles’ first opening ever outside of his home base in Dallas. Also at Éilan is the 10,000-square-foot ballroom dance studio developed by World Professional Latin Champion Corky Ballas of TV’s *Dancing with the Stars*.

Did I say San Antonio was intriguing?

Back with Gene in his yard for a parting chat, I find a colorful ceramic representation of a tornado hidden in the bushes on a pedestal. “Some student’s work I found in the trash,” he tells me. For a moment, I think there might be a symbolic connection. Activist-minded still, Gene has never shied from stirring things up. He was escorted out of that Anita Bryant event for handing out his prayer; a year later, he ran for mayor. In 1987, he was among some 300 protestors arrested in Washington, D.C. for demonstrating for gay rights on the steps of the Supreme Court. Most recently, San Antonio City Hall blocked his e-mail address from its servers in response to his many missives.

But a tornado? He is too artful, spirited, and humorous to be called that. “It is always the really sick people that try to take over the world,” he tells me. “The rest of us are content to just give a couple of cocktail parties.” His desire for justice and freedom may smolder like that of the Alamo’s defenders, but ultimately, he keeps it all in perspective. “Art, like the Alamo, has to draw the line somewhere,” he says with a smile. ■



Photo: Ansen Seale

## EXPLORE

**Cameo Center**, 1123 East Commerce Street. Tel: 210-212-5454. Dating to 1940, this former vaudeville and movie palace is a perfect choice for an entertaining evening. Currently presenting a production of *Hairspray*, the venue features regular drag nights and much more. [www.cameocenter.com](http://www.cameocenter.com)

**McNay Museum of Art**, 6000 North New Braunfels. Tel: 210-824-5368. Set on 23 acres, this transporting treasure unites the namesake founder's Spanish Colonial Mansion with the Stieren Center, a striking modernist glass pavilion from Parisian Jean Paul-Viguier that is the first US museum expansion designed by a French architect. [www.mcnayart.org](http://www.mcnayart.org)

**Museo Alameda**, 101 South Santa Rosa Street. Tel: 210-299-4300. Created in connection to ongoing efforts to revive the nearby circa-1949 Alameda Theater—once the cultural seat of Latino-American life in the city—this pink-clad museum on the edge of Market Square is the first formal affiliate of the Smithsonian outside of Washington D.C. [www.thealameda.org](http://www.thealameda.org)

**Pearl Brewery**, 200 East Grayson Street. As it continues to add more culinary, cultural, retail, entertainment and living options, this winning heritage re-use complex by the San Antonio River is a new center of fun for the city. [www.atpearl.com](http://www.atpearl.com)

**San Antonio Missions National Historic Park**, Tel: 210-932-1001. Comprising four frontier missions built after the Alamo, these Old World survivors were San Antonio's first communities. Don't miss the exhilarating weekend Mariachi Mass at Mission San José (ca. 1720). [www.nps.gov/saan](http://www.nps.gov/saan)

**San Antonio Museum of Art (SAMA)**, 200 West Jones Avenue. Tel: 210-978-8100. Expansively inviting, this artful riverside campus is a place to laze away the hours, and every second Friday, enjoy happy hour at pARTy SAMA. Don't miss Picasso's iconic Guernica tapestry, on loan indefinitely. [www.samuseum.org](http://www.samuseum.org)

## EAT

**Cappy's**, 5011 Broadway. Tel: 210-828-9669. Opened in 1977, this Alamo Heights institution (with two sister restaurants, Cappycino's and La Fonda on Main) pairs perfectly with visits to the nearby McNay Museum and strikes that perfect casual-upscale balance. [www.cappysrestaurant.com](http://www.cappysrestaurant.com)

**Feast**, 1024 S. Alamo. 210-354-1024. Gay-owned, this sexy boîte is the most un-San Antonio-like eatery in town, and that's a good thing. Celebrating its one-year anniversary this September, it's a scene-setter with great small plates and quenching cocktails inside and outside. [www.feastsa.com](http://www.feastsa.com)

**Guenther House**, 205 East Guenther Street. Tel: 201-227-1061. Across from the Blue Star Contemporary Art Space in Southtown's King William Historic District, this circa-1860 riverside jewel was once the home of the founder of the adjacent Pioneer Flour Mill. Now it's an elegant restaurant, museum, store, and event space—and a local must for breakfast or lunch. [www.guentherhouse.com](http://www.guentherhouse.com)

**La Gloria Ice House**, 100 East Grayson. Tel: 210-267-9040. "No hace falta morir para llegar a la Gloria." ("You don't have to die to go to heaven"). That's Chef Johnny Hernandez's motto, divinely describing his sizzling good Mexican street fare and margaritas—and check out the art around his riverside space, those iconic angels especially. [www.lagloriaicehouse.com](http://www.lagloriaicehouse.com)



**Mi Tierra Cafe Y Panaderia (Restaurant & Bakery)**, 218 Produce Row. Tel: 210-225-1262. Opened in 1941, this Cortez family-run institution, open 24/7/365, is a marvel to behold, including the richly stocked tequila bar and wall mural of signature Latino figures. The painting of Bill Clinton jogging is a hoot, too. [www.mitierracafe.com](http://www.mitierracafe.com)

**NAO: New World Flavors**, 312 Pearl Parkway. Tel: 210-554-6484. In 2007, hometown businessman Kit Goldsby, who sold his Pace Salsa to Campbell Soup for over \$1 billion in 1996, gifted \$35 million to the CIA to expand its then modest San Antonio campus. His behest stipulated for the advancement of Latino chefs, kitchen workers, and culinary traditions: that mission finds its latest delicious expression at this enticing student-staffed Pan Latin newcomer in the CIA building. [www.ciarestaurants.com](http://www.ciarestaurants.com)

**Sustenio**, 17103 La Cantera Parkway. Tel: 210-598-2950. Fifth-generation Texan and Southwestern cuisine pioneer Stephan Pyles is a Lone Star legend. Located at the Éilan Hotel, this is his first venture outside of Dallas. Inventively at the helm is friend and star chef David Gilbert, whose first book, *Kitchen Vagabond*, is due out soon. [www.eilanhotel.com](http://www.eilanhotel.com)

## SPEND

**Melissa Guerra Latin Kitchen Market**, 200 East Grayson. Tel: 210-293-3983. Located in the Pearl Brewery adjacent to the CIA, this irresistible store carries amazing kitchen cookware and implements, along chiles, chocolate, hard-to-find Latin American ingredients, jewelry, gifts, and much more. Just try to leave empty-handed. [www.melissaguerra.com](http://www.melissaguerra.com)

**Zebraz**, 1608 North Main Avenue. Tel: 210-472-2800. A true San Antonio original, this gay and lesbian department store was founded in 1995 and makes for eclectic and engaging fun as you browse a wide product range from books and videos to household goods. [www.zebraz.com](http://www.zebraz.com)

## DREAM

**Arbor House Suites Bed and Breakfast**, 109 Arciniega. Tel: 210-472-2005. Owned by the very cordial Ron Stinson, a proud South Texan who

once headed up the San Antonio B&B Association, this quartet of historic cottages dates back to 1903. Clustered around a lush garden, the cottages, each named for a Texas river, feature eight suites named for heroes of the Alamo—a unique, relaxing, and very pleasant choice. Rooms from \$159. [www.arborhouse.com](http://www.arborhouse.com)

**Éilan Hotel Resort & Spa**, 17103 La Cantera Parkway. Tel: 210-598-2900. Is it Tuscany? Vegas? Venice? Hollywood? Over the top in every way, this recently opened hotel palace is a sight to behold. Flaming cauldrons atop the entrance canopy and its own version of the Spanish steps at back, go for the fantasy (and very comfortable beds). Rooms from \$160.

**Hotel Havana**, 1015 Navarro Street. Tel: 210-222-2008. Lushly evocative of exotic locales and times past, this 27-room haven is your passport to unique romantic and imaginative possibilities. Embodying classic "less is more" mystique, the rooms and interiors almost dare you to misbehave and hatch schemes. Rooms from \$129. [www.havanasanantonio.com](http://www.havanasanantonio.com)

## DANCE

**The Annex**, 330 San Pedro Avenue. Tel: 210-223-6957. Cruise into this community-focused haunt, which serves as home bar for several local gay groups and organizations including the San Antonio Gay Pool League and charter member of the Texas Gay Rodeo Association. [www.theannex-satx.com](http://www.theannex-satx.com)

**Bonham Exchange**, 411 Bonham Street. Tel: 210-271-3811. The landmark gay club opened by local pioneer "Hap" Veltman in 1981 is still dancing, with three floors and an outdoor patio. The 18 plus mixed crowd may not know the building's significance, but do come and pay your respects. [www.bonhamexchange.net](http://www.bonhamexchange.net)

**Heat**, 1500 North Main Avenue. Tel: 210-227-2600. The heart of the gay strip and flagship of local club impresario Randy Cuniff's mini-empire, with four party spaces including the Chill video lounge and heated outdoor patio. When you are hungry, head across to Luther's Café, or if you are feeling pubby, grab a pull or two at "gay-rish" Sparky's next door. [www.heatsa.com](http://www.heatsa.com)