

DEFENDING THE ALAMO

By David J Whyte



OUR INTREPID SCOTTISH TRAVEL REPORTER, DAVID J WHYTE TAKES A TRIP TO TEXAS AND DISCOVERS HIS SCOTTISH ROOTS ARE MORE INTIMATELY ENTWINED WITH THE LONE STAR STATE THAN HE REALISED.

I was surprised to learn that San Antonio is America's 7th largest conurbation. You'd never know it! Away from the compact downtown area there are very few high-rise buildings... and a whole lot of trees. So, apart from the network of freeways fanning out from downtown, America's 7th largest city comes over like one very large, leafy suburb. It's also curiously non-Texan. I expected louder-than-life cowboys in Stetsons chewing fat, soggy cigars

'10 DAYS OF FESTIVE FUN EARLY IN APRIL'

and asking, "How ya'll doin?" Instead I found quite a sophisticated, cosmopolitan city – not unlike New Orleans, full of friendly folk with a dozen different ethnic influences. Only 150 miles from the Mexican border, there's a tangible TexMex tang. But you also find strong

German influences - along with Greek and Scots. In short, San Antonio was far from what I expected and surprisingly close to an ideal city getaway. As a golf destination it's not so unusual! There's golf and plenty of it - 25 courses within the city boundary. Apart from its latest offerings (more on that in a minute) the standard is reasonable, certainly enjoyable but nothing astonishing.

It's not golf that you would come here for! San Antonio - it's ambience, its friendliness and its relaxed pace is what really struck me. For that I'd go back in a minute – with a bit of golf thrown in of course. Springtime is the time to come from mid March through to mid June. In fact you can play most of the year but it gets very warm and humid in July and August. If you want to catch San Antonio at its best as I did - come in time for Fiesta, one hell of a street party - 10 days of festive fun early in April. And to top it all, if you're price-conscious - and who isn't these days, San Antonio is one of the most cost-effective

places I've recently visited. Accommodation deals, shopping, eating-out and golf all come at particularly good rates.... music to a Scotsman's wallet!

JW Marriott San Antonio Hill Country Resort & Spa

We spent our first few days at the JW Marriott San Antonio Hill Country Resort & Spa, a large property, possibly one of the largest hotels I've ever been in. Opened just last year with over 1000 rooms, seven restaurants, its own water park, spa and two magnificent championship golf courses, you can hide out here for days without leaving the property. The only downside is its distance from downtown, should you want a change of scenery.

The AT&T Oaks course at the JW Marriott is a Greg Norman production. Now, as most of us know, Greg never stints on testing his customers - to the limit - and the new AT&T Oaks course is no exception. Opened early in 2010, it has already hosted the Valero Texas Open. This is a course custom-built for tour events, a long, tight, torturous stretch that us mere normals might find a bit hairy. But hey, it's a great thrill to play especially approach shots into the greens brought into sharp relief by defiant, outrageously steep-sided bunkers. It took us a few holes and one-too-many bogeys to realise the only

strategy to avoid these pit falls was to lay-up on most of the Par 4's and 5's. The bottom line is I'd love to play it again – which is always a good sign.

Compared to the Oaks its neighbour, the Canyon is a breeze. That's not something you'll hear everyday about a Pete Dye course - Pete is as renowned for creating tough golf courses as Mr Norman. In this case Pete must have took pity and gave us just an averagely testing track. It's a comfortable meander up, down and around Texas Hill Country with some distinctive changes in elevation. On its own, it would be seen as a fairly good outing but having tasted the thrill of the Oaks, that's the one I'd go back for.

Westin La Cantera Resort

In typical Texas style, if you want to play another golf course be prepared to drive. "Oh, sure, that course is real close. Just jump onto Highway 16. It'll only take you an hour." The Westin La Cantera Resort is located on one of the highest points in the city about 15 miles northwest of downtown. It's Resort Course used to host the Texas Open, a full-on 7000-yard leviathan from the back tees. Hugging curvaceous, rolling hills and graciously sweeping down into valleys, good looks are one of this course's prime assets. There are rocky prominences everywhere and watery leaps of faith as well as dastardly drops such as at the 7th. It's a pretty good test!





Neighbouring Palmer Course also gets good reviews. It's more open than the Resort off the tees but has its own fair share of drama. La Cantera is Spanish for 'rock quarry' so that more or less tells you what to expect. Rocky outcrops, deep creeks, rolls and rises make it unusual, a bit unpredictable perhaps but it certainly works. The 18th is a long, interesting Par 4, a bit of a blind tee shot followed by a drop to a multi-tiered green, the grand finale to a card-full of interesting challenges.

Deep in the Heart

I've got to say, while these outlying resorts were interesting, I was more interested in getting at the heart of San Antonio so a shift downtown was gratefully agreed to. Basing yourself in the centre of this city opens up a load of options with everything close at hand – especially during Fiesta!

Viva Fiesta!

Fiesta, San Antonio's colourful street party purports to celebrate the heroes of the Alamo - but in practice it presents, in glorious Technicolor San Antonio's rich multicultural heritage. During the day and early evening it's a family affair with a major event happening each day

such as a street or river parade. Nighttime brings out the party people with live music, dancing in the streets and a whole lot of eating and drinking.

'SINGING 'MUSTANG SALLY'

My finest Fiesta memory was undoubtedly during 'Nights in Old San Antonio'. As dusk falls, the smell of barbecue lures legions of locals downtown for a massive get-together. It's fun, friendly, full of mostly San Antonians partaking in their own annual street party, strangers made most welcome. Near the end of the night, I found myself after a beer or five joining in with the live music and singing 'Mustang Sally' at the top of my voice with three gorgeous black girls providing backing vocals. Now that was a really San Antonio moment!

Mad Hatters

Staying downtown is great to explore the city which you can do easily on foot. During my daytime meanders I stumbled upon a grimy little shop called Paris Hatters. It certainly didn't look like much out-front but inside is a Texas institution. The walls are festooned with fedoras,



Stetsons, derbies and panamas. Abe Cortez and his wife Myma run the business which has been in his family since 1917. They still sell more than 9000 hats a year. The list of customers is legendary including Bob Dylan, the late Johnny Cash, Eric Clapton, several US Presidents and even Pope John Paul II. God knows why!

River Walk

River Walk is San Antonio's number one attraction, colourful and cool during the day, romantic and entertaining at night. It's a great place to sit anytime at an outdoor cafe or restaurant and watch the world go by. Or take a cruise! In fact, do this early in your visit and it will help you get your historic bearings. Narrated cruises last around 35 to 40 minutes. You can even book a dinner and cocktail cruise - see www.riosanantonio.com for more information.

The Alamo

Being a big fan in my younger day of Davy Crockett and Daniel Boone, one site I had to visit was the Alamo. "I believe Scots played a role in defending the Alamo," I mentioned to an American friend. "I'd vaguely heard something to that effect. "Ha! Scotsmen at the Alamo... sure!" Maybe I was wrong but I bet her \$10 it was so and off we went to tour the famous former mission. "Was Davy Crockett a Scotsman?" I asked the guide. "He was a second-generation Scot?" Not enough to scoop the bet! "Were there any Scotsmen defending the Alamo?" I asked checking my wallet for a spare \$10. I had watched

the 1960's John Wayne/Hollywood version of events but like most of his films, it was big on the 'Duke' but light on historical accuracy. And noticeably Scot-free!

"Were there Scotsmen defending the Alamo?"

"There were four first-generation Scots fighting with the Texians," the guide told us. Highly relieved, I put my wallet back where it belonged! "They also say that the Mexicans coined the word 'Gringo' from the singing that could be heard within the besieged mission," he added. "As they faced certain death, the men took to singing one of their favourite songs 'Green Grow The Rashes, O!' by Robert Burns. Gringo! Bingo! I'd made 10 bucks and learned a great little dinner-party yarn.

A good friend had mentioned to me his sons had recently visited the Alamo and were disappointed as it was touristy and surrounded by fast food joints and souvenir shops. As it happened, I ended up staying at the Crockett Hotel overlooking the Alamo Mission and came over in the evening when it was quieter without throngs of tourists trooping in and out. It is at the centre of town and there were office blocks and shops surrounding it, but - you could sense something special about the place - a real historic, virtuous significance! Texans feel that way about it too!

The Alamo City Golf Trail

In spite taking in Fiesta and all this San Antonio spirit, there was still some golf to play. There are 25 golf courses within the city boundary, several of them members of

the Alamo City Golf Trail. You can find more details on www.alamocitygolftrail.com. Green fees are extremely reasonable on the Trail. Brackenridge Park is the best course, a good deal at \$65 with a cart. This municipal course, only minutes from downtown opened in 1916. The Texas Open originated here in 1922 and continued until 1959. Originally designed by A.W. Tillinghast, this leafy parkland has recently seen extensive renovations making it an outing definitely worth including. There are a couple of curious 'square' greens, which I'm told was a Tillinghast touch!

Like any large city, San Antonio went through its industrial phases but they've done a good job of covering it up! The Quarry Golf Club transformed an ugly gaping hole in the ground into a gorgeous triple-tiered golf course and shopping plaza. From a playing perspective, the Quarry is quirky, the front 9 skirting round the excavation before dropping down to lower levels. What you get is an excellent set of links-style holes before winding down into some creatively chiselled challenges on the back nine. That's all the golf I played but there's plenty more on offer.

What Else To Do

If you want a nice combo-holiday, a bit of sightseeing, some golf and some excellent food, I can heartily recommend San Antonio. I can particularly recommend the locals - the friendliest I've met in the US - but maybe that was just the beer talking during Fiesta. What else

is there to do? Check out the Spanish Missions dotted around town. These missions played an important role in establishing San Antonio and ultimately the State of Texas. The historic King William District is also interesting. German immigrants originally settled this area and created the first Historic Neighbourhood District in Texas. I always hang on for an American trip before I do any clothes shopping. You buy shirts and jeans here for the same amount of dollars you pay in British Pounds - often better than half price - and there's a much better selection. There are two great malls in San Antonio... The Shops at La Cantera with 160 stores arranged in an open-air plaza and the North Star with 200 shops just north of downtown. This one's easy to find with a giant (40 foot high) pair of cowboy boots someone left at the entrance.

Where to Eat

Mi Tierra Cafe, a family-owned Mexican cantina in old Market Square is ideal for a fabulous San Antonio breakfast. Strolling mariachis serenade you over your scrambled eggs - wrapped in a tortilla of course. www.mitierracafe.com. It's open 24 hours a day and a wonderland of Mexican décor.

I had a pleasant surprise at Guenther's Bakery, another great breakfast venue. I spent most of my teenage years in the Midwest USA, my father a baker so I grew up on donuts & gateaux and my all-time favourite, German Chocolate Cake. Here at Guenther's was the real deal, rich, moist, coconut-covered German Chocolate Cake.



I simple had to sample one... just for old times sake!

www.guentherhouse.com

You might think I'm going a little overboard on breakfasts, but that's what you do in the States - go overboard on food! The place that really 'took the breakfast biscuit' so to speak was an unassuming little cafe on East Hildebrand Avenue near Brackenridge Golf Club. Taco Taco Cafe wins awards for the best tacos in town. Starve yourself before you come because once you have one, your going to have another...and another. Helenie, a lovely little Greek woman prepares everything fresh and has added her own secret Mediterranean touch to her Mexican tortillas that seems to make all the difference. www.tacotacosa.com

If you have any room left for lunch or dinner, try Boudro's on River Walk, a mix of southwest Texas & French cuisine. Ask for their freshly prepared-at-your-table guacamole. www.boudros.com

Where to Stay

JW Marriott San Antonio Hill Country Resort & Spa
The JW Marriott Resort is situated in Texas Hill Country in Cibolo Canyons about half an hour from downtown San Antonio and the airport. The resort features the 36-hole TPC San Antonio and a very pleasant spa. www.jwsanantonio.com

Drury Plaza Riverwalk Hotel

This former bank still houses the old safe in the basement. Check in at the tellers' booths. The back door of the hotel opens directly on to River Walk. Drury's is one of the best deals in town and the rooms are comfortable. Rates include a hot breakfast and free drinks during Happy Hour. www.druryhotels.com

Crockett Hotel

My favourite was probably the Crockett Hotel overlooking the Alamo, ideal for exploring all of downtown. It's been recently renovated; the rooms are spacious and cool with a lovely view over the Alamo Mission. www.crocketthotel.com

