

FEATURE

San Antonio offers blend of Latin, German cultures

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Contributing writer

A friend once told me San Antonio is just another big city, and its main attraction, the Alamo, is a disappointment because of its unpicturesque location in the middle of the city's thoroughly modernistic downtown. San Antonio is definitely a big city — the nation's ninth largest, at last count — and it is a bit shocking to see the Alamo sitting right near a Holiday Inn and the Rivercenter Mall. But the city is a fascinating metropolis bursting with surprises.

Established in 1718 on New Spain's outer frontier, the colorful, vibrant city definitely reflects its Spanish and Mexican roots. Hispanics make up a majority of the population today, and haciendas, tacos and mariachi music are as common as saltboxes, baked beans and the Red Sox in Boston. Yet many visitors don't realize the city has a rich German heritage as well.

German immigrants flooded the region in the 1840s and quickly prospered. German burgher bankers and businessmen built many stately mansions and simple cottages in an area soon known as the King William District; today, this is San Antonio's premier historic district, and a not-to-be-missed tourist destination. The German people also brought along their love of sausages, sauerkraut and beer — meal items nearly as prevalent in the city as fajitas and tequila — and their famous oom-pah music.

Ethnicity aside, San Antonians take pride in several of their city's main attractions. The first is, of course, the Alamo, along with its four sister missions. Residents are also quite fond of their picturesque River Walk, a striking duo of cobblestone and flagstone paths that line both sides of the San Antonio River for three miles in the heart of downtown. Then there's the city's diverse array of museums: everything from a trio of first-class art institutes and the impressive University of Texas Institute of Texan Cultures to small spots such as the Hertzberg Circus Museum, where you can browse through various displays of big top memorabilia.

If it's at all possible, come to San Anto-

nio in April 2003, when the city will hold its 112th Fiesta celebration. The 10-day festival honors the heroes of the Alamo and Battle of San Jacinto, while celebrating the city's diverse heritage and culture.

Religious sites

San Antonio is known for its five missions, which define the character of the city. The most popular is Mission San Antonio de Valero, or the Alamo, which was not only the first mission built here in 1718, but was the site of the famous battle that led to Texas' independence from Mexico.

Missions began springing up throughout Texas in the early 18th century, shortly after a group of Franciscan friars from Spain traveled to the region in 1690 to spread Christianity to the Native Americans. Thirty-eight missions were eventually established, five in San Antonio. Each mission was comprised of a church, living quarters, textile shops, a ranch, granary, blacksmith shop, tannery and irrigated farmlands. The Spaniards hoped the natives would embrace Christianity and Catholicism in exchange for the food and protection offered through mission compounds.

Visitors can easily visit all five of San Antonio's missions by following the Mission Trail, which directs motorists to each compound via signage. Athletically inclined folks can hike or bike from the Alamo to the other four on San Antonio's new 12-mile trail. All of the missions are active parishes today, except for the Alamo. Following are highlights from each one.

- The Alamo sits proudly, if not a bit oddly, in the middle of downtown San Antonio. You'll recognize the façade of its chapel, which is one of the most photographed landmarks in the world. While the chapel is beautiful, the structure seems to echo with the cries of the 189 patriots from across the nation who perished within its walls in 1836 during the Battle of the Alamo, including Davy Crockett and James Bowie. Make sure to stroll through the lush gardens in back, where you'll find a museum and library filled with relics and mementos from the Republic of Texas

- The next mission on the trail is Mission

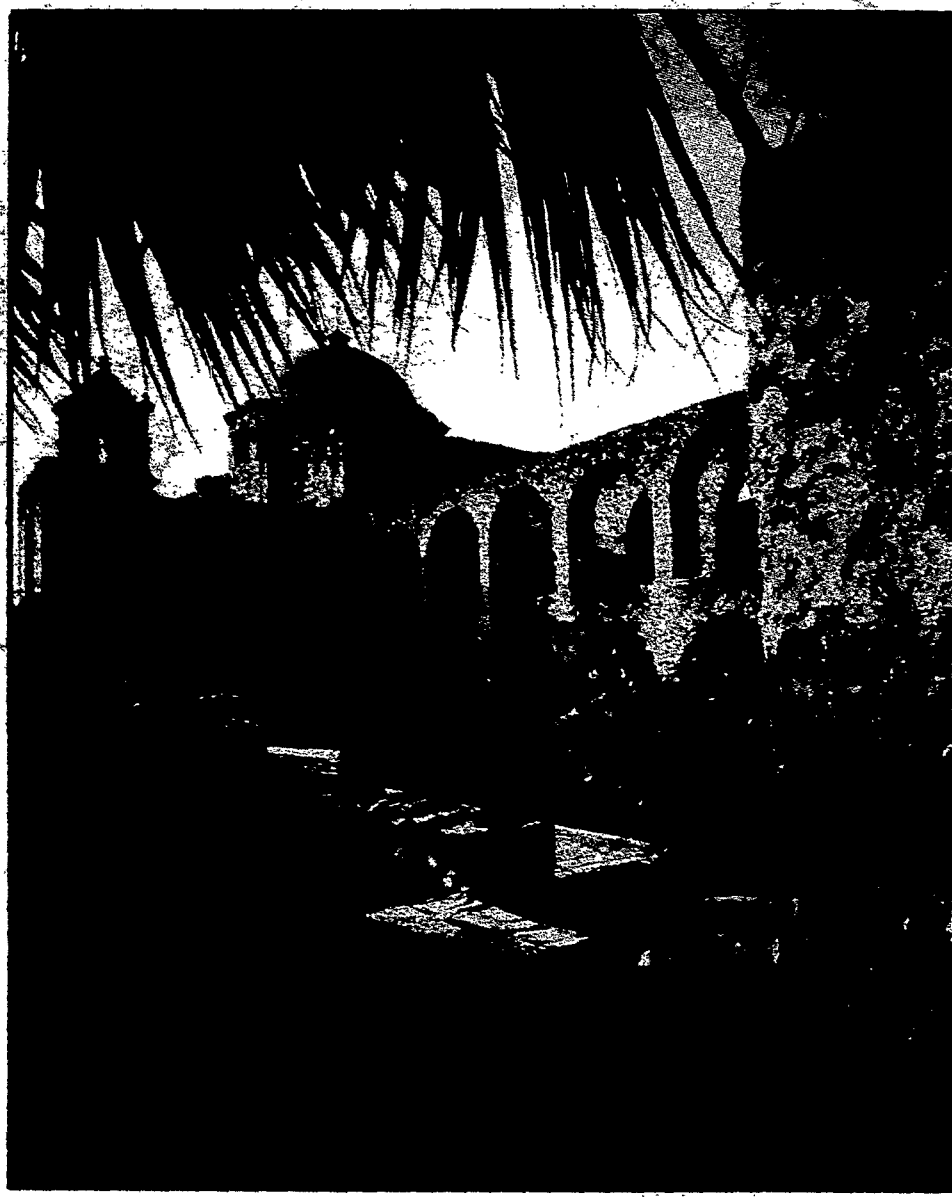


Photo courtesy of San Antonio Convention & Visitors Bureau

The San Jose Mission is one of five missions located in San Antonio, Texas.

Concepcion. Established in 1731, it contains America's oldest unrestored, functioning church. Massive twin towers rise from the stone edifice, and you can glimpse traces of the colored paintings the Spaniards used on the structure to make it more attractive to the Native Americans, who often strenuously resisted conversion.

- Mission San Jose and the trail's visitor center are next. Step into the visitor center first to peruse its interactive displays, then view the movie that provides background on San Antonio's Spanish colonial period before heading out to see the mission. San Jose is considered the most beautiful of the five, and was the most prosperous and best fortified as well. The mission is known for its ornate carvings and for Rosa's Window, a spectacular piece of Spanish Colonial ornamentation. If you're in town on Sunday, stop back at noon for its famous mariachi Mass.

- Mission San Juan Capistrano is famous for its church's open bell tower and rare figures of Christ and the Virgin, made of corn-

starch pith. It also contains a self-guided nature trail and small museum with artifacts from its past.

- Mission Espada contains several well-preserved segments of its old aqueducts, which transported water from the San Antonio River to its irrigation system. The site's dam, built in the early 18th century, is still functional.

Although not one of the city's famed missions, San Fernando Cathedral holds a special place in the hearts of San Antonians. Founded in 1731 by 15 families who came from the Canary Islands at the invitation of King Phillip V of Spain, the church was intended to be the soul of the city. It has been since its inception; even today 5,000 people attend Mass every weekend.

The church is a vast repository of beautiful furnishings from the centuries, including a hand-carved stone baptismal font believed to be a gift from Spain's King Charles III in 1759.

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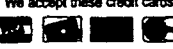
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