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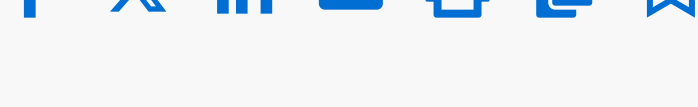
TRAVEL

Small town charm awaits in New Braunfels, Texas

Enjoy live music and kick up your heels at the oldest dance hall in Texas

By Mike Fisher Special to the Star

Thursday, August 3, 2017 2 min to read

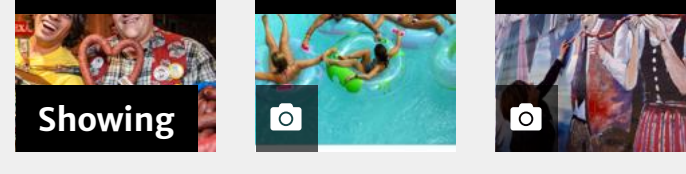


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New Braunfels Chamber of Commerce

The 10-day Wurstfest in New Braunfels in November melds the city's rich German heritage with Texas hospitality.



NEW BRAUNFELS, TEXAS — There is the lonesome whine of the train whistle in the distance near midnight and the calming rush of the Guadalupe River below. Otherwise, silence, aside from the creaking, worn, wooden floors.

Welcome to the Gruene River Inn in New Braunfels, a small city with the comfy feel of a favourite, weathered pair of jeans. As I sank into bed, my feet throbbled. Earlier, I'd hit the dance floor hard in the most Texan of Texas music venues.

Having never been to Texas, this is what I imagined, country charm with a river that kids could leap into when it gets too hot, roads where you get a three-finger wave when someone lets you pass, places that serve buttermilk pie (The Buttermilk Café), and the fresh air of down-home civility.

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An hour or so drive southwest of Austin, nestled into what's called Hill Country, New Braunfels is home to Gruene Hall. The hall was built in 1878, and it is the state's oldest continually operating and most famous dance hall.

With side flaps alongside that open to welcome breezes during open-air dancing, a pitched tin roof and a small, well-lit stage above which stretches a you-can't-miss-it Texas flag, Gruene Hall is a visitor's dream music venue.

The floor is scarred and scuffed by the soles and heels of people two-stepping and laughing since the hall hosted weekly dances in the 1800s. The stage is a trampoline of sorts for strong talent, the undiscovered and the now famous, Lyle Lovett and George Strait among those who got their start here.

So, when Joe Ely, who lives nearby, returned to this stage where he began his career as a visionary song poet, it was a celebration. For me, it was an opportunity to see and hear a living legend.

"This has always kind of been my home theatre, you know," said Ely in his friendly drawl, signing CDs near the front door that opens to a wall of photographs of all the great performers who've graced the stage.

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"I've been playing here since 1981, and it hasn't changed, though, of course, we have. You know, it was once an old stage coach stop. Stage coaches would cross the river, come up here and someone would be cooking and there'd be a band and there'd be dancing."

When Ely played with his hellfire band, the crowd sang along, knowing the lyrics. A local couple at the concert, having learned I was from Canada, insisted on buying me beers. It was prom night, and the parents and grandparents of graduates would occasionally check their phones and take calls from kids checking in with them. The building held everyone in its hand as a reminder of a sweet time.

"There are pockets of Texas with ordinary folks who are really friendly and this is one of them," said Garrett Lebeau, a memorable new guitar player and songwriter from Wyoming who opened the show with his band.

There is much to do in New Braunfels aside from listening to music. It was originally settled by Germans and it boasts a strong Oktoberfest. The outdoors Natural Bridge Wildlife Ranch is outstanding. The massive Schlitterbahn Waterpark is ranked among the best in America.

Yet, if you come for the live music, as I did, there are upwards of 20 small venues to enjoy it. That includes The Phoenix Saloon, the first bar in Texas to serve women, in 1871, where there was once an alligator pit and badger fights with the music on Saturday nights.

The ornery critters are gone, but the music remains gloriously alive.

Mike Fisher's trip to Texas was hosted by Texas Tourism, which didn't review or approve this story.

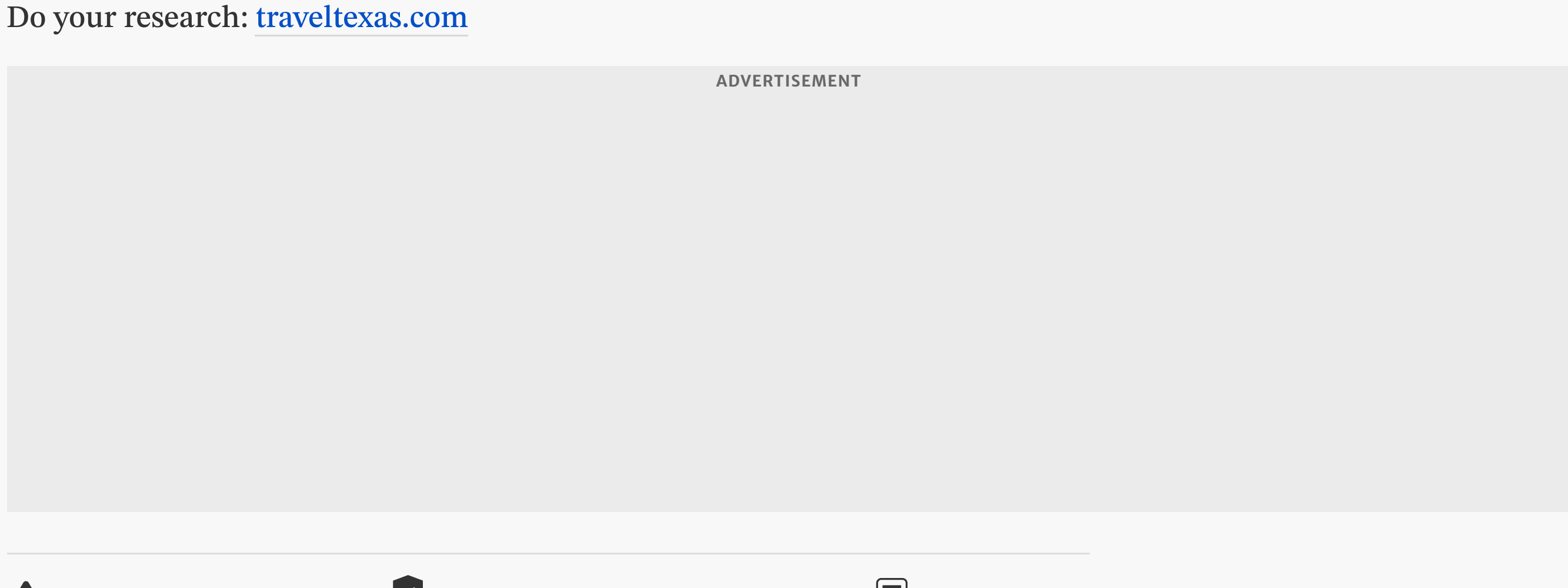
When you go:

Get there: New Braunfels is accessible by vehicle from Austin, which is 65 km to the north, San Antonio, which is 40 km to the south and Houston, which is 257 km to the east.

Eat: The Gristmill River Restaurant & Bar is almost right next door to Gruene Hall, the oldest dance hall in Texas that features top live music acts. Get a table on the patio, where you can catch a breeze and people-watch. The onion rings are massive and the Texas T-bone is legendary.

Stay: I stayed at the Gruene River Inn, a quaint inn with small balconies that overlook the Guadalupe River and, bonus, free breakfast in a charming dining room. It's an easy walk to the small downtown, where you can browse in the boutiques, stores and pubs.

Do your research: traveltexas.com



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