

Paid content

About ▾

The
Guardian
Labs

Discover New Frontiers In Texas

From speakeasies to SXSW: a local's guide to Austin, Texas

The capital of the Lone Star State is known all over the world for its live music but, as in-the-know local Madeline Hollern points out, it's also a great place to enjoy everything from heavyweight cultural highlights to bars radiating intimate neighbourhood vibes



📷 All about the tunes: Austin is officially the Live Music Capital of the World. Photograph: Kalu and the Electric Joint at C-Boys Heart & Soul courtesy of Visit Austin

Paid for by

TRAVEL  TEXAS

Cynthia J Drake

Tue 20 Aug 2024 06.03 EDT

While an influx of tech workers has made Austin a prominent cyber city, Texas's capital still maintains its counterculture vibe and bragging rights as the Live Music Capital of the World, a slogan the city actually trademarked because of the abundance of live music on offer. Any night of the week, you can wander downtown and find live music playing somewhere – from the set of a live television show to a pop-up concert in a convenience store, not to mention incredible cuisine and nightlife where people never take themselves too seriously. We chatted with Madeline Hollern, editor of Austin Monthly, to get her latest favourite recommendations for visitors.

Food and drink

Though Austin was always a great place for food trucks and burger joints, Hollern says she's seen more options opening up from new restaurants in the city this year. "We're getting more diversity in terms of types of food and price points, which is very welcome," she says. One of her favourite new restaurants is [Bambino](#), a pizza restaurant offering hand-tossed pies with a daily changing menu in East Austin.

Far East Austin is where you'll find some of the trendiest bars and restaurants in the city. Start your evening at [Sign Bar](#) (you'll recognise it by the melange of neon), and then when you get hungry, head next door to [Lao'd Bar](#). A newcomer on the Austin bar scene, Lao'd Bar represents a departure from the standard bar fare. "It has some of the best food I've had all year – it's incredibly tasty Lao-inspired food, and it's getting accolades left and right," says Hollern.

Naturally, if you're coming to Austin, you'll need to get your hands on some barbecue. [Franklin Barbecue](#) still lives up to its reputation. "I do think Franklin Barbecue has the best barbecue in the city, it is part of the experience that anyone visiting should partake in," she says. Elsewhere in the city, [la Barbecue](#) is another of Hollern's picks – if you go, be sure to check out the disco-themed restrooms.

Nightlife

Another quickly developing location is in the Manor Road neighbourhood, also in East Austin, near the University of Texas at Austin. "There are all of these new bars and restaurants in that area, and there's this cool new bar called [The Long Goodbye](#), which is sort of a neighbourhood bar, but it has an indoor and outdoor space, as well. Really good, innovative cocktails, just fun vibes."



📷 'Quintessentially Austin': The Driskill, situated in the heart of the city's downtown area (left); 'Just fun vibes': The Long Goodbye. Composite: Mark Knight Courtesy of Visit Austin/Guardian Design

For gorgeous sunset and night-time views, head to the rooftop bar/restaurant Nido at The Loren at Lady Bird Lake. "In my opinion, it's the best view in the entire city," says Hollern.

Meanwhile, don't overlook a truly classic Austin hangout at a place that's more than 100 years old, The Driskill. "I still think the Driskill bar is quintessentially Austin, whether you're visiting for the first time or you've lived in Austin for decades, it's an amazing place to go. It's so beautiful, so historic, it's friendly and fun."

Speakeasies are another local favourite, and there are several located around Austin. Hollern recommends checking out Kinfolk, which is the cellar underneath Moonshine Grill on Red River. You'll need a reservation to go. "I think it has some of the best cocktails in the entire city," she says. "You walk down the steps and go underground, and it's amazing. It's somewhere I take people for special occasions."

Outdoors, sports and adventure

One of the things that makes Austin so special is its huge expanse of green spaces for recreation, including a natural spring-fed swimming pool called Barton Springs. "The heartbeat of the city is Barton Springs. Those waters are magical. It's so refreshing in the summer, and the people watching, and the vibes are just so stellar," says Hollern. "To be there and lie on that grassy hill, soak in the sunshine, take a dip in the water that is 68F [20C] year-round - that is somewhere everyone visiting Austin should go."



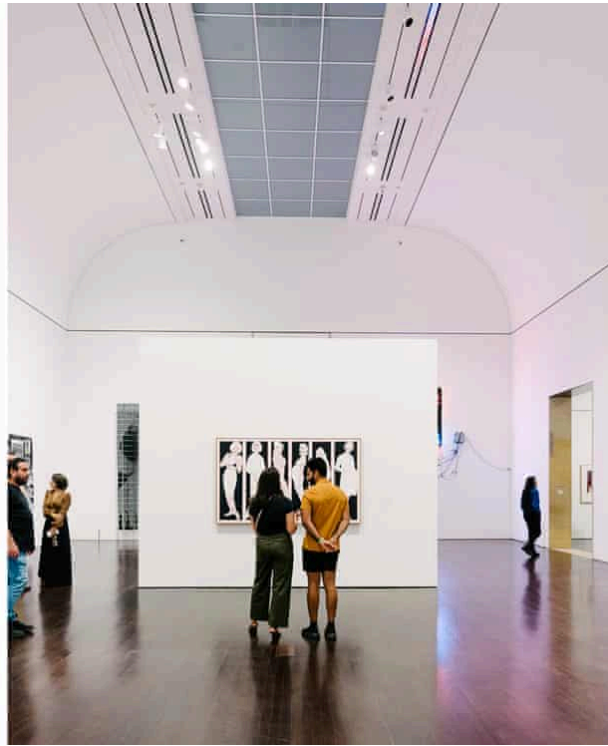
📷 Barton Springs, where the locals cool off. Photograph: Courtesy of Travel Texas

Nearby, you can also check out the [Ann and Roy Butler Hike and Bike Trail](#), a 10-mile loop that weaves right through downtown's most beautiful park spaces. "Go to the boardwalk part of the hike and bike trail – you get a view of the water and the skyline. It's just really beautiful and majestic."

For more exercise, head to one of the dozens of community workout events, such as yoga classes and more, open to anyone on a drop-in basis – many of them are even free. Hollern recommends people check out [Swift Fit Events](#) for upcoming classes to see what's available around the city.

History and heritage

Located just blocks from the [Texas State Capitol building](#) (which is open for tours), head to the University of Texas at Austin campus for several eye-opening museums, including the [Harry Ransom Center](#) that is an archive and repository of artefacts from films and TV shows from the Americas and Europe.



📷 Texas State Capitol building (left); and the interior of the Blanton Museum of Art. Composite: Getty Images/Handout/Guardian Design

Nearby, you'll also find the [Blanton Museum of Art](#) - in particular, Hollern suggests taking in artist Ellsworth Kelly's "Austin", a chapel-like structure that explores colour and light.

Finally, the [LBJ Presidential Library and Museum](#) has several interesting exhibits focusing on the tumultuous term of this Texas-born president, who played a pivotal role during the Vietnam war and civil rights era in the US.

Music, arts and culture

Austin is home to two legendary annual events: [Austin City Limits](#), a major outdoor music festival in October; and [SXSW](#), a 10-day festival in March dedicated to music, film, education, and innovative, interactive technology.



📷 Crowds in full swing at Austin City Limits. Photograph: ACL Live at the Moody Theater PR Image

"It's kind of choose your own adventure," says Hollern about SXSW. "You can go more the technology route where you attend tech panels and learn about innovative things coming down the pipeline; you can watch a lot of movies, go to a lot of movie premie, see the cast and crew, meet them at after parties; then of course, the second half of the festival is the music part, so there's bands from across the world all across the city."

Apart from the festivals, three major music venues, all named "Moody", have each created a huge impact on the city. Austin's Moody Center opened in 2022, a gamechanger for Austin, says Hollern, ushering in major acts, from Madonna to Harry Styles and Janet Jackson. The Moody Amphitheater at Waterloo Park, an outdoor concert venue, has also hosted some huge names in a breezy outdoor space. Meanwhile, ACL Live at the Moody Theater is where the public television show Austin City Limits celebrates 50 years on the air this year, and is still going strong. You can see concerts here, including ones that are scheduled for broadcast, during the show's taping season. "That's my personal favourite venue in the city - the acoustics are just incredible," says Hollern.

Discover more and book with British Airways Holidays

 Visit Austin USA

