

# The Hill Country of Texas

Lin Sutherland

Onion Creek Ranch

There is a part of Texas that is the heart's blood of everything Western. It is where the deer and the antelope—and a few buffalo—still roam. It is where the grass grows stirrup high, where the hills cast a violet glow on splendid sunsets, where natural beauty and Western ruggedness collide with rolling terrain, green trees, ample clear rivers, limestone bluffs and canyons, deep mysterious caves and expansive skies. It is the Hill Country of Texas, the heart of the Lone Star State.

Known for its striking beauty and fascinating, colorful history, the Hill Country defies all those stereotypical images established by movies such as *Giant* and *Hud*—the endless, barren, desert miles with sparse grass and no water for cattle.

Wrong area! That's El Paso. People who come to the Hill Country gasp and exclaim, "I had *no idea* Texas looked like this!"

Located northwest of San Antonio and southwest of Austin, the Hill Country defines the beginning of the Great Plains. Thick growths of bald cypress and live oak give the countryside a year-round green look. In the spring and early summer, vast carpets of wildflowers adorn the hills with bright colors. Deer, raccoon, bobcat, armadillos, coyotes, and a myriad of other critters call this place home. And more and more "settlers". The early German and Scottish settlers who fought for the state's independence in 1839 have given way to artists, photographers, authors, business people liberated by computers, and retirees who have stumbled upon one of the best-kept secrets of the West. They find inspiration and friendliness here, and quickly feel at home with the region's scenic beauty and peaceful, easy-going nature.

Historically, the Hill Country never stops giving its legacy of independence and originality. The territory was a staging area for the cattle drives of the 1800's. Bandera, the heart of the Hill Country, was the beginning of the famous Western Trail—1876 to 1894—which cowboys used to take cattle to the rail heads for shipping to Kansas City and to new grazing lands in Montana. When the grass wore out, the trail was moved westward to the Chisholm Trail, through Abilene, 1867 to 1882.

Around Bandera County and southward, large ranches sent their cattle and cowboys up these trails. In 1929, when the price of cattle fell sharply, several

ranches offered themselves as a place for guests to stay for an authentic working ranch experience. It was an effort to ward off bankruptcy.

At first laughed at, this effort met with great success, and was the beginning of the Southwestern "dude" ranch, or guest ranch, and it happened in Bandera—"the cowboy capital of the world." Now, the word "Texas" comes from the Indian word "*tejas*", meaning "friendly", and the Lone Star State's motto is friendship. People love the friendliness of Texas, which is why tourism is the third-largest industry in the state. And most of those visitors want to visit the Hill Country

## The Perfect Hill Country Visit

The recipe for a perfect Texas visit starts with *Austin*, the delightful capitol city, and an overnight stay in one of its great B & Bs such as the historic Bremond House, a majestic turn-of-the-century home elevated on a hill a few blocks from the State Capitol. With a stroll through the Capitol Building, you can get a good background on the dramatic history of Texas and its fight for independence. Spend an hour in the Zilker Park Botanical Gardens, or at Lady Bird Johnson's National Wildflower Center, or in the fascinating Lyndon B. Johnson Library and Museum at the University of Texas.

Drive on to Wimberley, only 25 miles southwest, a little gem of a town set on Cypress Creek. Swim in the Blue Hole and if time permits, stay over at Dancing Water Inn, one of the most unusual inns in the West. Its two artist/owners have transformed a stone house into a living primitive folk art environment. The whole place is their canvas. Even the furniture is hand-crafted. And the inn is set at Jacob's Well, a 240' deep crystal spring. You'll love Wimberley, with its many delightful shops and galleries in the Village Square.

From there, take scenic route 3424 to 306 and Canyon Lake, then 473 to a series of wonderful back road small towns: Kendalia, Sisterdale and Comfort, a "haven in the hills." Historic Comfort, so appropriately named, has comfortable unique lodging, restaurants, galleries, turn-of-the-century antique shops, and scenic drives. From Comfort, drive up 87 to Fredericksburg, where you'll want to stop and explore a little.

In 1846, a handful of industrious German immigrants made friends with the neighboring Comanches—an eminently good idea—and founded Fredericksburg. Now a quaint town with a walking Main Street, unusual European-flavored shops, and over 100 vintage accommodations, Fredericksburg is a favorite destination of folks traveling through the Hill Country. Two favorite places to explore are Gish's Old West Museum, and Texas Jack's Wild West Outfits for authentic 1800's Western garb.

Just a little further down the road is Kerrville, with a personal favorite: the Cowboy Artists of America Museum. This excellent museum, with its scenic hilltop setting and domed ceilings, provides the perfect showcase for portrayals of cowboy and frontier life by living Western artists. For overnight, how about staying in The Hays House, a Spanish-style home named after famous Texas Ranger Jack Coffee Hays, the man who captured Santa Ana.

A beautiful courtyard secludes the house, which as an eclectic decor of antiques and sayings around the house on the wall such as, "Share your wisdom, not your prejudice." Thirty-two miles from Kerrville is the legendary YO Ranch. Dating to the 1800's, it sprawls across 40,000 acres, with herds of Longhorns and exotics such as zebras, giraffes and antelopes. Two-hour photo safaris take you out across the ranch to view them up close and personal.

And now for the big treat: driving deep into the hills on Tx. 16, one of the most scenic roads anywhere, straight for Bandera. You'll pass through the little town of Medina, and cross the gorgeous Medina River numerous times. Feel free to stop and stick your tired old dogs in that cold clear water that bubbles forth from the Balcones Fault. The cypress-shaded rivers of the Hill Country are one of its great attractions, so don't leave without a little swim or tubing the Medina, Guadalupe, San Marcos or Blanco Rivers. You'll get to see the land—and many beautiful ranches—from the river, as did the first settlers.

Bandera is just a little wink of a western town set on the Medina River. But it's got a really big spirit that keeps drawing people there. Its cowboy heritage is evident everywhere, from the posters on the door of the boot store announcing the ranch rodeo next Wednesday and the Cowboy Chapel Sunday to the Blacksmith's Forge on Main Street, Bandera just feels down-home.

You might see someone riding their horse down Main Street, heading for the horse trails that run along the river right in the middle of town.

Just outside of Bandera is the Hill Country Natural Area, a 5500 acre wilderness park run by the State. 75,000 trail riders can't be wrong—that's how many trailer over to this park every year to ride its wonderful hilly trails. Seems like at every turn, an armadillo peers myopically up at you in this pristine primitive camping area. There are various equestrian campsites, and a farm house called "The Lodge" (sleeps 12) for rent in the park. Adjacent to or nearby are the classic guest ranches Bandera County is so well known for: the Running R, the Mayan and the Dixie Dude are the leading three. For your archetypal dude ranch stay, you can't go wrong with ranches like the Mayan, run by three generations of the Hicks family.

For something just a little different though, there's the Hill Country Equestrian Lodge, "a haven for horse and rider." The dream of Dianne Tobin and her partner Peter Lovett, this is a classy hands-on horse facility that offers a new perspective to the traditional guest ranch. Guests can bring their own horses, or ride one of Diane's well-trained Quarter Horses. Emphasis here is on privacy and individual needs. Her "Whole Horsemanship" program is custom-designed to the guest, and she holds clinics for as few as two people." The idea is to develop the relationship between horse and rider in a positive way through understanding of the horse's psychology, physiology and biomechanics," says Diane, "aiming for improved rider skills and improved performance." She is one of the new "cross-over" breed of horse people—using both English and Western techniques to get a good rider and good horse.

The Lodge is nestled on 275 acres adjoining the Hill Country State Natural Area, so guests get the privilege of riding out the back gate and heading into the park. Diane, a native of Bandera who had a big dream, has an all new equestrian area with stalls and paddocks for overnight boarding of private horses. Guests can work horses in her round pen or the arena, and of course, the best part is the trail rides in the park. Diane is of the school of "let 'em ride!" Meaning you won't be head-to-tail walking as you would be at your usual dude ranches (which Diane is quick to add, has its place and safety for beginner riders and children).

Diane's background includes 30 years' experience training horses, from starting colts under saddle to working through problems with mature mounts. She competed successfully and won high-point awards in Showmanship in Western Pleasure, Western Horsemanship, Trail, Reining, English Pleasure and English Equitation. She also spent eight years as a successful Certified Personal Fitness Trainer and has an extensive knowledge of human biomechanics, kinesiology and mind/body awareness. Coupled with her horsemanship experience, this gives her a unique background from

which to draw a broad perspective on the horse-rider relationship, and a special ability to communicate her concepts to students.

Diane conducts a special five-day clinic that goes into details such as the balanced mount, intuition, stabilization and relaxation for proper seat, how to warm up your body and your horse properly, center of gravity and how a balanced mount moves, flexion and collection, lifting the back, proper cueing of the horse, the calm down cue, and so on. It is a full week, full of some of the most up to date techniques and information in horsemanship—and geared to be fun, too.

The lodge's limestone cabins, built in Early Texas architectural style, each have their own spacious porch from which to enjoy the sunrises, sunsets, birding and star-gazing. The cabins feature hardwood floors, fireplace, and a kitchen stocked with a basket of fruit, breakfast foods, coffee, tea and snacks. The adjoining park is not just for riding too—it has 40 miles of trails for hiking, biking and birding.

"I like guests to connect with nature here," Diane says. "We want them to learn, enjoy and leave rejuvenated and ready to enjoy life. No matter what happens, I wouldn't trade this opportunity for anything. I've never worked harder, but waking up in this heaven is my daily reward."

The Hill Country is a kind of heaven and daily reward to those who explore it. Outside of Bandera, there is so much more: Hunt, Ingram, Boerne, Lukenbach, and the appropriately named Utopia. Utopia, Texas —that's the Hill Country.

## History

The history of Texas is big, colorful and interesting. Steep yourself in its fascinating stories by reading the great Texas authors John Graves, J. Frank Dobie, Ben Capps, Walter P. Webb, Larry McMurtry and Katherine Anne Porter. The tradition of independence, strength and loyalty lie strong in the Texas character. You can still find *real* cowboys working ranches in the Hill Country. You can still go to small town *real* rodeos that show the skills still used today and *real* cafes on little courthouse squares where the waitresses still call you "Sugar" and "Honey" and don't mean anything but good by it. You can still visit *real* little antique and "junque" shops—'cause no town in the Hill Country is too small to have them—and find treasures from early American to primitive folk Texan.

## Oh, Mama—The Food!

Much of Texas history is reflected in its food—and oh, what a delectable variety of food there is. Quaint restaurants, outdoor restaurants, ethnic restaurants—all serve up blends of irresistible Texas cuisine. From the Fredericksburg Bakery with its delicious German pastries to Czech kolaches stuffed with fresh peaches from Stonewall, to big, butter-soft steaks like you get at Sullivan's in Austin, to the best Tex-Mex food in the world like you'll find at every family-run Tex-Mex restaurant in Texas, you will love Texas food.

## Wineries

To the surprise of many, climate in the Hill Country is ideal for the cultivation of wine grapes, and it is a flourishing industry in the area. The rebirth of the Texas wine industry has brought a new wave of tourism—there are ten wineries in the region where you can receive a stimulating education about the marriage of nature and chemistry—and a first-hand, on-premise presentation of the process and variety of wine-making as well as free tours and wine tastings. Nestled in beautiful pastures framed by the rolling hills and live oaks, Hill Country vineyards are the product of hard work and Texas ingenuity—the state is proud of its touch of class, fine wines.

## Lodging, Ranches, and B & Bs

When it comes time to relax, the Hill Country simply offers the best array of accommodations anywhere. There are fine hotels on the river such as the Four Seasons in Austin, and specialized lodging with a distinctive Texas flare. Bed-and-breakfast inns are in almost every town, with many located in historic homes. They usually feature personalized care by the owner with gourmet breakfasts in romantic settings. A good resource for this is the Texas Monthly *Texas Bed and Breakfast* book, by the way. A taste of the old west lives on in the popular guest ranches such as the YO or the Lazy Hills Guest Ranch in Kerrville—a family experience well-preserved in the Hill Country.

Water lovers find the Hill Country to be heaven because the lakes and rivers are plentiful, clean and uncluttered. Lake and riverside lodges abound, such as River Bend B & B, Boerne Lake Lodge or Guadalupe River Ranch Resort in Boerne, River Inn in Hunt, Lake Austin Spa and Resort in Austin, Texas Stagecoach Inn in Vanderpool or the XXXX in Utopia. The variety is endless, and the Texas hospitality is famous—and unforgettable.

## Scenic Drives

Bring lots of film to the Hill Country, you're going to need it! The little "blue line" county roads offer a moveable visual feast: fields of bluebonnets in the spring adorning the roadway crossings, oak studded fields with grazing Longhorns and fine horses, a white tail deer flashes through the brush, a mountain view of hills cast in violet and crimson, the power and grace of a singularly beautiful countryside. And it changes every season. The fall colors of the maples at Lost Maples State Park in the Sabinal Canyon in Vanderpool, always astonish people. "How did *those* get here!" they exclaim.

Don't ask, sugar—in Texas, there is *everything*. Just enjoy.

## Recreation

Get ready to *move* —there is just too much to do in the Hill Country. Whether driving a five-iron off an elevated tee or a mountain bike through a winding river canyon, people are inspired to get active and explore the Hill Country. There's hiking over a solid granite mountain like Enchanted Rock, bird watching some of the 500 plus species in Texas amongst the mesquite and cedar breaks on a clear water stream, horse back riding the back trails, and swimming, canoeing and tubing the great rivers. Just get outside in the Hill Country—you'll discover why Texans love it.

## A Sense of Humor

Don't forget to pack this essential Texas ingredient in your suitcase. People love to laugh here, and they love a good story. Ask anyone about theirs and you'll make a new friend at no extra charge. Here are a few tips:

- Learn how to talk the talk and walk the walk—slowly—the city name is pronounced "Aws-tun". It

doesn't matter how people pronounce it in other places.

- "Sir" and "Ma'am" are used by the person speaking to you if there's a remote possibility that you are at least 30 minutes older than they are.
- Understand that there are still 90-year old ranchers in the Hill Country who drive 5 m.p.h. in their Cadillacs, unaware that the ends of their vehicles are in different ZIP codes. Just be patient, honey, and slow down—it's Texas
- In the Hill Country, they drink Big Red and Dr. Pepper. It's rumored that there are other soft drinks sold here, but no one will admit to knowing anyone who actually drinks them. So don't ask for any other soft drink.
- Listen up...Texas is Colorful Speech Central. When you're standing on the Bandera board walk, and you hear the old geezer next to you telling the old crony next to him, "There are a lot of nooses in his family tree," or "She sure is in a horn-tossing mood," or "Might as well. Can't dance, never could sing, and it's too wet to wrangle," you'll know you're in the heart of Texas. Where everyone is in tall cotton, life is as fine as dollar cotton and sweeter n' stolen honey, people are independent as a hog on ice, happy as a boarding-house pup, handy as a latch on the outhouse door, and their attitude is "Long as I got a biscuit, you got half."

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FOR MORE INFORMATION

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## About the Author

Lin Sutherland teaches horsemanship and riding at Onion Creek Ranch in Austin, Texas. She rides and writes where the west wind takes her.