

San Antonio

This vibrant city remains true to its Texan heritage and boasts a bustling and scenic downtown core offering modern architecture and first-rate hotels, spas and event venues. *written by* **HAILEY EISEN**

When you think of Texas, the first things that come to mind are cowboys, ranches and wide-open spaces. But while San Antonio — the United States' seventh-largest city — remains true to its Texan heritage, it also boasts a bustling and scenic downtown core offering modern architecture and first-rate hotels, spas and event venues.

San Antonio enjoys an estimated 300 days of sunshine annually. But that's where similarities with Caribbean-style destinations end. "Not all clients want a beach resort," explains Brooke Soucier, founder of Hidden Champions, an Oakville, Ont.-based corporate meeting and incentive travel company. "San Antonio is a festive and friendly destination with endless activities that appeal to a variety of groups."

Connecting Flight

Located in south central Texas about 200 miles southwest of Houston and 150 miles north of the Mexican border, San Antonio often requires a connecting flight from Canada. For Soucier, who took a corporate finance incentive travel group of 325 from Toronto to the Alamo City in January, 2009, chartering a plane proved more economical and allowed for a more relaxed travel itinerary. "Because the trip is only three days long, we couldn't risk delayed flights or missed connections," she says.

Once you arrive, however, the city, its downtown core and scenic River Walk are easy to navigate.

"We have special park police that monitor the downtown and River Walk areas, to make our guests feel more comfortable," says Steve Clanton, vice-president of sales for the San Antonio Convention and Visitors Bureau.

Designed by Robert H.H. Hugman in the 1920s as a solution to the often-flooded San Antonio River, the three-mile River Walk, featuring flagstone paths, arching stone footbridges and lush greenery, links downtown hotels, convention facilities and cultural and historic sites.



River Walk

A \$279-million project is underway to lengthen the walk to 13 miles, connecting the downtown core to the colonial missions to the south and museums to the north. The first stage of the expansion, the two-mile extension to the north, is expected to be complete by spring, 2009, says Clanton.

Convention Centre

The city's major event venue, the 1.3-million-sq.-ft. Henry B. Gonzalez Convention Center incorporates San Antonio's history and culture into its design. Elaborate, bright-coloured carpets throughout the facility's 63 meeting rooms and three elegant ballrooms depict vivid designs and icons representing images of Texas.

Groups looking for diversion won't be disappointed. One must-see tour is the historic San Antonio missions. Though most visitors are anxious to see The Alamo — the 33-ft. Spanish Colonial church, downtown, that attracts more than 2.5-million tourists a year — the historic missions are even more awe-inspiring.

The San Antonio Missions National Historical Park consists of four missions that were part of the colonization system stretching across the Spanish Southwest of the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries. Built by the Indians under the direction of the Franciscans, the immense and architecturally impressive missions functioned as religious centres and training grounds used to "convert" Indians into Spanish, Christian citizens.

An ideal way to orient groups with the city, Rio San Antonio Cruises offers charter tours and dinner and



The Alamo

cocktail cruises along the river. Each open-air boat seats approximately 40 for a tour and 20 for dinner.


Golf Destination

Back on land, San Antonio continues to gain recognition as a world-class golf destination. With three sprawling luxury resorts just a short drive from downtown and another in the process of being built, groups that prefer a more laid-back, country feel have plenty of choice.

As for accommodations, the 508-room Westin La Cantera Resort (westinlacantera.com) was built on the site of an abandoned limestone rock quarry in the heart of the Hill Country. This resort offers more than 39,000 sq. ft. of function space, including an outdoor terrace, Emily's Rose Court, and 36 holes of golf and the Golf Academy at La Cantera, providing programmes and private lessons for players of all levels.

With a four-acre water park, man-made beach and lazy river, the Hyatt Regency Hill Country Resort and Spa (hillcountry.hyatt.com) gives meeting participants the opportunity to really unwind — and the flexibility to turn a corporate trip into a family vacation.

“Many groups take advantage of our award-winning 27-hole championship golf course set in the Texas Hill Country,” says Kyle Stevens, director of sales and marketing.

Rustic yet elegant Windflower Spa, set amid 300 acres of meadows, offers tranquil indoor and outdoor treatment facilities. 

— Hailey Eisen is a Toronto-based freelance writer.

> fast facts

Recommended Websites:

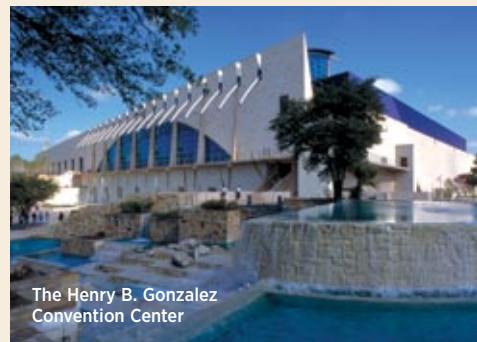
visitsanantonio.com
thesanantonioriverwalk.com
thealamo.org

Getting There: San Antonio International Airport is 8 Miles or 15 Minutes from downtown.

Average Hotel Room Rate: \$92.48

Convention Facilities:

The Henry B. Gonzalez Convention Center sanantonio.gov/convfac
 San Antonio's Alamodome sanantonio.gov/dome



The Henry B. Gonzalez Convention Center

> pillow talk

The latest downtown hotel is the **Grand Hyatt San Antonio**, a 1.5-million-sq.-ft. property adjoining the **Henry B. Gonzalez Convention Center**. With 1,003 rooms, the hotel, opened in February, 2008, features more than 115,000 sq. ft. of indoor/outdoor meeting space, including a 31,000-sq.-ft. ballroom. grandsanantonio.hyatt.com

The soon-to-be-newest member of the San Antonio resort family is the **JW Marriott San Antonio Hill Country Resort & Spa**, offering 140,000 sq. ft. of meeting space. “This facility will open as a 1,002-room luxury resort with extensive meeting space, two PGA golf courses with views of the Cibolo Canyon countryside and a 26,000-sq.-ft. spa,” says Steve Clanton, vice-president of sales for the San Antonio Convention and Visitors Bureau. It's scheduled to open in March, 2010. jwsanantonio.com

> culture vulture

The 900-seat **Aztec Theatre** will re-open in mid-May, 2009, after a major overhaul, with a Texas-style country music show. Available for private group rentals, the mezzanine hosts 300 for a seated dinner or 800 for reception. aztecontheriver.com

Having just completed a \$50.8-million expansion, and celebrating the opening of the 45,000-sq.-ft. Jane and Arthur Stieren Center for Exhibitions, the **McNay Art Museum** houses the McNay galleries, which



feature works from 19th and 20th century greats, including Gauguin, van Gogh, Picasso, Pollock and Renoir. The picturesque Blackburn Patio accommodates receptions, while indoor receptions can host 300 for banquets or 500, for receptions. mcnayart.org