

San Antonio: Some Like It Hot!

The second largest city in a state where “everything is bigger,” and the seventh largest city in the U.S., San Antonio feels more like a historic small town that doesn’t quite know it’s grown up. People, for the most part, are friendly, the pace is laid back, and the dress code is casual. Even though the gay rights movement didn’t make the same splash in San Antonio as it did in New York, San Francisco, Chicago, or even Columbus, GLBT folks have been a central part of San Antonio’s cultural blend for decades. What San Antonio lacks in terms of a distinctly queer ambiance it makes up for with its cultural stew. It’s almost like the cultures of Mexico, Germany, the Wild West, African-Americans, the Deep South, and the military collided to create a great big party where folks sometimes get along, sometimes fight and everybody dances.

By now, you’re probably saying, “Wait a minute! Texas is a scary state! Isn’t ‘fag bashing’ still seen as a popular sport? Isn’t that where G. W. came from?” Yeah, but... Let me explain. In some ways, Texas is still a bit scary, (OK, a lot scary), especially in small towns and rural areas if you happen to be queer. Truth be told, Texas isn’t really known for its avid enforcement of its hate crimes statute. But, it does have a hate crime statute that covers gay and lesbian people. And yeah, G.W. was the Governor of Texas for a spell. But then again, so was Ann Richards and she sported a fabulous hairdo, slayed anyone dumb enough to make racist or sexist comments in her presence with her razor sharp wit, and could almost make a grown man pee from laughing so hard at her jokes. The real truth is that Texas is an odd mix of progressive and conservative politics, and no place in Texas captures that blend more than San Antonio.

Maybe it’s this odd clash of conservative and liberal politics, or maybe it’s the fact that San Antonio is and has historically been a military town, (there are currently 3 bases in town, down from 5) but one of the first things GLBT visitors will notice is the that San Antonio has pretty much adopted a “Don’t ask, don’t tell” stance. Outside the clubs, most queer folk don’t flaunt it, and most straight folk are at least tolerant. Still, the night life is thriving. It may not be like the Castro in San Francisco or Chelsea in New York City, but San Antonio does have a “gay strip.” You can bar hop up and down N. Main near San Antonio College, popping into the Silver Dollar Saloon, The Saint, to Pegasus, Heat, and Essence. Heat, the Saint, and Pegasus are the best options if you’ve got a craving to get your groove on. Heat caters to the trendy GQ’esque crowd. The Saint has pegged itself as more of a show bar and is the home of the “Texas US of A” pageants. Pegasus is best known for its leather bar, its 2-stepping bar and the twinks and bears that go there. Off the strip, the Bonham Exchange is the best known and oldest gay dance club in San Antonio. It’s been packed every time I’ve been there. While lesbians do go to The Saint, Heat and the Bonham Exchange, if you really want to go to where the girls are, check out the Industry or the Bermuda Triangle.

Looking for a truly gay restaurant? Pop over to Luther’s. It’s the only “gay” restaurant in town and is known for its burgers and its Tex-Mex menu. It has a full bar, flat screen TV’s, and Wi-Fi connection. The other selling point is that it’s on “the gay strip” and stays open after the bars close.

If gay theatre is what you’re after, check out the Jump-Start Performance Company. While they are not an exclusively gay theatre company, they have been producing queer plays for the last 20 years. In September, they produced *Rancho Pancho*, a play about the the short-lived but intense relationship between Tennessee Williams and Pancho Rodriguez. At the end of November, they are putting on *The*

2nd Annual Glamarama: The Legends of Drag, an extravaganza benefit honoring classic drag. In the fall of 09, they are putting on the Sterling Houston Festival, a tribute to Sterling Houston, one of San Antonio's queer icons who died several years ago. In all, they will put on six plays in San Antonio, Dallas, Austin, and San Marcos.

When it comes to accommodations, keep in mind that San Antonio is a tourist town and has lots of soldiers, so most of the decent hotels look at the money and ignore the details. There are also a number of gay friendly bed and breakfasts. Of these, The Painted Lady Inn, Ayres Inn, Beauregard House B&B, Alamo City's Little Flower Inn, and Fiesta B&B are gay owned and operated. I found the guys at The Painted Lady Inn to be especially friendly. If you're looking for something with a bit more of a Latin flair, check out Fiesta B&B. Their colors are simply fabulous.

Beyond the bars, San Antonio's culture and history will draw you in. First and foremost, San Antonio is a party town. There are festivals almost every weekend. Some of the most notable are: the International Accordion Festival, Jazz'SAlive, Fiesta, A Night in Old San Antonio, The Tejano Conjunto Festival, and the Texas Folklife Festival. Beyond the festival's, there's a thriving live music scene. You can catch anything from swing at Sam's Burger Joint, to Americana at Casbeers or Floore's Country Store, to jazz in the vein of Louis Armstrong with the Jim Cullum Band at The Landing, or modern jazz at Luna, to almost any other style of music that floats your boat. In addition, while the performing arts seem to be going under in the rest of the country, San Antonio's performance arts scene is thriving. Visitors to the city can whet their classical appetite by attending a performance of the San Antonio Symphony, the San Antonio Opera or with one of several ballet companies.

San Antonio is also a great town for great visual art. Folks on the market to buy can head down to Southtown on the first Friday of every month for the First Friday Art Walk and listen to live music, eat great food, and find art to adorn their homes and gardens. La Villita, on the River Walk also has a number of galleries and folk art shops, including The Village Weaver which sells wearable art, blankets, pottery and other Latin American craft art. The San Angel Folk Art is another option for the intrepid art buyer interested in folk art from Latin America. Folks who just want to look can stroll through the McNay Art Museum and/or wander through the halls of the San Antonio Museum of Art.

San Antonio is not known for its hiking trails, but nature lovers can check out Sea World (I know, this is stretching it but it is Texas), the San Antonio Zoo, the San Antonio Botanical Garden and/or the Japanese Tea Garden.

One of the more surprising things, to me, about San Antonio, is that it's a great yoga town. There are two studios in particular that are worth mention: San Antonio Yoga and Hot Body Yoga. San Antonio Yoga is actually in a rural setting northwest of town. With its wood floors, and wall to wall windows overlooking the hill country, it's simply the most beautiful yoga studio I've ever been to. Hot Body Yoga is more notable for the intense journey it provides into the soul. FYI, it's called it Hot Body Yoga for a reason. Students do vinyasa (flowing movement coordinated with breath) with long holds in a room that's heated to a steamy 98 degrees. Let me tell you, when it's 98 degrees in the studio and your body is dripping in sweat, you focus on that downward facing dog, warrior, crow, or whatever else the instructor invites you to do.

Folks who'd rather watch other people sweat than sweat themselves can whoop it up at a WNBA Silver Stars or an NBA Spurs basketball game, depending on the season.

San Antonio is also noted for its role in Texas history. It still houses five Spanish missions. The Alamo – the shrine to the battle for Texas' independence - is the most famous. Truth be told, this is one of my all time favorite museums. As a child, I drug my parents there every time we went to San Antonio and spent hours reading every name and historical marker. I especially had a thing for Davy Crockett and even bought fake coon skin hat with my allowance money because I was so enchanted with his legend. Folks with less fascination with Texas history can probably zip through the whole Alamo in half an hour to an hour and leave without even trying on a coonskin hat. The other four missions, Concepcion, San Jose, San Juan and Espada, are part of the San Antonio Missions National Historical Park. All of them have museums and do a nice job of telling stories both of the Native Americans who used to inhabit the area and of the Spanish who took over.

The King Williams Historical District, located just south of down town on the east bank of the San Antonio river is another must see area of historical interest. You can stroll through the 25 block neighborhood and look at mansions built in the mid to late 1800's. Two of the houses, the Guenther House and Steves Homestead, are opened for tour. Originally settled by wealthy German immigrants who made their fortunes by investing and in retail, the neighborhood is now famous for its literary figures. Acclaimed poet Naomi Shihab Nye lives in a house on S. Main Street. Her poetry has been featured in several of Bill Moyers' shows on poets and poetry. San Antonio's most famous literary figure, Sandra Cisneros, lives in a "periwinkle purple" house on E. Guenther Street. Cisneros' battle with the King Williams Historical District made the national news and illustrates San Antonio's cultural collision. Some of her neighbors took issue with her color choice saying that it was inappropriate for the historic district. She won the battle by successfully arguing that for her culture (streaming all the way back to the Aztecs), purple was a historical color.

The River Walk is another "must see" attraction in San Antonio. Also known as Paseo del Rio, the River Walk is a network of walkways on the banks of the San Antonio River, lined by restaurants, shops and bars. If you've got time to kill, I recommend taking a river boat cruise. The guides usually do a good job of weaving fact and fiction into an interesting spiel. Even if you don't like to shop, ya gotta check out some of the gift shops. How can you leave without a cuddly stuffed armadillo, a tequila flavored lollypop with a worm in the middle, or a tacky pink straw cowboy hat? Finally, you can't leave without eating at one of the many restaurants that line the River Walk. If the weather permits, hold out for an outdoor table. There's something magical about eating on the river. There are a lot of great restaurants to choose from, but if you're looking for something romantic, the Las Canarias is the best choice.

For more information about San Antonio, check out the following websites:

General GLBT community and visitor information:

The Esperanza Peace and Justice Center - <http://www.esperanzacenter.org/>

Q San Antonio - <http://qsanantonio.com/>

Jump Start Performance Company - <http://www.jump-start.org/>

Bed and Breakfasts:

The Painted Lady Inn - <http://www.thepaintedladyinn.com/>
Fiesta B&B - <http://www.fiestabandb.com/>
Ayres Inn - <http://www.1908ayresinn.com/>
Beauregard House B&B - <http://www.beauregardhouse.com/>
Alamo City's Little Flower Inn - <http://www.littleflowerinn.com/>

General offbeat Sites:

San Angel Folk Art - www.sanangelfolkart.com

Las Canarias - <http://www.omnihotels.com/FindAHotel/SanAntonioLaMansionDelRio/Dining.aspx>

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