

The Washington Post

# Travel

SUNDAY, MARCH 10, 2013

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**SMART MOUTH**

**To market, to market**

A Mexican mountain town offers a plethora of colors, textures and flavors. **F5**



**The Navigator** Think travelers are worried about the sequester? Bring it on! **F2**

**Travel News** The TSA clears some once-banned items for reboarding. **F2**

**What's the Deal?** We scope out the week's best travel bargains for you. **F2**

**CHAT** We answer reader questions Monday at 2 p.m. at [live.washingtonpost.com](http://live.washingtonpost.com).

**ESCAPES**

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On this tour, you can follow the progress of the grape as it turns into the drink of the gods. **F6**



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# Step right up

BY MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN  
Special to The Washington Post

A round of boot-scootin' boogie nights in the dance halls of Texas



On my ninth day in Texas, I learned my most important dancing lesson. It was a warm afternoon in January, and I had stopped at Riley's Tavern — a nearly empty music venue on a desolate road 40 miles south of Austin — to watch a Redskins game. I sat at the bar across from a TV and eventually began talking to an off-duty cop. When he found out that I was driving across the state by myself, unarmed, he bequeathed me his pocket knife.

Toward the end of the game, he politely took my hand. He led me past the bikers in chaps and toward the back of the building, to a small, deserted dance floor beside a quiet stage. Before I knew it, he was facing me and placing his right hand on my shoulder. And then, we were two-stepping.

The movements weren't unfamiliar. After all, in the preceding days I'd found myself on countless dance floors, dancing with strangers to live music, taking lessons and remembering to let my

partner lead. I just didn't expect — on my day off from visiting dance halls — to find my skills tested in a smoky saloon during a playoff game. We shuffled around the gritty floor for a couple of jukebox songs before we returned to the bar for the fourth quarter.

After the game, I said goodbye and headed to my hotel, uncertain exactly how I would protect myself with the knife, but with a deeper understanding of how people in this state roll. I realized that when it comes to the act of facing a partner and stepping in unison — which Texans do so well — the venue, the music and the atmosphere are all secondary.

In this state, people just dance.

TEXAS CONTINUED ON F4

**The swing of things: Gruene Hall, which was built in 1878 in New Braunfels, Tex., is the oldest continuously operating dance hall in the state.**

## Carlsbad? Killer, dude!

Getting soaked — and stoked — riding the SoCal waves

BY BOB CARDEN  
Special to The Washington Post

The monster wave approached. It had to be 20 or 30 feet. Undaunted, I paddled forward. Well, all right, maybe it's more like 2 or 3 feet. But does size really matter?

I jumped onto the board, turned into the crest and caught it. And for three mind-numbing seconds, I stood up — love handles dancing in the air.

Dude, I'm surfin'.

There are worse places to be in the summer than Carlsbad, Calif. About 35 miles north of San Diego, the beach town has bright sun, good bars and restaurants and oh-so-tasty waves. It doesn't

**Surf city: Carlsbad, Calif., has seven miles of pristine coastline, great weather — and monster waves.**

get much more SoCal than this. The weather is about 75 degrees, the water temperature about 70. If you want to learn to surf, this is the place.

This was an end-of-summer vacation with my wife and two teenagers. A four-day surf camp promised good weather, physical activity and maybe even a remedy for a midlife crisis. Surfing lessons are cheaper than a Mercedes convertible and safer than friending your recently divorced high school flame on Facebook. And it rocks. Just ask Rusty, Keenan or Evan.

They were our surfing instructors. We met them on the beach across from the

CARLSBAD CONTINUED ON F3



PHILLIP COLLA/OCEANLIGHT.COM





BEN NOEY JR./FORT WORTH STAR-TELEGRAM



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THE DALLAS MORNING NEWS

**Texas-size fun: From left, tourists can take a picture on a fake bull at Billy Bob's Texas in Fort Worth, which calls itself the world's largest honky-tonk; bands perform daily at Gruene Hall in New Braunfels; Sons of Hermann Hall is an old fraternal organization in Dallas known for its live music and swing dances.**

# Texas dance halls have all the right moves

TEXAS FROM F1

## Dancing breaks

Anyone who has driven across Texas knows that simply setting your sights on the next state's faraway border is a form of torture that could last for days. So when I was offered a writing assignment that involved traveling to Big Bend National Park in West Texas, I decided to break up the long drive with some dancing. I knew that the dance halls in Texas were like no others, and I love hearing the sweet croons of Western music enough to take on a few detours. I packed my boots in Washington just before New Year's and headed west.

According to Stephen Dean, co-founder of an organization called Texas Dance Hall Preservation, most of the state's historic dance halls are in the central and coastal regions. This is where German, Czech and Polish immigrants settled in the mid- to late 1800s. They would preserve their culture by gathering to celebrate the harvest or a holiday, sharing food and dancing the polka. The polka evolved into one type of two-step (quick-quick-slow pattern), but the more popular version — what's known as Texas two-step (quick-quick-slow-slow) — evolved from the fox trot and looks like dancers taking small walking steps together.

The charm of these dance halls is that they're very much the same today as they were back when: You go for no-frills fellowship, cheap beer, good music and dancing. "Some are nothing more than a barn with a dance floor," said Dean, who has been to more than 750 Texas dance halls, most of which are rarely used. "There's something special about it. You're dancing, the outside is coming in through the windows, and you're in a historic wood building."

Of course, there are many other types of places to two-step in Texas. As Dean explained it: "A dance hall is where you go and dance with your wife. The honky-tonk is where you go and dance with someone else's wife."

## Boots on the floor

My first stop was in Houston, at Goode's Armadillo Palace — decidedly more honky-tonk than dance hall (the giant mirrored armadillo outside should have been the first clue). But that's a technicality I chose to ignore; when the dance floor beckoned, I danced. It was a good opportunity to brush up on my two-step the night before I headed to Austin, where I bought another pair of cowboy boots at Allens Boots and got to work.

My crash course in Texas music included such subgenre terms as redneck rock and red dirt, and I quickly learned that Bob Willis was the "king of Western swing," that everybody loves Asleep at the Wheel and that Willie Nelson is nothing short of divine.

I started hearing certain artists' names over and over — Dale Watson, Bobby Flores, Amber Digby, Jesse Dayton. No matter where these folks were playing, people would follow them. Mike Stinson, an artist fairly new on the Texas circuit, told me that people who love to dance often split their time between two venues in one night to catch certain bands. "A common topic of conversation," he said, "is, 'Where are we going to see live music and dance tonight?'"

On a Sunday afternoon, I caught Dale Watson at Ginny's Little Longhorn Saloon, on the north side of Austin, which was as crowded as a frat party, but people still made room to dance. I showed up at the Continental Club on funky South Congress Avenue on a Wednesday and danced the jitterbug, only to find out later that Sunday is the big country-and-western night, with live music by Heybale. I kept hearing about the White Horse, a relatively new venue on the east side, but on my last night in Austin, I had to choose the Broken Spoke on the south side of the city.

Part dance hall, part honky-tonk, the Broken Spoke is legendary. Country music lover James White decided to open the place after he got out of the Army in 1964, and he still shows up nightly. I paid for a two-step class, got a wheel stamp on the back of my hand and walked onto a dance floor surrounded by neon beer signs.

The owners' daughter Terri, wearing ripped jeans, a pixie haircut and a headset, sprinkled dance floor wax on the cement floor like it was fairy dust. She started her class with the guys lined up on one side, gals on the other. There were a lot of boots and cowboy hats, but there



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**Fancy footwork: Terri White, whose parents own the Broken Spoke, works with couples on the floor during her two-step dance lessons. The venue, top, is Austin's best-known dancing spot.**

were also sneakers and sequins. Terri explained that Western swing is just two-step with turns. "Quick quick, slow slow," she said. "There is a follower. There is a leader. I don't care who is who. But girls, if you're following, don't fight him."

We paired up to practice, and I partnered with a tall blond lead. Terri reminded us not to lift our toes. "That song 'Boot Scootin' Boogie' is about keeping your boots on the floor," she said. During the lesson, her dad stood in the back, wearing a white cowboy hat, a turquoise cowboy shirt with rhinestones and a matching handkerchief around his neck. After class, the dance floor was packed before the band even began.

## Hill Country halls

The next morning, I woke up with a wagon wheel smudged on my cheek. I stopped for the Redskins game at Riley's and spent the next day in New Braunfels, less than an hour south of Austin, home of historic Gruene (pronounced "green") Hall. Located on the banks of the Guadalupe River, Gruene is the oldest continuously operating dance hall in the state. It was built in 1878 as a community center for cotton farmers. Back then, people would go there to celebrate weddings, births, deaths, business deals or simply the end of a workday, and — aside from the tourists — it's not much different today.

In front, there's a cash bar where you can buy a Shiner Bock or a Coke. I scanned photos of the artists who have played here — George Strait, Lyle Lovett, Garth Brooks, Jerry Jeff Walker.

The back looks essentially like a barn

with a stage. Long tables and benches with years of graffiti etched into the wood line up like picnic tables. Bands perform daily, and whether the lyrics are about love, the moon or 18-wheelers, there's something sweet about watching the dancers: Some looked as if they'd been moving together for generations; others were young enough to still be wearing patent-leather Mary Janes.

En route to my next stop, driving over roller coasters of asphalt as far as I could see, I saw firsthand why this beautiful area of Central Texas is called Hill Country. I arrived in Luckenbach, about 90 minutes northwest of Gruene and outside the town of Fredericksburg, which still maintains much of the German culture brought over by its original settlers. Luckenbach opened as a trading post in 1849, and it still sits more or less in the middle of nowhere, with a general store, a dance hall and a tollbooth-size tavern. The 1977 Waylon Jennings and Willie Nelson song, "Luckenbach, Texas," made it famous.

I showed up on a weeknight for what they call a picker circle — a few guitarists sitting around, playing acoustically. Three musicians sat in the corner of the bar, where every square inch of wall was covered with patches, stickers, dead animals, signs and photos. I found myself standing around the wood-burning stove with about a dozen locals, sipping Lone Stars, listening to the tunes.

The dance hall was closed for the night, but the bartender grabbed his keys and switched on the lights for me to peek in. I added that to my growing list of places for my next visit. I was realizing

that many halls — like Anhalt Hall (between Austin and San Antonio), the beautifully restored Sengelmann Hall (between San Antonio and Houston) and Floore's Country Store (outside San Antonio) — have dances only on the weekends. So I hit the ones I could, making notes for a return trip one day.

## One more for the road

I spent the next couple of weeks in West Texas, and on my way home, I made a quick stop in Fort Worth to see what's known as the world's largest honky-tonk: Billy Bob's Texas. After the quiet of Big Bend, I was a little traumatized by the size and touristiness of the place, which includes real bull-riding, souvenir shops, several dance floors and even a saddle-shaped disco ball.

My last stop was Dallas. The cop I'd met in Austin was in town for business, and we'd arranged to meet for a Western swing class at Sons of Hermann Hall, an old fraternal organization known for its live music and swing dances. The instructor talked us through the steps and turns, and we rotated partners. The crowd was mostly young, but I also danced with an older man wearing a button-down shirt with a gun pattern. By the time the cop made his way back to me, we had both mastered the steps, and by the time the band played Frank Sinatra's "South of the Border," we were feeling confident. We were even getting ourselves back into step after a turn.

"Not bad," he said of my dance skills, as we left the hall. But he implied that I could use some more practice. I laughed. I'd never be a Texan, but I had a feeling

## DETAILS

### GETTING THERE

Southwest Airlines offers nonstop flights from Reagan National to Austin; United offers nonstop flights from Washington Dulles.

### WHERE TO STAY

**Hotel San Jose**  
1316 S. Congress Ave., Austin  
512-444-7322  
[www.sanjosehotel.com](http://www.sanjosehotel.com)  
Guests can check out a manual Remington typewriter or a Polaroid camera. Weekday rates start at \$100 for shared bath or \$195 for standard queen.

### Full Moon Inn Bed & Breakfast

3234 Luckenbach Rd., Fredericksburg  
800-997-1124  
[fullmooninn.com](http://fullmooninn.com)  
Just around the bend from Luckenbach. Full country breakfast included. Rooms and suites from \$150.

### WHERE TO EAT

**Torchy's Tacos**  
3005 S. Lamar Blvd., Austin  
512-614-1832  
[www.torchystacos.com](http://www.torchystacos.com)  
Next to the Broken Spoke. On the taco menu: The Democrat/shredded beef \$4; the Republican/grilled jalapeno sausage \$3.25; the Independent/fried portobello strips \$3.50.

### Huisache Grill

303 W. San Antonio St., New Braunfels  
830-620-9001  
[www.huisache.com](http://www.huisache.com)  
Three and a half miles from Gruene Hall. Grilled salmon burger \$9.95, blackened farm-raised catfish \$13.95, fried oysters \$9.50.

### Twisted Root Burger Co.

2615 Commerce St., Dallas  
214-741-7668  
[www.twistedrootburgerco.com](http://www.twistedrootburgerco.com)  
In the Deep Ellum neighborhood, near Sons of Hermann Hall. Burgers made from beef, buffalo, turkey, elk, emu, boar, alligator and black bean start at \$5.99.

### WHERE TO DANCE

**The Broken Spoke**  
3201 S. Lamar Blvd., Austin  
512-442-6189  
[www.brokenspokeaustintx.com](http://www.brokenspokeaustintx.com)  
Austin's best-known dance venue, with live music Tuesday-Saturday. Two-step classes Wednesday-Saturday, \$8 plus the night's cover charge.

### Gruene Hall

1281 Gruene Rd., New Braunfels  
830-606-1281  
[www.gruenehall.com](http://www.gruenehall.com)  
Live music daily. Shows are free Monday through Thursday evening and Saturday and Sunday afternoon. Two Ton Tuesdays (swing lessons with the band Two Tons of Steel) run June to mid-August.

### Luckenbach

412 Luckenbach Town Loop, Fredericksburg  
830-997-3224  
[www.luckenbachtexas.com](http://www.luckenbachtexas.com)  
Ten miles southeast of Fredericksburg. Live music daily and free Friday night dances every month starting in March.

### Sons of Hermann Hall

3414 Elm St., Dallas  
214-747-4422  
[www.sonsofhermann.com](http://www.sonsofhermann.com)  
Western Swing Sundays with the band Shoot Low Sheriff every third Sunday of the month; \$10 at the door with barbecue available for purchase, beginner swing lesson at 6:30. Lessons also every Wednesday at 8 p.m., \$5.

### Day-Long Dance Hall Tour

512-567-7570  
Texas Dance Hall Preservation co-founder Stephen Dean takes small groups to visit historic dance halls, leaving from Austin. Offered March 23 and monthly thereafter through the summer. \$60; barbecue lunch extra. For reservations, call or e-mail [sdean75@gmail.com](mailto:sdean75@gmail.com).

### INFORMATION

[texasdancehall.org](http://texasdancehall.org)

— M.D.G.K.

that the music and the two-stepping would always be with me. I told him that I'd be back, and I knew that I would be.

The next day, I packed up my boots and my pocket knife and headed east.  
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