

Austin: Haven for the healthy, paradise for the party crowd

- Story Highlights
- Austin, Texas, has clubs and bar districts to keep a night person hopping
- It also has outdoor activities to please a run-six-miles-before-breakfast person
- Barbecue, enchiladas and margaritas help visitors refuel

By Dave Thomas
Special to CNN

AUSTIN, Texas (CNN) -- At dusk, stand on the Congress Avenue bridge over Town Lake, the span linking hip downtown to funkier South Austin, and you'll see it.

No, not the 1.5 million Mexican free-tailed bats that emerge from crevasses below and fwip-fwip-fwip into the night (although they're pretty cool -- see them on the way to doing something else and it will be time well spent).

What you'll see is Austin's diversity. And I don't mean yuppies, hippies, hipsters, scenesters, tech geeks, cowboys, students, musicians, politicians or got-more-money-than-sense rich folks, either -- though Austin has 'em all and more.

Think Lance Armstrong. Think Willie Nelson. Day people. Night people. Cooling off after a run, perhaps. Or headed downtown. They come together here to witness the bats' spectacle.

Live music capital of the world? Well, [Austin](#) at least has the clubs, dance halls, bar districts and late-night restaurants to keep a night person hopping. But Austin also caters to the early-to-bed, early-to-rise, run-six-miles-before-breakfast person.

And, if you think you can, you can run all day and dance all night.

Daylight's Burning

A swath of wilderness: With no mountains, you wouldn't think Austin would be a destination for mountain bikers. Well, it's not Moab, Utah, but it's not bad. The highlight: The Barton Creek Greenbelt. This strip of green meanders from Zilker Park in the heart of Austin westward for 7.5 miles (with many side trails), ending at the Hill of Life -- a quarter-mile climb to test your thighs and lungs.

The Greenbelt is popular with hikers and wanderers, so it's best not to crank with abandon, but the wooded straightaways and wet (sometimes) creek crossings make for an enjoyable ride. Can't bring your bike? Rent one at Bicycle Sport Shop, 517 S. Lamar Blvd.

Ten miles downtown: The Town Lake Hike and Bike Trail runs 10.4 miles, mostly along the shores of the Colorado River on the southern border of downtown. There are walkers and easy-going cyclists, but this is also an excellent trail for running and getting a good look at Austin (as well as at other runners).

The western half of the trail is alive with people (and an occasional celebrity), surrounded by trees. The eastern half involves crossing over Interstate 35, navigating some neighborhoods and a small stretch along city streets, but offers more solitude and wide-open trail.

The soul of Austin: Barton Springs Pool (2101 Barton Springs Road) is three acres of old-school, spring-fed swimming. Open year-round, it's a jump-in-and-gasp 68 degrees no matter the weather. Nestled in a corner of Zilker Park, surrounded by pecan trees, the pool is often crowded (but seldom overwhelmed) on summer weekends and draws one of the most diverse crowds in Austin.

Refueling Stations

Enchiladas and margaritas: Matt's El Rancho (2613 S. Lamar Blvd.) is big, busy and well worth the wait. Since 1952 this hot spot has been Austin's self-proclaimed "King of Mexican Food." If they're not right about that, they're at least in the royal family. You can't get away without trying the Bob Armstrong dip -- think "super-queso."

Dueling barbecue joints: Whatever you're looking for in Texas barbecue, you only have to choose between Stubb's Bar-B-Q (801 Red River St.) and Sam's Bar-B-Que (2000 E. 12th Street). Stubb's was once owned by the late patron saint of barbecue, C.B. Stubblefield. Sam's was a favorite of the late blues legend Stevie Ray Vaughan. Stubb's is a restaurant and live music venue. Sam's is a joint with uneven floors and character. Stubb's anchors its own entertainment mini-district. Sam's is definitely outside the tourist zone. Either way, you get a true barbecue experience.

Nighttime is the Right Time

Bars, bars, bars: A river of alcohol runs along Austin's Sixth Street. The current is strongest in the entertainment district between Interstate 35 and Congress Avenue: A cluster of crowded nightspots ranging from the rarified air of the elite Driskill Hotel bar to the Chuggin' Monkey. Heading west, the river thins out and the scene grows up: There's Mother Egan's Irish Pub (715 W. Sixth), where the Dixie Chicks once ruled the Tuesday night trivia contest. And at the intersection with Lamar Boulevard, there's Whole Foods' flagship store -- where you can drink and shop at the same time.

Live Music Capital of the World? You can't go anywhere here without seeing some fellow earnestly strumming a guitar. For the best chance at hearing something good, you want to head to a venue known for live music. The Continental Club (1315 S. Congress Ave.) is not just one of Austin's best, but also in the midst of the South Congress district of fashionable stores, oddball shops and restaurants (try the tacos al pastor at Guero's Taco Bar -- 1412 S. Congress Ave.)

Honky-tonk heaven: It's a tech geek world, but the Broken Spoke (3201 S. Lamar Blvd.) is a refuge for those whose appreciation of cowboy boots and heartbroke country songs is irony-free. The Spoke is the real thing -- no urban cowboy stuff here. Populated by singers such as Dale Watson and Alvin Crow, serving up a mean chicken-fried steak and complete with its own museum of photos from better days, the Broken Spoke looks and feels ... just like it should.

Courtesy of JB Goodwin