

36 Hours in Austin, Tex.

By JAIME GROSS

THE city's unofficial motto, "Keep [Austin](#) Weird," blares from bumper stickers on BMWs and jalopies alike, on T-shirts worn by joggers along Lady Bird Lake and in the windows of independently owned shops and restaurants. It's an exhortation for a city that clings to eccentricity, even in the face of rapid development — downtown Austin, for one, is being transformed with a fleet of high-rise condos and a W Hotel, scheduled to open late next year. But this funky college town, known for its liberal leanings and rich music scene, has little to worry about — at least as long as its openhearted citizens, with their colorful bungalows and tattoos, do their part to keep the city endearingly odd. As one local put it: "As long as Austinites keep decorating their bodies and cars, we're going to be fine."

Friday

4 p.m.

1) DRESS THE PART

If you forgot to pack your Western wear, make a beeline for [Heritage Boot](#) (117 West Eighth Street; **512-326-8577**; www.heritageboot.com), where Jerome Ryan and his team of "boot elves" fashion fanciful boots out of exotic leathers like shark and caiman alligator, using vintage 1930s to '60s patterns. With colorful stitching, hand-tooling and puffy, butterfly-shaped inlays, they're instant collectors' items — and priced accordingly, from \$295 to \$1,800. Next, stop by the new location of Cream Vintage (1714-A South Congress Avenue; **512-462-3000**; www.creamvintage.com) for vintage Western shirts and weathered concert tees, customized to your dimensions by an on-site tailor.

6:30 p.m.

2) MEAT MECCA

Barbecue is a local sport and there are a lot of competing choices. For a classic pit experience — meaning you can smell the smoke and sauce as soon as you pull into the state-fair-size parking lot — drive 25 miles southwest to the [Salt Lick](#) (18300 Farm to Market Road 1826, Driftwood; **512-858-4959**; www.saltlickbbq.com), settle into a communal picnic table and order the \$18.95 all-you-can-eat platter, piled high with brisket, ribs and sausage. If you prefer to stay in downtown Austin, check out the newcomer Lambert's Downtown Barbecue (401 West Second Street; **512-494-1500**; www.lambertsaustin.com). Carved out of a brick-walled general store that dates from 1873, it is raising the bar (and provoking outrage among purists) with its newfangled "fancy barbecue" — think brown-sugar-and-coffee-rubbed brisket (\$14) and maple-and-coriander-encrusted pork ribs (\$16).

8 p.m.

3) CULTURAL ANCHOR

Just off the south shore of Lady Bird Lake is the world-class [Long Center for the Performing Arts](#) (701 West Riverside Drive; **512-457-5100**; www.thelongcenter.org), opened in early 2008 after an epic \$80 million fund-raising effort. It has one of the largest, most acoustically perfect stages in [Texas](#), home to the [Austin Symphony](#), [Austin Lyric Opera](#) and Ballet Austin. There's also a smaller black box theater spotlighting local musicians, improv troupes and theater companies. Even if you don't attend a performance, it's worth stopping by for a glimpse of the glittering skyline views from the building's front terrace.

Saturday

10 a.m.

4) BIKE STRONG

Explore the city at a leisurely pace by renting a bicycle from [Mellow Johnny's Bike Shop](#) (400 Nueces Street; **512-473-0222**; www.mellowjohnnys.com), opened by [Lance Armstrong](#), a native son, in May 2008. In addition to selling and renting bikes (from \$20 for four hours), the shop stocks accessories like wicker baskets, Chrome messenger bags and colorful racing jerseys. An adjacent cafe serves protein smoothies and organic coffee. If you ask, staff members will chart an appealing route along Austin's 20 miles of urban hike-and-bike trails.

1 p.m.

5) LUNCH ON THE GO

Some of Austin's best grub can be found in parking lots and vacant lots, dished out of Airstreams and food trucks by both amateur and professional chefs. You'll find them all on www.austinfoodcarts.com, but here's your shortlist: tarragon mushroom crepes with goat cheese (\$6.75) at Flip Happy Crepes (400 Jessie Street; **512-552-9034**; www.fliphappycrepes.com); slow-roasted green chili pork tacos (\$3.25 each) at Torchy's Tacos (1311 South First Street; **512-366-0537**; www.torchystacos.com); and the hot, crunchy chicken-and-avocado "cone" with coleslaw and mango aioli (\$5.95) at Mighty Cone (1600 South Congress Avenue; **512-383-9609**; www.mightycone.com).

3 p.m.

6) VINYL TO DUCKS

South Congress is an appealing neighborhood for window-shopping, or shopping-shopping. Pick up rare and collectible vinyl, from 99 cents to \$1,000, at Friends of Sound (1704 South Congress Avenue; **512-447-1000**; www.friendsofsound.com), down an alley off the main drag. Quirky souvenirs, like a duck decoy (\$28) or antique beaver top hat (\$95), abound at Uncommon Objects (1512 South Congress Avenue; **512-442-4000**; www.uncommonobjects.com), a sprawling emporium with a flea market aesthetic.

7:30 p.m.

7) BATS!

Early spring through late fall, the Congress Avenue Bridge hosts a Halloween-worthy spectacle: at dusk, more than a million Mexican free-tailed bats pour out from under the bridge and head east to scavenge for insects. The best spot for viewing the exodus is from the park at the southeastern end of the bridge, so you can see their flitting forms backlit by the glowing sky. To hear an estimate of the bats' flight time on a particular evening, dial the bat hot line, operated by The Austin American-Statesman newspaper and Bat Conservation International (**512-416-5700**, extension 3636).

8:30 p.m.

8) FRENCH CONNECTION

There's something almost Felliniesque about driving down a dark road lined with industrial warehouses, and stumbling onto [Justine's](#) (4710 East Fifth Street; **512-385-2900**; www.justines1937.com), a new, pitch-perfect French bistro. Outside, a family plays pétanque on the driveway; inside, groups of friends and couples sit on Thonet chairs at candlelit cast-iron-and-marble cafe tables, as a turntable, manned by the owner, Pierre Pelegrin, plays old jazz and reggae tunes. With atmosphere this good, the meal — Parisian comfort food, and delicious — is just a bonus. Order the duck confit (\$15) or the steak frites with pepper sauce (\$18).

10 p.m.

9) PERFORMANCE ANXIETY

The sheer quantity and variety of music in Austin on any given night can be daunting. Step one: consult [Billsmap.com](#), which lists every gig in the city, highlights recommendations and includes links to previous performances on YouTube. Two spots that reliably deliver a good time are the [Broken Spoke](#), an old-time honky-tonk dance hall (3201 South Lamar Boulevard; **512-442-6189**; www.brokenspokeaustintx.com), and the retro red-walled [Continental Club](#) (1315 South Congress Avenue; **512-441-2444**; www.continentalclub.com), which dates from 1957 and has roots, blues, rockabilly and country music.

Sunday

10 a.m.

10) TAKE A DIP

Wake up with a bracing swim in the natural, spring-fed [Barton Springs Pool](#) (2101 Barton Springs Road; **512-476-9044**; www.ci.austin.tx.us/parks/bartonsprings.htm), a three-acre dammed pool that maintains a steady 68-degree temperature year-round. There's sunbathing (sometimes topless) on the grassy slopes, a springy diving board and century-old pecan trees lining its banks. Then, park yourself on the patio at the new [Perla's Seafood & Oyster Bar](#) (1400 South Congress Avenue; **512-291-7300**; www.perlasaustin.com) for a decadent lobster omelet (\$16) and an oyster shooter spiked with rum and honeydew (\$7).

2 p.m.

11) EXPLORE OUTSKIRTS

Hill County beckons to the west and south of Austin, with rolling limestone hills, wildflower-filled meadows and dozens of [wineries](#). Get a closer look by driving 30 minutes to Bastrop State Park (3005 Highway 21 East, Bastrop; **512-321-2101**; www.tpwd.state.tx.us/bastrop), for a hike along the 8.5-mile Lost Pines Trail, which takes you past a creek and a toad pond, and through rock outcroppings, mini-gorges and wooded ravines filled with oaks and loblolly pines. Channel your inner cowboy, especially if you're breaking in new boots.

THE BASICS

American, Continental and JetBlue fly into Austin from many major cities; a flight from [Kennedy Airport](#) in New York in early December on JetBlue runs about \$300. Public transportation is lacking — though a light rail is planned — so you'll need a car or bike to explore the city.

An appealing home base is the lively and pedestrian-friendly South Congress neighborhood. Hotel Saint Cecilia (112 Academy Drive; **512-852-2400**; www.hotelsaintcecilia.com), which opened last winter, has nine modern studios and bungalows, and five rooms in a converted Victorian house, starting at \$275.

More affordable are the 40 rooms at the [Hotel San José](#) (1316 South Congress Avenue; **512-852-2350**; www.sanjosehotel.com), which are airy and simply adorned with Indian bedspreads and framed vintage concert posters. Doubles with shared bath from \$95; doubles with private baths from \$160.

Nearby is the year-old Kimber Modern Hotel (110 The Circle; **512-912-1046**; www.kimbermodern.com), where six minimalist rooms, from \$250, open onto a hammock-strung patio shaded by a giant Texas live oak tree.

Courtesy of JB Goodwin