

TEXAS | SAN ANTONIO



Confluence of Cultures

San Antonio's River Walk, history and architecture make it the rising star of Texas

Hotel Emma

By Kit Bernardi

OURGO RIO TOUR barge floats under leafy branches of 100-year-old cedar trees along the San Antonio River Walk. We glide past the **Briscoe Western Art Museum**, originally the city's 1930s-era art deco-style public library. Its massive bronze sculpture of a whip-cracking vaquero driving longhorn steers marks the spot where cattle drives crossed the river heading to the Chisholm and Great Western cattle trails.

The San Antonio River banks have long been a place where life flourishes, cultures intersect and history is made. Indigenous peoples lived here 14,000 years ago. Then the Spanish arrived, followed by other European immigrants. All shaped this south Texas city's more

than 300-year-old history and complex, multicultural identity that is still attracting visitors and new residents.

Today, San Antonio ranks as the nation's seventh-largest and third-fastest-growing city. During the COVID-19 pandemic, more than 100 new restaurants and 12 hotels opened, according to Visit San Antonio President and CEO Marc Anderson. "Our city continues to grow, as reflected in a 10 percent increase in visitors in 2022 over 2021, and the hospitality industry's economic impact of \$19.2 billion, an all-time high," Anderson says.

Thoughtful adaptive reuse of historic architecture is a cornerstone of San Antonio's appeal. Legacy buildings enjoy new leases on life along 15 miles

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Brackenridge Park's Japanese tea garden

KIT BERNARDI

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Pearl

of river flowing through the city center's iconic **River Walk** and two expansions, the **Museum Reach** north of downtown and the **Mission Reach** to the south.

MUSEUM REACH

A pioneer of the city's adaptive reuse movement, the **San Antonio Museum of Art** opened in 1981 in the former riverside Lone Star Brewery, established in 1884.

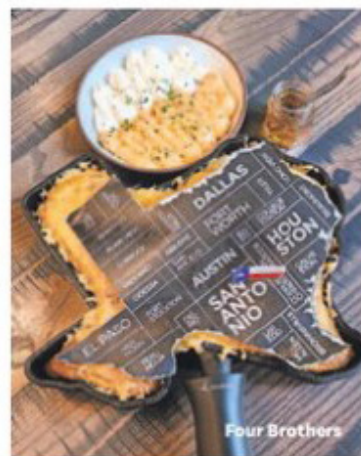
Looking up at the barrel-vaulted ceiling, I'm surprised by how ancient Roman statuary looks right at home in the former industrial space. The original elevator connects the museum's global art collections. Outside, pathways made

of the smokestack's red bricks lead to contemporary Italian restaurant **Tre Trattoria** in the brewery's Hops House.

To understand where it all began, I go to the headwaters near the **Witte Museum** in 343-acre **Brackenridge Park** where Indigenous peoples and their descendants have lived for thousands of years.

The family-friendly park's tranquil **Japanese tea garden** is a repurposed, 1800s limestone quarry. The nearby **San Antonio Zoo** contains **Kiddie Park**, which claims to be the nation's oldest children's amusement park. Opened in 1925, it still has its original, vintage rides.

River Walk expansion plans include



Four Brothers

connecting Brackenridge Park to the **Pearl district**, the site of the former Pearl Brewery turned culinary-centric destination. The uber-luxury **Hotel Emma** opened in 2015 in the Second Empire architectural style brewery.

The 146-room hotel anchors the former industrial complex's public plaza ringed by — multiple local chef-owned restaurants, including multiple James Beard Award-nominated restaurants. The Culinary Institute of America's third school, located at Pearl, has helped spur San Antonio's culinary status as the country's second **UNESCO Creative City of Gastronomy**. (The first U.S. city

on UNESCO's list was Tucson, Ariz., designated in 2015.)

Before heading to my **Brewhouse** tower guest room, I sink into a leather couch to people-watch in the once gritty engine room, now a classy living roomlike lobby. A family plays cards by the fireplace and a cover model-worthy wedding party saunters by the bulbous liquid ammonia compressor and lattice of red pipes previously used to cool beer. Giant fermenting tanks transformed into private, guest-only booths showcase the clubby **Sterneirth** tavern's finishing cellar past.

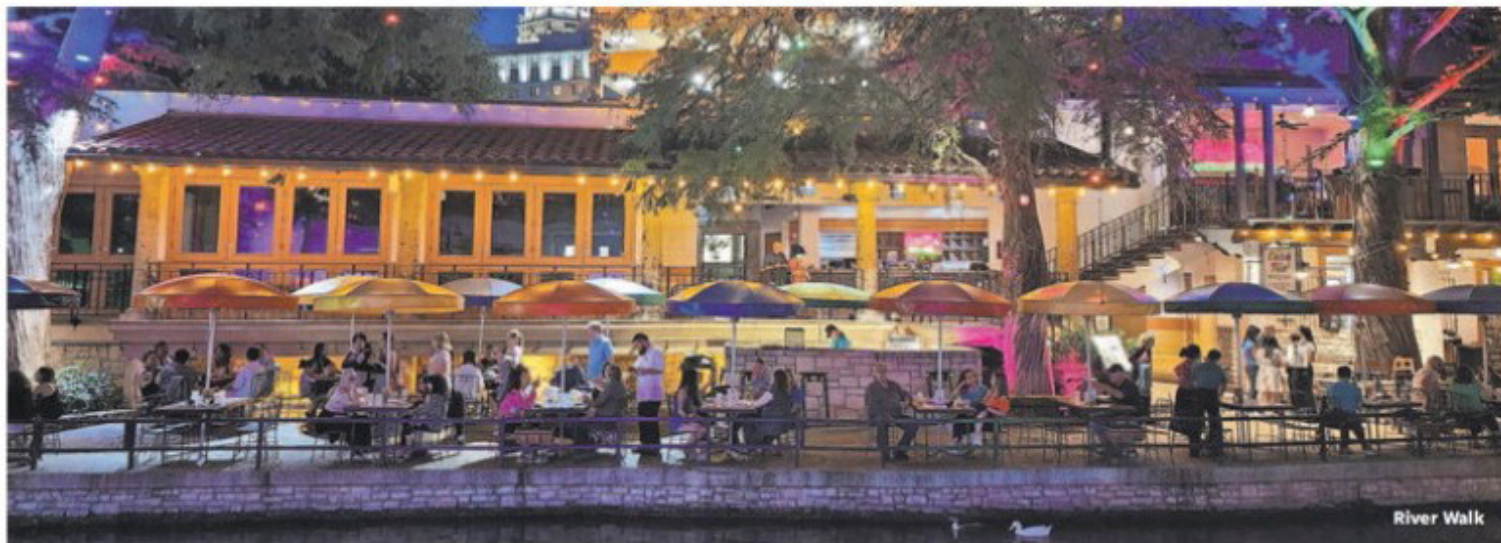
A historical timeline lobby exhibit traces Pearl Brewery's evolution, scandals and pride as the only Texas brewery that did not close during Prohibition, thanks to shrewd owner Emma Koehler, the hotel's namesake. Adding to its recent adaptive reuse history by year's end, Pearl Brewery's nearly 130-year-old rotund stable will debut as a 1,000-seat concert venue. There are also plans for a new hotel across the river.

Near Pearl, a new restaurant-bar entertainment venue opens this year in **The Creamery**, occupying the Borden Creamery warehouse built in 1932.

RIVER WALK REBOOT DOWNTOWN

I end my day with a stroll along the festively lit River Walk and a nightcap at **Four Brothers** in the historic **Omni La Mansión del Río hotel**, originally a boys school

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River Walk

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built in 1853. The Spanish colonial-style hotel opened for the 1968 San Antonio World's Fair, called **Hemisfair**.

Hemisfair is also the name of downtown's transformation of 40 acres of former World's Fair grounds with historic structures into three different shady parklands and public gardens.

"This new urban green space encompasses restored, late 1800s Victorian mansions housing locally owned shops and restaurants," says Anne Krause, president and executive director of Hemisfair Conservancy.

Families love **Yanaguana Garden's** playground. The parkland portion of Hemisfair's \$66 million **Civic Park** along the River Walk with native plant gardens, interactive water features, a tree-scaped promenade and spacious lawn for festivals opens this fall.

Nearby is **La Villita**, San Antonio's oldest neighborhood that is now a shopping district of restored adobe buildings close to **The Alamo**, the city's famous fort and oldest building.

The Alamo was originally constructed in 1718 as Mission San Antonio de Valero. It is the northernmost of five historic mission communities comprising the UNESCO San Antonio Missions World Heritage Site, the only such site in Texas. The other four missions south of downtown make up San Antonio Missions

National Historical Park.

MISSION REACH

The national park's sites are **Mission Concepción**, **Mission San José**, **Mission San Juan** and **Mission Espada**. They are 3 miles apart, connected by a hiking and biking path meandering along rewilded riverbank.

My tour guide and I are mission-hopping, and I am sightseeing by sidecar hitched to a Vespa driven by a **San Antonio Sidecars** guide. The breeze smells sweet from blooming nutty honey mesquite trees. Open grasslands and woods we pass give me a sense of the frontier terrain in Spanish soldiers and Franciscan friars encountered in the early 1700s when they came to impose Catholicism on the Indigenous inhabitants and expand the Spanish colonial empire.

Around the river bend, a scalloped bell tower's graceful silhouette appears against blue sky. Walking the mission grounds, we pause in the shade of live oak trees. A humming cicada chorus accompanies my guide's explanation of how the white limestone churches built by Indigenous peoples once had colorfully painted exteriors. Their interiors are simple and humble.

"San Antonio's origins and its identity truly began in these mission communities built by the region's Indigenous



peoples, and their descendants are still living here now," he says.

The National Park Service's visitors center and museum are at Mission San José. Fortified walls doubled as living quarters for friars, soldiers and Indigenous peoples.

Behind the Spanish Baroque-style church, famous for its rose window, stands a grist mill once powered by river water fed by an acequia (irrigation ditch).

Indigenous peoples were compelled by the Spanish to dig approximately 50 miles of those ditches to supply precious river

water to the missions and their surrounding farm fields of beans, squash, peppers and corn. The national park maintains 13 miles of functional, flowing acequias, which are highlighted during guided interpretive tours led by national park ranger Chantelle Ruidant-Hansen.

"Indigenous peoples of south Texas (call) the river **Yanaguana**, meaning 'sacred waters,'" Ruidant-Hansen says. "The San Antonio River was the lifeblood of their communities before the Spanish arrived and the missions they built, just as it is for our city today."

**THE ALAMO CITY AGENDA**

Tap into these resources on your visit to San Antonio to navigate smoothly through a busy maze of attractions:

- ▶ An online visitors guide provided by **Visit San Antonio** will help you build a checklist of what to see.
- ▶ See the River Walk from the waterway, and use **Go Rio Cruises** river shuttles, which make 15 stops along the span.
- ▶ On land, you can get two-wheel transport at **San Antonio BCycle**.
- ▶ The **San Antonio CityPASS** offers savings on attraction admissions and transportation citywide.

— Kit Bernardi



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