

TEXAS HILL COUNTRY, IN YOUR POCKET

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This page: a musician plays at Gruene Hall; opposite page: outside the Gristmill River Restaurant and Bar



toes crowned by flesh-tearing claws. The newer set was made by a juvenile *Sauroposeidon* (“lizard earthquake god”) who moseyed about on four legs and ate plants. These marks are round and seem more delicate somehow, even though, at 55 feet, this beast would have towered over the *Acrocanthosaurus*. We leave the tracks and trek up the bluff to get a pterodactyl’s-eye view of them.

Back on the highway, I drive south until I reach historic Gruene, the kind of absurdly cute village that belongs inside a snow globe. Set on a gentle ridge above the Guadalupe River, the town was built in the 1870s by German immigrants, but was abandoned after they fell on hard times. With everyone gone, the perfectly intact enclave was vulnerable to culture developers—until an architecture student kayaking

down the river in 1974 rediscovered it and campaigned for its preservation. (It was annexed by the city of New Braunfels in 1979.)

I drop my bags at the **Gruene Mansion Inn**, a Victorian manor built by town founder and cotton farmer Henry D. Gruene. Like many buildings here, it’s on the National Register of Historic Places. I walk two doors down to the **Gristmill River Restaurant and Bar**,

WHERE TO STAY

Lone Star Court

This hotel, just northwest of downtown Austin, serves as a great starting point for a Hill Country adventure. Centered on a grassy courtyard with firepits and a swimming pool, the property has a retro ranch feel and offers live music on the weekends. The guest rooms have full-size fridges and chicly weathered barn doors. *From \$180, lonestarcourt.com*

Fredericksburg Herb Farm

Located next to a creek and an herb farm and gardens, this inn feels like a rural respite despite being four blocks from Main Street. The wooden cottages are built in the style of Sunday Houses (weekend city homes for farmers), and the spa treatments use local products. *From \$159, fredericksburgherbfarm.com*

Dixie Dude Ranch

One of the country’s oldest dude ranches, the family-owned, 725-acre Dixie offers a taste of life on the range. All-inclusive stays cover rustic rooms and cabins, three home-cooked meals, two daily horseback rides into the cedar-covered hills, campfires, fishing, hiking, hayrides, lawn sports, and use of the swimming pool and hot tub. *From \$160, dixieduderanch.com*

Gruene Mansion Inn

Each of the accommodations at this flamboyant Victorian mansion along the main drag in historic Gruene is unique, whether it be a grand suite in the main house or a cabin out back, where old barns along the river were converted into rustic rooms with period furnishings and clawfoot bathtubs. *From \$205, gruenemansioninn.com*