

TRAVEL

# Down-Home Friendly, Texas Style

Austin is not only the state capital of Texas, but also the Live Music Capital of the World®. One visit to the lively 6th St. entertainment district on any given night will



Mira Temkin

convince you that Austin is a town that rocks. With hundreds of music venues, you'll find everything from country to bluegrass to jazz, and the music wails 'til the wee hours of the morn. Day or night, you can even watch them draw the

Texas Lottery live on 6th St.

But the music scene doesn't just stop there. Every October, Austin City Limits comes to town, a three-day, eight stage live event in Zilker Park, Austin's crown jewel. This festival hosts 130-plus performers from all over the world as well as incredible local fare, fun for the kiddos and more.

If you think Austin is a little weird, the folks there like things that way. Wander around the streets and it won't take you long to find a college student wearing a "Keep Austin Weird" T-shirt, a campaign I'm told that's more than 15 years old.

This is a town that celebrates creativity – a community of musicians, artists, and entrepreneurs. Think Michael Dell. Sandra Bullock. Willie Nelson. And, oh yes, a famous cyclist named Lance Armstrong. There's a vibrant energy you'll feel throughout the city.

**Home suite home at the Omni Austin Hotel.**

We chose to stay in the downtown area because it was so close to many of things we wanted to do. The beautiful Omni Austin Hotel Downtown offers sophisticated luxury in the heart of the city, and it's just steps away from the Texas State Capitol and Austin Convention Center. The hotel boasts 375 rooms and suites with an exquisite atrium for having coffee and people watching. There's even a rooftop swimming pool.

My newly renovated two-bedroom suite was like an oasis in the sky with dazzling views of the city and Texas, as far as you can see. Each of the new suites features a unique

décor, reminiscent of great Texas history, and all are appointed with the latest amenities to ensure the ultimate in relaxation and comfort. My suite included living, dining room, fully stocked kitchen, and two and a half baths.

The Omni has two great restaurants. Ancho's specializes in Southwestern cuisine and is located in the glass atrium. Dining options include a quick breakfast, pleasant lunch, or leisurely dinner with a rotating luncheon buffet. Stop at Morsels for coffee and a muffin before you start your day. Later on, the Atrium Lounge is a great place to relax and hear living discussions about, what else, Texas football! You'll see everything in the atrium from cowboy-hat wearing businessmen to families with babes in arms, and everything in between.

Bringing the kids along? Count on the Omni to give them their own suitcase filled with games and books. Eager to please, the staff was more than accommodating in helping us assemble our new "Pack n' Play."

The Omni is also just a short drive to the trendy South Congress Ave. (So-Co), loaded with chic boutiques and hip restaurants. *For reservations at the Omni Austin Hotel, call 888-444-OMNI or visit omnihotels.com.*

**A taste of Austin.** Austin prides itself in being somewhat of a foodie town, and you can find almost anything your heart desires. The kitchens of the country's best Tex-Mex and barbecue restaurants can be found here, as can a wide selection of local and organic eateries.

**Great pizza.** Yes, I'm from Chicago, and that makes me somewhat of a pizza expert. But Home Slice Pizza on South Congress Street didn't disappoint. New York-style thin crust pizza is king here, served in a fun, urban atmosphere. Since I came with a big group, the family-style salad was perfect. We sat on the back porch, gobbled down a few large pizzas, and took the rest back to the hotel.

**Whole Foods.** Having been to Austin before, we always make it a point to go Whole Foods. Yes, I know we have one in Deerfield. But Austin is corporate headquarters, and their flagship store looks more like Soldier Field than a supermarket. There are plenty of different food stations throughout the place, and you can get lost trying to decide what you



MIRA TEMKIN

The Omni Austin Hotel in downtown has you (and the kids) covered.

want. When you finally do, you can take it all outside and enjoy.

**Go batty!** No visit to Austin is complete without seeing the urban bats as they take flight every night from mid-March to November. So, we joined the throngs of people who line the bridge at dusk to see more than a 1.5 million Mexican free-tail bats emerge from under the bridge to blanket the sky as they head out to look for food. We also saw people cruising the water on boats while watching the bats. Don't miss it.

**The Texas State Capitol – Standing Tall and Proud.** This ornate building at the foot of Congress Ave. is an extraordinary example of late 19th-century public architecture and is widely recognized as one of the nation's most distinguished state capitols. In 1970, it earned the distinction on the National Register of Historic Places. A stop at the Capitol Visitor's Center, 112 E. 11th St., is a good place to start. Free Texas Capitol tours are available daily and feature information about the Capitol, Texas history, and the Texas legislature. Texas is one of the few states in

the nation whose Capitol building is actually taller than the one in Washington, D.C. When you walk in, look up. The rotunda is exquisite.

**See it all ... and quick!** Catch all the major sites in Austin with Austin Overtures. This 90-minute tour takes you to more than 30 major historical and cultural points of interest, including historic downtown, University of Texas, Texas Hill Country, and more. [AustinOvertures.com](http://AustinOvertures.com). *AustinOvertures.com.*

After spending only a few days in Austin, I want to go back. The people are friendly, the food is fantastic, and the music doesn't get any better. *For more about Austin, visit [austintexas.org](http://austintexas.org) or [austincityguide.com](http://austincityguide.com).*

*Mira Temkin is a Highland Park-based freelance travel journalist who has ventured across Europe and visited most of the Caribbean Islands. Her articles have appeared in Chicago Tribune, Family Time Magazine, six-00-three-five magazine, and Empower Woman Publications. In addition, she is the Chicago Upscale Travel Examiner for [examiner.com](http://examiner.com). She can be reached at [miratemkin@gmail.com](mailto:miratemkin@gmail.com).*



MIRA TEMKIN

Austin's Capitol building is taller than its Washington, D.C. counterpart.

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