

Herald Travel

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TRAVEL TIP OF THE WEEK

Make sure your credit card will work in the country you're visiting. European banks have switched almost completely to the more secure chip-and-PIN technology and fewer businesses abroad are accepting the outdated magnetic-strip cards. (Travelzoo.com)

GET UP AND GO



A couple visits one of many must-see destinations in San Antonio, Texas. CATHY DONALDSON

So much to celebrate in San Antonio

City ranked as one of National Geographic's top-rated places to visit in 2018

CATHY DONALDSON

Every so often you meet someone you automatically like, someone who inspires you, someone you want to be around as much as possible.

After just four days, that's exactly how I felt about San Antonio, Texas. And I'm not the only one who has fallen for the city of 1.5 million, which celebrates its 300th birthday in 2018. National Geographic Traveler, Frommer's, Fodor's and a host of other travel publications highlight it as a top destination for the year ahead.

What makes San Antonio so special? Here are my top five reasons:

1. THE WEATHER

The city's initial appeal had much to do with the sunshine and 27 C temperature warming my soul after I arrived into San Antonio International Airport. Who doesn't like swapping their parka and winter boots for a T-shirt and sandals? The city is a great destination year-round, with 300 days

of sunshine annually, warm-to-hot summers, mild winters and pleasant spring/fall periods.

2. THE HISTORY

If you like a place with a rich history you'll love San Antonio. Originally occupied by indigenous peoples, the south-central Texas area that now makes up the city saw the arrival of Spanish explorers in the late 1600s. Keen to colonize northward from New Spain (present-day Mexico), the Spaniards established an outpost in 1718 at Villa de Bejar, near the headwaters of the San Antonio River. Soon after, five missions financed by Spain were set up to spread the Catholic faith as part of the colonization effort. The first mission, San Antonio de Valero (commonly called the Alamo), and four others, along with a fort and related settlement are considered the seeds of one of the most successful Spanish communities in Texas history.

Fast forward to 1821 when Mexico gained independence from Spain and Anglo settlers from other American states ("Texians")

entered what is today San Antonio. The Texians and Tejanos — Mexican-born individuals who moved to the vicinity — united as Texans to oppose Mexico. The fight included the 1836 Battle of the Alamo during which a Mexican army of more than 2,000 surrounded the mission-turned-military establishment for 13 days before killing 200 Texans. The event became a symbol of the Texans' struggle for independence, won later that year.

3. THE PEOPLE

From the chatty cabbie at the airport to bubbly staff in restaurants, museums and hotels, the people of San Antonio won my heart. Rarely in my travels have I come across such an authentic bunch, so passionate about their city, so genuinely happy to share their home with visitors. In addition to the deep Hispanic heritage here — you'll catch Spanish spoken in most places, along with English — San Antonio's cultural patchwork incorporates European, Asian, African, Western and other traditions into a unique, warm

blend. Overall, there's a relaxed, neighbourly vibe in San Antonio, one that makes it feel like more of a town than a city.

4. THE ARTS

With its multicultural diversity, San Antonio has some incredible offerings in the realm of arts, culture and music. Along with outdoor sculptures and art galleries, there are over 25 museums, more than 40 performing arts stages, as well as an assortment of live music venues and cultural arts festivals.

5. FOOD AND DRINK

Tex-Mex may dominate the region's restaurant scene but it sure isn't the only game in town. In fact, there's such excitement in the local culinary arena that UNESCO recently designated San Antonio a creative city of gastronomy. Chef Elizabeth Johnson, owner of farm-to-table eatery Pharm Table, is part of a growing "Tex-Next" culinary movement in San Antonio that builds upon local ingredients and the area's heritage and culture. "We're developing a new style of cuisine that will have

long-lasting effects on the culinary industry here and abroad," she tells me as I sample her colourful and delicious Tunisian salad of spiced lentils, collards, kale, carrot slaw, cardamom, dates, ginger, raisins and roasted okra. Chat about innovation continued when I met Chef Johnny Hernandez at his latest restaurant, Burgerteca. "We're creating something really special here with the marriage of the old world and the new," he says as my taste buds go wild for creations like his Oaxaca Burger (beef patty with mole sauce, black beans, pickled red onions, avocado and queso fresco, a Mexican cheese) and his Pacifica Burger (tuna with jalapeno-lime mayo, cabbage slaw, sesame seeds and avocado). I washed down the treats with trials of Bigtex Punch — a mellowing combination of Hernandez's single barrel Rhum Clement plus tropical guava, pineapple and lime juice — and a Mangonada, the same rum combined with fresh mango, lime and house-made chamoy, a plum-based sauce. Siesta, anyone?