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PHOTOGRAPHS: TEXASTOURISM

Texan charm

Rio Grande in Big Bend State Park

Located in the USA's deep south, Texas is somewhat off the beaten track for the typical language travel student, although for those that do venture into this state, the lack of other international students is one of its principal attractions.

Cattle ranching, oil fields, remote windswept towns, immense cotton fields and cowboys are some of the enduring images associated with the US state of Texas and students visiting the area for a study trip certainly find all these things and more. The state has its own distinct style and attitude that is summed up by its nickname – the Lone Star State – named after the Texan flag depicting a single star on a blue background and representing the state's battle for independence from Mexico.

Many international students are attracted to Texas by the onward education opportunities available, as Chelsea Curtis at Austin English Academy, in the state capital of Austin, relates. "Many of our students

want to attend an American university after they perfect their English and Austin is a perfect place to do this because there are so many wonderful institutions to choose from," she says. "Austin is one of the fastest growing cities in the USA and is home to one of the most prestigious American universities, the University of Texas in Austin."

The relatively small numbers of international students coming to the state can also be something of a bonus for those wanting a true immersion experience. "The ESLI at West Texas A&M University offers excellent opportunities for international students to interact with Americans and small classes," says Margaret Tate, Director of the ESLI at the university located in Canyon, in the northern "pan-handle" region of Texas. "Because we are located in a small college town, local residents are very friendly to our international students," she adds. "Examples include invitations into homes for holiday meals, the offer of free furniture for students in apartments and various small group meetings in the residents' homes to get to see first-hand how Americans live."

The local Texan people have a reputation for extending "Southern-style hospitality" to all strangers – the word Texas comes from teysha which means 'hello, friend' in the language of the Caddo Indian tribes – and international students are made to feel particularly welcome, says Betsey Johnson at Texas Wesleyan University in Fort Worth. "The local community has invited our international students to speak at civic meetings, help with after-school programmes and give exhibits of their cultures at local schools," she says. "Students find Texans helpful and friendly at shops, on the bus, everywhere."

Dallas World Aquarium

One of the central attractions of this aquarium is the possibility to walk through a tunnel and experience a panoramic display of marine life. Sharks and manta rays are among the exhibits



They are greeted on and off campus with smiles and hellos."

International students in Texas may originally be attracted to the state by its educational institutions and friendly reputation and can therefore be unaware of the varied attractions that await them in this vast state. The Gulf of Mexico forms the southern edge of Texas and there are a number of sandy beaches along the coastline. Students studying at the ESLI at Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi can take advantage of some of these coastal attractions. "The resort towns of Padre Island and Port Aransas are close enough to reach by bus, sporting beautiful golden sandy beaches and offering ocean tours and deep-sea fishing," says Gary Bartholemew at the university. Closer to home, he adds, "attractions such as the Texas State Aquarium and the USS Lexington, located bay-side in downtown Corpus Christi, offer an opportunity to play tourist".

When it comes to tourist attractions, the city of San Antonio is host to the top two most visited attractions in the state – the Alamo and the River Walk. The Alamo is a shrine and museum to the Battle of Alamo, where 189 people defended the San Antonio mission against 4,000 Mexican troops for 13 days, while the River Walk is the city's central entertainment area with several nightclubs, bars, pubs and restaurants. Nina Patrizio at Our Lady of the Lake University

River Walk at night, San Antonio

Conceived in 1929 to help combat flooding problems, the River Walk is a hotbed of activity with fountains and cypress trees adding to its charm. The river itself is very shallow



in San Antonio says that, "nightclubs, international cuisine and great entertainment make for a very interesting and dynamic nightlife", and adds that international

students may also like to participate in Lakeapoolooza, a yearly festival featuring local rock bands, food, games and sporting competitions between students and faculty staff.

San Antonio is also famous for its Tex-Mex restaurants, reflecting the state's close connections with its neighbour in a fusion of Mexican and Texan cooking styles. The cuisine mixes rice and beans with beef, spicy sauces, cheese and corn or flour tortillas and can be found in restaurants throughout the state. Another Texan speciality is the barbecue, which was invented, according to local claims, in the back rooms of meat markets in central Texas at the turn of the century. The state's high number of cattle ranches ensure that beef steaks feature strongly on any barbecue menu and this is taken to extremes at the famous Big Texan Steak Ranch located in Amarillo, near West Texas A&M University. Here, diners can eat free of charge as long as they eat a 72-ounce steak in less than an hour.

According to Tate, as well as discovering the local cuisine, "students particularly enjoy visiting Palo Duro Canyon, skiing in [neighbouring state] New Mexico and visiting Dallas and the World of Fun". Palo Duro Canyon is the second largest canyon in the USA at roughly 120 miles long and with an average width of six miles. The canyon is made particularly dramatic by its rock formations, called hoodoos, which are tall thin spires of bare rock that protrude from the ground level.

The city of Austin – live music capital of the world, according to Curtis at Austin English Academy – also has its share of outdoor attractions, encompassing as it does three man-made lakes within the city limits. Curtis relates that the area provides lots of opportunities for students to make the most of their free time. "Barton Springs, a huge spring-fed pool, is a popular destination in the summer time and is perfect for lounging and sunbathing. There is lots and lots of good shopping and the area around Austin is perfect for hiking and bike riding," she says.

Another rather unusual Austin attraction is the world's largest population of Mexican free-tailed bats, which have taken up residence inside Congress Avenue Bridge. Up to 1.5 million bats arrive to breed and raise young in the bridge in February every year and emerge from their roost at sunset to search for insects, watched by 100,000 visitors each year.

Whatever a student's academic goals, Texas is able to cater to their ambitions and offer a relaxed, friendly and healthy, outdoor lifestyle. Johnson at Texas Wesleyan University adds that the weather, boasting long, hot summers, adds to the experience. "The weather in north Texas is warm and provides an energy to the campus," she states.



State Capitol, Austin

Modelled on the national capitol building in Washington, DC, this is a taller version at 94 metres and it took seven years to complete, costing US\$3 million in 1888, a huge extravagance even then

Agent viewpoint

"We hardly have any students going to Texas. We once had two au pairs placed in Houston and Dallas. They loved it. They both spent one year and were never home at the weekends. They made lots of friends from Texas. They said [the local people] were very kind and friendly. A high school student placed in Dallas some years ago did not like the experience very much because the city was too big and

she was too young to go anywhere alone. The au pairs still have contact with the host families and friends they made there."

Tania Jorge, ICI Intercâmbio Cultural, Brazil

"Students choose to study in Texas because they have relatives who live and study there; the state has a low cost of living and low cost of college tuition for when they go to college or gradu-

ate school; because it has nice weather – no snow; or just for personal preference. Most of them love Texas and they have a great time. Most of them, after the language study, will ask us to find them graduate programmes for advanced degrees. I think for a student to choose to go to Texas, they are rather more home-oriented or enjoy outdoor activities."

Ben Chang, UR Edu & Info Co, Taiwan



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