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Ramblin' and Relaxin' in Bandera

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Welcome to Banderaland

COWBOY CAPITAL OF THE WORLD

**Well, it's 5 o'clock on a Saturday,
The regular crowd shuffles in.
There's a man at the bar standing next to me
Saying, "Hey, look what just came in."**

Okay, so I've taken some liberties with the last line of Billy Joel's hit song "Piano Man," but the tune sprang to mind after witnessing a bizarre scene one afternoon on a visit to a Bandera watering hole. Thirsty after traipsing around on a warm spring day in what is one of the most scenic regions of the Texas Hill Country, I stopped at the Longhorn Saloon on the town's western edge.

Shortly after my arrival, I heard some commotion and turned to see a cowboy saunter through the front door atop his black-and-white Longhorn steer, Oreo. The dusty rider, Cowboy Craig, dismounted from his saddle and ordered a frosty mug of beer, while Oreo stood near the bar accepting the adoration of patrons. After quenching his thirst, the cowboy swung into the saddle, carefully guided the animal's huge horns through the doorway, and headed east on Texas 16, toward downtown.

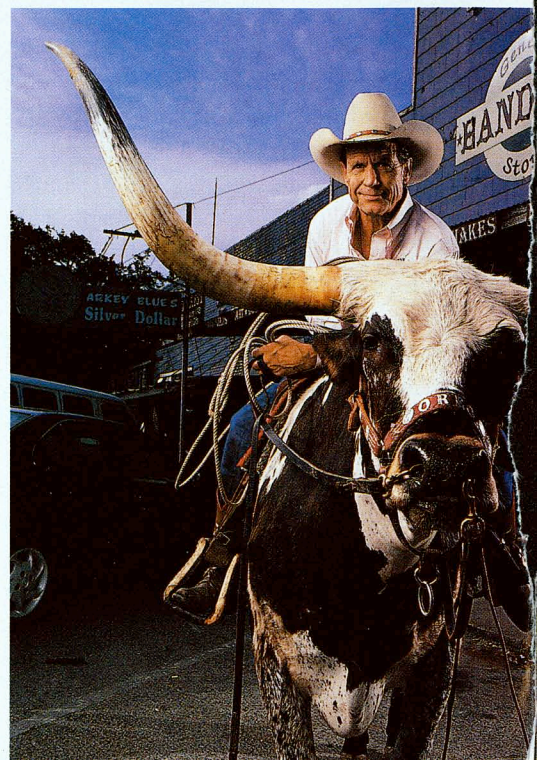
Welcome to another zany, fun-filled day in the "Cowboy Capital of the World."

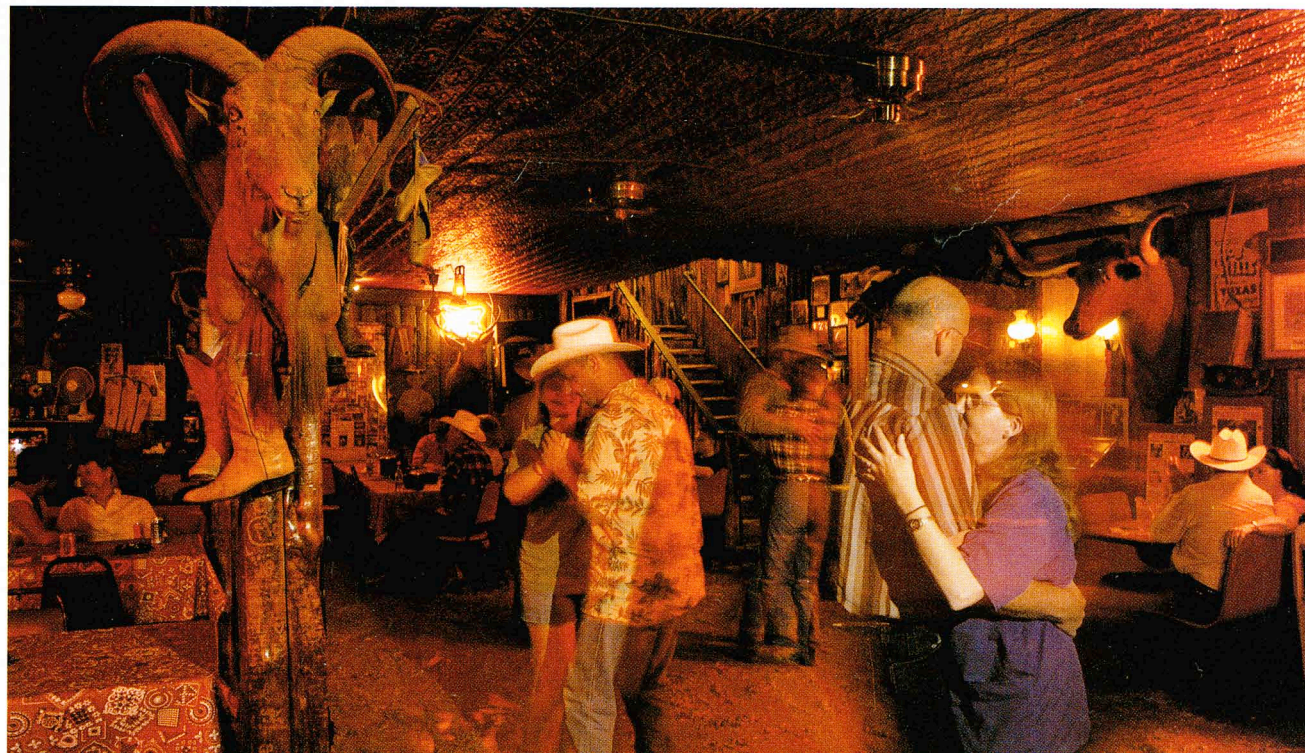
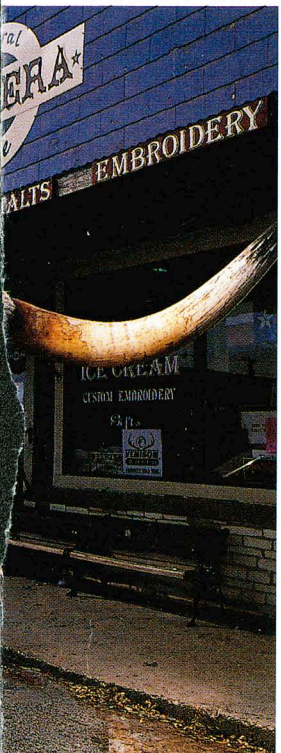
Spend some time in this historic town that churns out world-champion ropers the way the Soviets once produced gold-medal gymnasts, and such "pinch-yourself" moments occur more often than you'd think. Bandera quickly endears itself to visitors with its heartfelt friendliness, Old West feel, and its quirky mélange of artisans, cowboys, conservationists, dudes, ranchers, river runners, and dozens of colorful characters who populate this Hill Country town of 957 souls.

Bandera's top tourism official, Patricia Moore, sums up the Bandera attitude: "Rule number one is, if you see somebody doing something fun, don't wait to be asked to join 'em. What people used to come to Bandera to do more than 50 years ago, they still come here to do today—ride horses, splash in the Medina River, relax, and have fun."

Adventurous folks have long been finding their way to this little slice of Hill Country heaven. The Indians who once roamed the verdant valleys, steep canyons, and limestone hills clashed first with Spanish explorers and later with dissident Mormons, Polish immigrants, and Anglo settlers who came to settle and harvest the

[FACING PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP] Bandera's 11th Street Cowboy Bar has an indoor area for refreshment and conversation, and an outdoor courtyard with live music and dancing. Boot-scootin' is also popular at Arkey Blue's Silver Dollar Saloon. Cowboy Craig Davies and his Longhorn steer, Oreo, turn heads and win hearts wherever they go.







Medina River valley's native cypress to make shingles and furniture.

J. Marvin Hunter Sr., the late Banderan journalist and world-class collector, provided excellent insight into Bandera's roots—mostly in agriculture and ranching—in his *History of Bandera: 1853-1953—A Century of Intrepid History*. Hunter's eloquent tribute to what he dubbed “Banderaland” sits on a table in the Frontier Times Museum, his brainchild and one of Texas’ funkiest must-see

collection, a 700-year-old carved English walnut rocking chair, and a stuffed two-headed goat. Funky, indeed.

Also intriguing are artifacts that interpret the Bandera area's late-19th-Century and early-20th-Century origins. Don't miss Hunter's printing press, used to produce the renowned *Frontier Times* magazine; an ox-drawn corn planter; a concert roller organ; an 1880s-era dentist's chair and dental equipment; and the Tarpley, Texas, 1950s-era telephone switchboard.

enemy, the Comanche, and transmitted from the Comanche to the paleface, to the effect that he who once having drunk from the waters of the Medina and goes away, will ever be athirst until he comes back to the valley.”

Hunter would be proud of this charming and picturesque cowboy-centric community on the spring-fed Medina. The laid-back resort town 45 miles northwest of San Antonio offers not only leg-

Newcomers and repeat customers alike can spend a weekend or a week at one of the area's dozens of accommodations, indulging in the three R's that define the town: ridin', runnin', and ramblin'.

museums. History-lovers and the curious will enjoy wandering through the low-slung, rock building, erected in 1933, and marveling at the 47,000-plus items. Besides the museum's renowned shrunken head, exhibits include a 500-piece bell

A consummate town booster, Hunter expounded on what he called “the Damascus of Southwest Texas” and warned of Bandera's inescapable charms. “There's an old legend,” he wrote, “handed down by the Apache to his mortal

endary guest ranches, such as the Flying A (Buck Ranch), Dixie Dude, and Running-R, but also exceptional scenery, favorable climate, the pristine river, and bountiful flora and fauna, all of which nurture a burgeoning nature-tourism movement.



[LEFT TO RIGHT, FROM FACING PAGE] Customers at the 11th Street Cowboy Bar relax with cold longnecks and country tunes. Kayakers and tubers float on the Medina River at Twin Elm Guest Ranch. The Bandera General Store boasts an old-fashioned soda fountain and a decorative-sign collection.

While it's true that Bandera enjoys an international reputation for its dozen-plus guest ranches—offering everything from chuck-wagon cookouts and trail rides to tennis, swimming, and golf—this Hill Country burg “where the fun never sets” also delights with a surprising choice of other recreational pursuits.

Newcomers and repeat customers alike can spend a weekend or a week at one of the area's dozens of bed and breakfasts, motels, lodges, and campgrounds, indulging in the three R's that define the town: ridin', runnin', and ramblin'. Specifically, riding horses, running the Medina River in canoes, kayaks, and inner tubes, and rambling about the colorful town and countryside on roller coaster-like canyon roads. Horses can be rented by the hour or enjoyed as part of overnight package deals offered by most dude ranches. Several Bandera outfitters will rent or sell you a kayak, canoe, or

tube for floating the cool, clear Medina. Ramblin' is free for any and all takers.

Many visitors become so enamored of Banderaland's mix of Western soul, small-town values, surprising cultural offerings, recreation, and unspoiled environment that they decide to call it home.

Pat Harrison and her daughter Susan were itching to move out of bustling Arlington, Texas, when they stumbled upon Bandera on a tour of the state's backroads. “When we got here,” Pat says, “this is where we both decided we wanted to live. We started meeting people immediately and found them to be so friendly.”

The Harrisons opened a bookstore, Backroads Books, in 1997, infusing the town with a touch of Texas literary chic. Along with bestsellers and children's books, bibliophiles can pick up the latest titles from Texas authors like Elmer Kelton, Mike Blakely, and Kinky Friedman, who lives near the town of

Medina. Recently, the owners opened a sandwich/soup shop in the back for lunch.

The steady stream of visitors convinced Pat to also start a bed-and-breakfast/lodging reservation service. She now handles bookings for more than 20 accommodations, ranging from creekside cabins and cozy guesthouses, like Casa de Amigos, to the Old Silver Spur Cottage, named for a defunct hilltop dance hall.

Visitors seeking more traditional B&B lodging might opt for the Mansion in Bandera, run by New Mexico transplants Cooper Barnett and his El Paso-born wife, Nancy. Built in 1888, the two-story structure in the heart of town features eight suites. An eclectically furnished Carriage House and three more-modestly-priced quarters in a separate building also accommodate guests. Those willing to splurge can partake of the five-course dinners served on weekends by Cooper, an award-winning



The dust flies as rodeo competitors ride, rope, and race at Twin Elm Guest Ranch on Tuesday and Friday nights in the summer.

chef. Chances are the menu will include Hill Country fare such as quail raised on the nearby Diamond H Ranch.

Cooper recalls the day he and Nancy first saw the stately, tree-shaded mansion. “We pulled into Bandera in April at dusk, sat there in front, and didn’t speak for 15 minutes. We knew this was it.”

It’s not hard to see why *Men’s Journal* in 2002 ranked Bandera among the nation’s top 50 places to live. The town’s macho personality shines through in the numerous saloons, dude ranches, river outfitters, furniture and wrought-iron businesses, and ranches catering to hunters seeking to bag the trophy deer, wild turkey, and exotics that thrive here.

Perhaps no place personifies the masculine side of Bandera more than the 11th Street Cowboy Bar, owned by transplanted Cajuns Susanne and Eldon Reed. Old cowboy boots dangle from the awning, and brassieres hang from the ceiling above the bar inside. Live music in the courtyard—

sometimes country, sometimes Cajun—keeps locals and out-of-towners two-stepping and sipping from icy longnecks from early afternoon until sundown, when the party may adjourn to the Purple Cow or other fabled Bandera honky-tonks.

That’s not to say that Bandera doesn’t have a softer side. Shop-a-holics can spend hours scouting for antiques, Western wear, handmade cedar furniture, jewelry, stoneware, leather goods, Mexican imports, and a host of Texana foods, knickknacks, and specialty items.

Most shops line Main Street or are found within a one-block radius. Try HIX Bandera for a good mix of Texana items; Wind River Trading Company for Western Americana furniture, arts, and home accessories; the American Indian Jewelry Store for straight-off-the-res Southwest Indian jewelry; and The Cowboy Store for authentic cowboy duds.

In the mood for a mosey down memory lane? Take a nostalgic trek to Bandera General Store. Belly up to the soda foun-

tain for a malt, or stroll the plank floors to peruse shelves stocked with Grapette sodas, bubblegum cigarettes, and other Baby Boomer memorabilia. Or skim the decorative-sign collection to appreciate the local sense of humor, personified in one that proclaims: “Bandera—a drinking town with a hunting problem.”

Bandera’s cowboy persona manifests itself in myriad ways. Check out the Western mural in the lobby of Bandera Bank (207 Main), then stroll the downtown streets taking note of the welding wizardry of Artie Erfurt of Quality Ironworks. Metal silhouettes of cowboys roping dogies, cowboys around a campfire, bucking broncs, cacti, Longhorns, and other Western icons adorn town light poles.

Historic walking and driving tours direct visitors to rustic, cut-block limestone buildings, some dating to the early days of this 151-year-old frontier town where trail drives were once staged. Don’t miss the picturesque Old Bandera Courthouse, built by Georgia stonemason Henry White in 1868, and the Old Jail (1881), designed by noted English architect Alfred Giles. Across the street and down the alleyway you’ll find Love’s Antique Mall, a former riverside general store, topped by a giant, rearing stallion, that contains thousands of collectibles.



The OST (Old Spanish Trail) Restaurant serves up plenty of hearty cowboy fare, including burgers, chicken-fried steak, enchiladas, and tacos.

ESSENTIALS **Bandera**

The clatter of horse hooves often mixes with traffic noise along Texas 16 (Main Street), which doglegs through the heart of Bandera. Weekends find working cowboys and ranchers in jeans, cowboy hats, and boots jockeying 4X4 diesel pickups for a coveted parking spot.

On any given weekend, live-music fans might hear name acts like Geronimo Treviño III, Gary P. Nunn, Ray Price, or native sons Bruce and Charlie Robison keeping boots scootin' at such landmark dance halls as the Cabaret and Arkey Blue's Silver Dollar Saloon, an institution for 35 years. Even on most weeknights, visitors might catch up-and-coming local talent holding forth in a local bar or club in this town, where the number of churches (11) barely exceeds that of saloons (7).

If you've come to see real cowboys, Bandera serves up plenty of amateur and professional rodeo action. Rodeo season kicks into high gear on Memorial Day weekend and runs through Labor Day weekend with three rodeos a week. Tuesday and Friday nights find spurs jangling and dust flying at the Twin Elm Guest Ranch west of town. Lightning Ranch, east of town, hosts rodeos on Saturday nights.

And between the ridin', runnin', and ramblin', you've gotta make time to eat. In that department, Bandera's got you covered. For home-cooked, reasonably priced fare, OST Restaurant—a Bandera mainstay—is tough to beat. Customers can mount saddle-topped barstools at the counter or sit at cedar tables in the John Wayne room to chow down on Mexican food, burgers, or The Duke, a chicken-fried steak about the size of a small tire. But lest you think dining options are limited to chuck wagon-style grub, think again, pardner.

Restaurants here offer everything from Chinese food (China Bowl) to bistro dining, complete with cappuccino and espresso (Fool Moon Cafe and Coffee House). Or cruise some of the Hill Country's prettiest roads to dine on grilled steak, fish, and fowl in a bucolic setting. Mac & Ernie's Roadside Eatery in Tarpley and Love Creek Cider Mill Patio Cafe in Medina offer fine al fresco dining with a touch of country class.

BANDERA, the seat of Bandera County, is 45 miles northwest of San Antonio at the junction of Texas 16 and Texas 173. It is one of the oldest Polish communities in Texas and home to St. Stanislaus, the nation's second-oldest Polish Catholic Church. Bandera means "flag" in Spanish. The **Bandera**

County Convention & Visitors Bureau, 1206 Hackberry St., can answer most of your questions about the area. Write to Box 171, 78003; 830/796-3045 or 800/364-3833; www.bandera-cowboycapital.com. **Bandera's area code is 830; the zip code is 78003.**

ACCOMMODATIONS

B&Bs Backroads Reservations, 1107 Cedar; 866/796-0660; www.BackroadsTexas.net (listings include Casa de Amigos, Old Silver Spur Cottage, and more).

Diamond H Ranch Bed & Breakfast, 5322 Texas 16 North; 796-4820; www.diamondhbandera.com.

Mansion in Bandera, 1005 Hackberry; 796-4590 or 866/233-4590; www.mansioninbandera.com.

DINING

China Bowl, 1206 Pecan; 796-8494.

Fool Moon Cafe and Coffee House, 204 Main; 460-8434.

Love Creek Cider Mill Patio Cafe, Texas 16, Medina; 589-2202 (Fri. evenings, lunch daily).

Mac & Ernie's Roadside Eatery, FM 470, Tarpley; 562-3250.

OST Restaurant, 305 Main; 796-3836.

DUDE/GUEST RANCHES

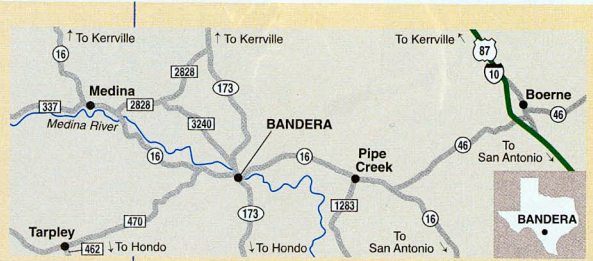
Dixie Dude Ranch, Box 548; 796-4481 or 800/375-9255; www.dixieduderanch.com.

Flying A Ranch, 1919 Texas 173 South; 796-4750 or 866/796-4750; www.flyingaranch.net.

Lightning Ranch, 818 FM 1283, Pipe Creek 78063; 535-4096 or 800/994-7373; www.lightningranch.com.

Running-R Ranch, 9059 Bandera Creek Rd.; 796-3984; www.rrranch.com.

Twin Elm Guest Ranch, Box 117; 796-3628 or 888/567-3049; www.twinelmranch.com/home.asp.



HONKY-TONKS & SALOONS

Arkey Blue's Silver Dollar Saloon, 308 Main; 796-8826.

Cabaret Cafe and Dance Hall, 801 Main; 796-8166; www.cabaretdancehall.com.

11th Street Cowboy Bar, 303 11th; 796-4849.

Longhorn Saloon, 1407 Main; 796-8849.

Purple Cow, 701 Main; 796-3344.

SHOPPING

American Indian Jewelry Store, 311-B Main; 796-4000 or 877/801-4284; www.americanindianjewelry.com.

Backroads Books and Cafe, 1107 Cedar; 796-7748.

Bandera General Store, 306 Main; 796-4925.

The Cowboy Store, 302 Main; 796-8176.

HIX Bandera, 335 Main; 796-7111.

Love's Antique Mall, 310 Main; 796-3838.

Wind River Trading Company, 1105 Cypress; 460-7104.

MISCELLANEOUS

Frontier Times Museum, 506 13th; 796-3864; www.frontiertimesmuseum.com.

Quality Ironworks, Texas 173 North; 796-3106; www.qualityironworks.com/pages/1.

EVENTS

The area's major annual events are **Spring Fling** (Apr.); **RiverFest** (May); **Funtier Day Parade and Bandera Co. Artists Assn. Arts & Crafts Fair** (Memorial Day weekend); **Texas International Apple Festival** in Medina (July); **Cajun Festival & Great Gumbo Cookoff** in Lakehills (Sep.); and **Annual Hunters Bar-B-Que & Outdoor Expo** (Oct.). For details, contact the CVB (see above).

But no matter your culinary inclinations, passions, or recreational pursuits, cooling your spurs for a while in Bandera is sure to leave you with a burning thirst that only a return visit to the town "where the fun never sets" can slake. ★

ROB MCCORKLE has lived much of the past 25 years in the Austin area, but plans to take up residence before too long in the Bandera County hamlet of Medina.

J. GRIFFIS SMITH has met a lot of colorful folks in Bandera since his first *Texas Highways* assignment there in 1985.