

THE LURE OF THE LLANO

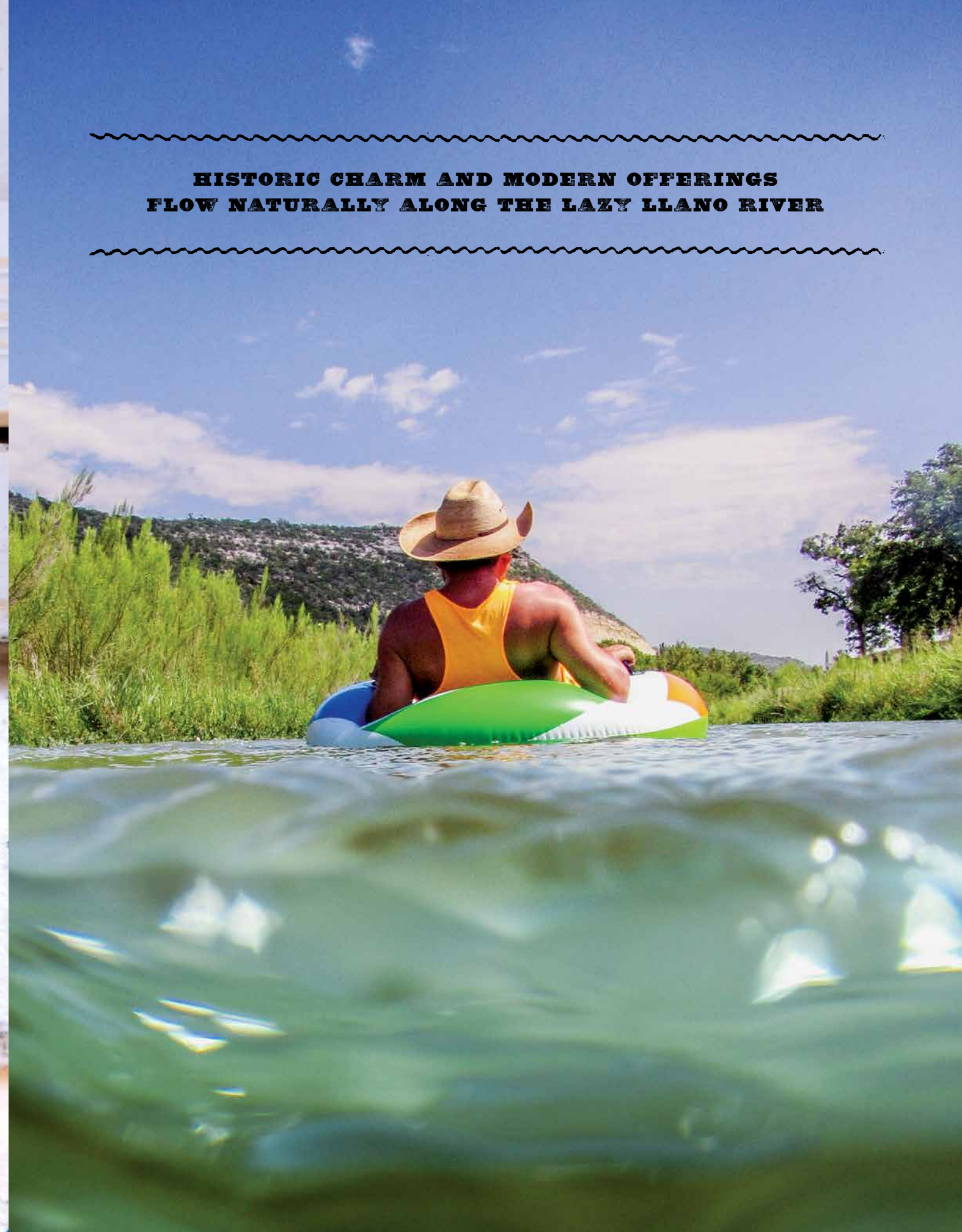
TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHS BY E. DAN KLEPPER

75 I Love Thee

1. I love thee, I love thee, I love thee, my Lord;
2. I'm hap - py, I'm hap - py, oh, won - drous ac - count!
3. O Je - sus, my Sav - ior, with thee I am blest,
4. Oh, who's like my Sav - ior? he's *Sa - lem's bright King;

My joys are im - mor - t
My life and sal - va - ti
He smiles and he loves r
mount:
rest:
sing:

HISTORIC CHARM AND MODERN OFFERINGS
FLOW NATURALLY ALONG THE LAZY LLANO RIVER



S

hades of an urban beat have finally arrived in Llano, a Hill Country community along the Llano River and the default capital of the Llano Uplift, the ancient dome of characteristic pink granite poking out of the Edwards Plateau. Big-city commodities like grilled salmon, fresh-baked breakfast goods, and even a certified sommelier have found their way to Llano, a 19th-Century ranching community that once promised to become the “Pittsburgh of the West” courtesy of iron ore deposits nearby. Today, Llano blends the iconography of a typical Texas travel destination—BBQ, rodeos, antiques, bed-and-breakfast lodging—with a rising tide of global fare.

The vantage point midway along the Llano River Bridge will give you an idea of the mash-up. Hovering above one river bank you’ll see the clock tower of a Texas classic—the 19th-Century, Romanesque Revival county courthouse, completed in 1893; on the opposite bank, the hand-forged oven for Tommy’s Mesquite-Flamed Pizza, an open-air cabana that serves thin-crust pies covered in mozzarella, locally made sausage, and fresh basil plucked from gardens planted among the restaurant’s tiki torches. In between, the Llano River’s glassy surface, stowed up against a low flood-control dam, tempts you to bring a kayak and straddle the two worlds while paddling up an appetite.

It’s a curious compilation, you might think, just before you hear the test blast of Llano’s storm siren running through its paces. As if on cue, the mega-decibel horn heralds this new age, announcing the world awash at Llano’s doorstep. However you wish to regard the arrival, either as an endowment or incursion, you can blame it all on the river.

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WONDERFUL WATER

South Llano River State Park offers easy access to the Llano River for swimming, kayaking, or maneuvering a “toob” through gentle swells. In Castell, some 17 miles southwest of Llano, the river takes a lazy turn.



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RELAXED PACE

The Llano Piano awaits you at the Dabbs Hotel in Llano. Free-tailed bats exit the Eckert James River Bat Cave Preserve. Farmstands offer eggs and produce during summer months. Tommy's Mesquite-Flamed Pizza has indoor and outdoor seating.

the southern tributary (arising in Edwards County) near the town of Junction. South Llano River State Park, just upriver from the confluence and featuring a stretch of water ideal for weekend retreats, occupies 2,600 acres of limestone- and oak-covered hills above dense, pecan-shaded bottomland. The abundant wild turkey habitat along the river here allows birders to witness flocks of hens and gobblers foraging in the thickets or crowding into tree-tops for a night's sleep. If you like to camp, pop a tent and grill some dinner or make a quick run into Junction, just seven miles away, to pick up some brisket from Lum's Bar-B-Que. For a light side dish, try Lum's Hungarian-style cucumber salad, which features sliced cucumbers and onions marinated in garlic, vinegar, and paprika.

The park's most appealing feature is its easy river access. Several put-ins and take-outs give you a chance to ride the currents and get wet without making it an all-day adventure ... unless you want one. In that case, you can launch a canoe or kayak and paddle the river all the way to Junction (arrange pick-up in advance). Or, keep it simple and rent a big yellow "toob" at park headquarters, and let the river show you just how lazy a day can get.

Once merged, the Llano River flows eastward out of Junction for approximately 100 miles, passing through Kimble, Mason, and Llano counties before joining the Colorado River near Marble Falls at Lake LBJ. Along the way, it picks up additional water from the James River, a 36-mile tributary that joins the Llano in south Mason County.

An overnight or two in the town of Mason, where guesthouses and B&Bs abound, will give you an opportunity to explore this very pretty countryside. If your visit falls between May and mid-October, reserve a spot on an interpretive tour of the Eckert James River Bat Cave Preserve, where you can witness the nightly bat emergence from one of the largest bat nurseries in the country. The drive to the preserve, located approximately 17 miles south of Mason, can be as memorable as the bat flight. The route snakes through prime Hill Country scenery before crossing the James River along a natural limestone roadbed typically under at least a foot of water.

Any time of year, make a point to stop by Mason Country Collectibles, which lies just two blocks north of the courthouse square. Ask for a peek of the "Grand Azure," a record-holding 587-carat Texas topaz that resembles a flashy, faceted egg. Mason County, the topaz capital of Texas, hosts an unknown quantity of the state's official gemstone within its streambeds, ravines, and granite outcrops. The collectibles shop, a two-story accumulation of goods ranging from books to glassware, sells a selection of topaz-studded jewelry should you wish to own a little piece of Mason County bling. Or hunt for your own raw topaz on one of three Mason County ranches that offer organized access (learn details at the shop or at the Mason Chamber of Commerce).

After your topaz purchase, you'll need a place to sparkle, so head over to the Wine Bar at Sandstone Cellars Winery, one of several downtown Mason enterprises. Sample the goods from Sandstone's collection of award-winning wines, all produced at the winery from Mason County grapes. In a nod to the state's roots, Sandstone partners Manny Silerio and Scott Haupert also opened Santos Taqueria



Texas Topaz



Chrissy's Homestyle Bakery, Llano

in one of Mason's vintage buildings next door. Head chef Santos Silerio prepares authentic Tex-Mex cuisine like gorditas, taquitos, and a selection of flavorful salsas, including a green chile version that will light a fire in all the right places.

Once the Llano River arrives in Llano, it covers a wide swath between tree-lined banks courtesy of the Llano River Dam. The flood-control modification created Lake Llano, a swimming, fishing, and paddling destination for outdoors enthusiasts. (It's currently dredged for cleaning and expected to re-open in June.) Its north bank hosts Badu City Park, where jogging and cycling trails are available along with a canoe/kayak ramp. The park's scenic view—an expanse of river, dam, bridge, and sky that gains in beauty as dusk lights reflect off the water's surface—adds a surprising dazzle to Llano's small-town geniality.

The Llano community may be where the river makes its brassy splash, highlighting the confluence of the urban future and a rural, wilder past, but just before arriving in town, 20 minutes or so

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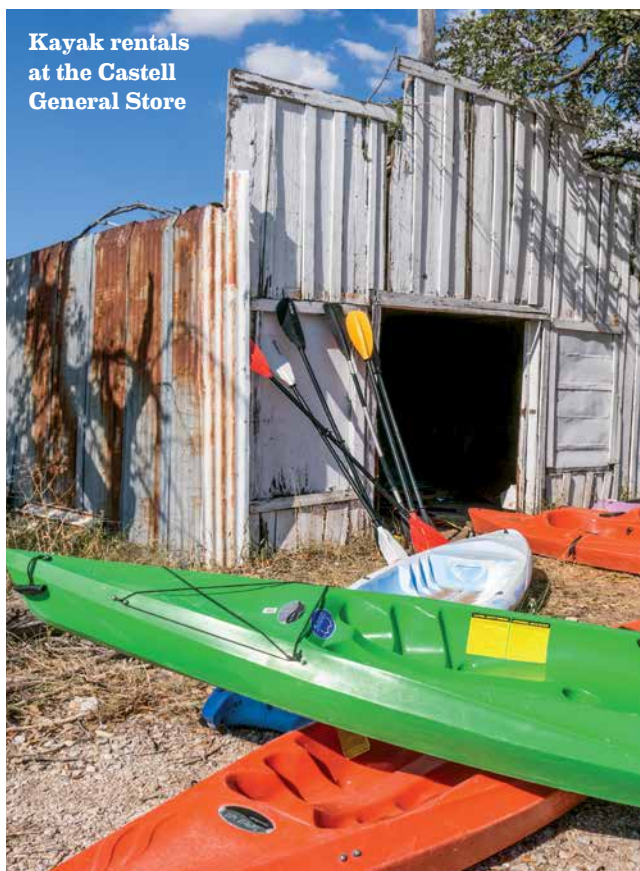
upriver along RR 152, the Llano takes a lazier turn. Its spring-fed shallows and trout-stocked pools coil around boulders and limestone flats before floating past the historic community of Castell, population 23.

Established by a congregation of German immigrants during the first half of the 19th Century, Castell is the oldest settlement in Llano County. The road dips just past the Castell General Store (great for burgers, BBQ, and live music on Saturday nights, and ribeyes on Sundays) then traverses the Llano along a cement crossing above the water line (unless the river's on the rise). Bring a fly rod, binoculars, or your wading shoes to explore the environs, or rent a kayak from proprietor Randy Leifeste, a Castell native. Or pull out a camp chair and relax. At sundown, the current eases as dragonflies alight and rainbow trout rise in the shallows. Settle in and watch a river angler silhouetted against the oxide dusk, back-casting to-and-fro like a drowsy metronome, before delivering a fly as far as it will go into the lazy river night. ★

"Go for the river, stay for the wine, salsa, and pizza," E. Dan Klepper says of Llano River country.



Sandstone Cellars Winery



Kayak rentals at the Castell General Store



ALONG THE LLANO

For details about **Llano**, contact the **Llano Chamber of Commerce**, 325/247-5354; www.llanochamber.org.

Tommy's Mesquite-Flamed Pizza is at 312 Bessemer Ave. Open Tue-Sat 11-7. Call 325/247-0388.

The Dabbs Hotel is at 112 E. Burnet St. Call 325/247-2200; www.thedabbs.com.

The Badu House is at 601 Bessemer Ave. Call 325/247-2238; www.thebaduhouse.com.

Chrissy's Homestyle Bakery is at 501 Bessemer Ave. Call 325/247-4564.

For details about **Junction**, contact the **Junction Chamber of Commerce**, 325/446-3190; www.junctiontexas.net.

Lum's Bar-B-Que is at 2031 Main St. Open daily. Call 325/446-3541; www.lumsbbq.com.

South Llano River State Park is at 1927 Park Rd. 73, just south of Junction. Call 325/446-3994; www.tpwd.texas.gov.

For details about **Mason**, contact the **Mason Chamber of Commerce**, 325/347-5758; www.masontxcoc.com.

Eckert James River Bat Cave Preserve requires advance reservations to witness the May-October bat emergences. Call 325/347-5970.

Casa Guadalupe Guest House is at 117 Spruce St. Call 325/347-7829; www.stayinmasontx.com.

Mason Country Collectibles is at 424 Fort McKavitt St. Open daily. Call 325/347-5249; www.masoncountrycollectibles.com.

Santos Taqueria is at 205 San Antonio St. Open Thu-Sat 11-9, Sun 11-2. Call 325/347-6140; www.santostaqueria.com.

The Wine Bar at Sandstone Cellars Winery is at 211 San Antonio St. Open Thu-Sat 11-11, Sun 11-2. Call 325/347-9463; www.sandstonecellarswinery.com.

For details about **Castell**, visit or contact the **Castell General Store**, 19522 West RR 152; 325/247-4100.

ESSENTIALS