

FRIO 101

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INSIDER TIPS FOR THE COOLEST GETAWAY ON
TEXAS' FAVORITE RIVER



OPENING SPREAD:
View of the Frio River from Old Baldy at Garner State Park. THIS PAGE: Fishing and tubing near Neal's Lodges.



EVERY-BODY KNOWS THE FRIO

That's the assumption most recreation-focused Texans make from the get-go. If you love Texas outdoors, how could you not know the Frio?

Well, maybe you're one of the millions of newcomers who just got to Texas. Or perhaps you've lived in Texas your entire life and, unlike all those people whose families have been vacationing on the Frio for generations, you have no clue what or where they are talking about. Never stepped foot in Garner State Park? Think Concan is in Mexico? Well, pull up a chair and scoot closer.

This Frio 101 is for you.

The first two things to know are: It's the water, and it's everything else. The Hill Country sports the prettiest landscapes in Texas—no brag, just fact—and the southwestern corner of the Hill Country has the best eye candy: clear, clean, swift-running creeks and rivers slithering between dramatic rises; valley bottoms crisscrossed with seeps and springs and hollows; and vast grasslands, giant oak forests, juniper thickets, and stands of towering cypress. The scenery is spectacular no matter where you look. But the consensus is that the Frio is the true Hill Country classic.

Frio Canyon is the most majestic and dramatic of all the Hill Country valleys—a rough, semi-pastoral setting that could easily pass for Germany, Switzerland, or France. In fact, one moniker for the area is “the Swiss Alps of Texas.” The Frio River is the canyon centerpiece, shadowed by soaring limestone bluffs and some of the most dramatic hills in the region. The river earns its name—Spanish for cold—running shallow and startlingly transparent over a limestone and gravel bed, pocked with deep pools and charged by springs that keep the water temperature refreshingly cool even in mid-July.

Pearl Beer used the short prong of the north fork of the Frio as its ideal image in the San Antonio brewery's “From the Country of 1100 Springs” advertising campaign in the 1950s and '60s, and Neal's Lodges in Concan was recognized in this magazine more than 40 years ago for having “the best little swimming hole in Texas.”

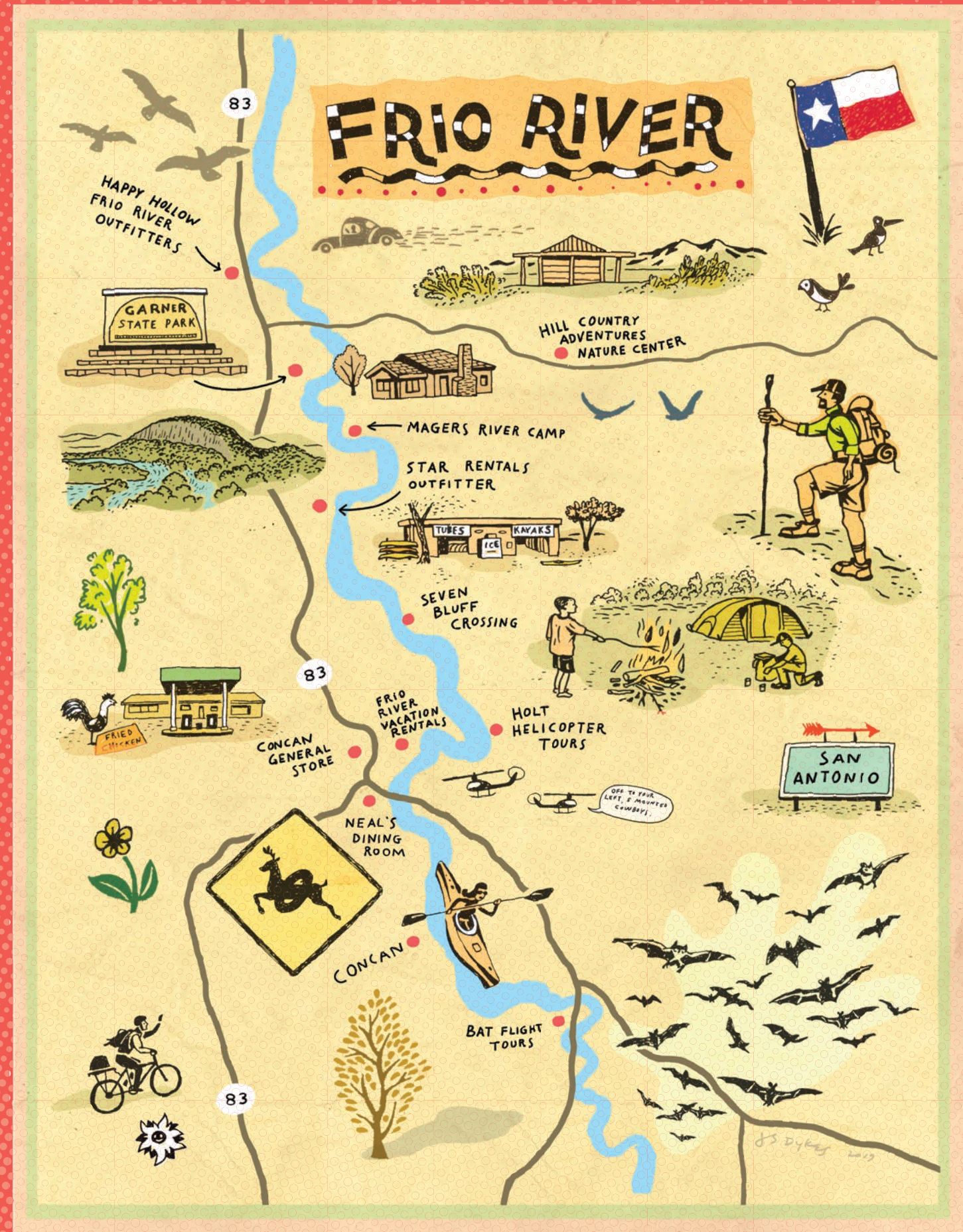


Illustration: John S. Dykes



FROM TOP: Frio River at Garner State Park; red poppies in Fredericksburg on the way to the Frio.



ALL ABOUT THE JOURNEY

Half the fun of a Frio River vacation is getting to the Frio Canyon. There's plenty to gaze upon no matter which direction you enter from, but my favorite entry is from the north on US 83. Coming off the Edwards Plateau and its empty

rocky grasslands pocked with stunted oaks and bushy Ashe junipers, the highway descends into the lush, densely vegetated Hill Country, immediately fording drainages, some of them wet, that slice between the dramatic rises. One rivulet holding water is the young Frio, or should I say the sparkling Frio, as it is advertised at the

Fishcamp Lodge, an old-school camp near the headwaters of the west prong of the river, 7 miles north of Leakey, transformed into a rustic two-lodge vacation rental.

All roads lead to the Frio, which when the fireflies light up at dusk along its banks, resembles nothing so much as a fairyland.

FLOATING THE FRIO

Doing the Frio means not really doing anything, other than relaxing and grooving. There are diversions galore, but in summer, it's all about tubing, i.e. floating in the river on an inflated inner tube.

This particular form of recreation requires no skills other than an ability to swim and an appreciation for sunscreen and hats. Anyone can tube, and almost everyone does, as all the primary-colored watercraft, portable signs, business flags, shuttle vehicles, and rental operations attest. But compared to popular tubing destinations on the Guadalupe, Comal, and San Marcos rivers, the Frio is old-school simple.

Public access to the river is limited to roadside crossings. Otherwise, book an overnight stay at one of the scores of independently owned vacation rentals along the river, and you can play all you want in the Frio. Lodging options range from rustic cabins and simple campgrounds to country clubs, gated resorts, and lavish lodges accommodating crowds of 40 or more. Most are independent mom-and-pop enterprises.

The primo part of the Frio that runs through Frio Canyon for almost 20 miles connects the towns of Leakey and Concan (which you should know are pronounced hereabouts as "lakey" and "con-can").

The end is where it all began.

Eat Here

Hippie Chic's River Shack, open spring break through Labor Day weekend, serves creative short order fare. 721 River Road, Concan. 830-232-5459



FROM TOP: Chicken-fried steak, brisket, and fried pickles from Neal's Dining Room in Concan; floating the Frio near Neal's Lodges.

A RIVERFRONT LODGING TRADITION

Tom and Vida Neal opened Neal's Lodges as a tourist camp on their ranch in 1926. Tom built the cabins and the dining hall near the river with his father-in-law. Vida ran the office and headed up the kitchen, where she developed a fanbase devoted to her fried chicken.

Neal's has been drawing visitors ever since, evolving into something of a tourist icon that welcomes returning families year after year, thanks to the stewardship of the Neal's children and grandchildren who operated the rustic cabins and dining room.

In 2011, Neal's Lodges was acquired by Cody and Yvonne Davenport, the first proprietors in the lodges' 92-year history who weren't related to the Neals. The addition of Wi-Fi to some of the cabins was made with hesitation, Yvonne says, "because it's difficult fixing routers, and because people are looking at their devices instead of what's around them here." The Davenports refitted the barn that once belonged to Tom's prized racehorse, Joe Jimmy, into a family-friendly entertainment venue, featuring live music and dances under the stars. They've also added 16 condos with a resort-style pool, 12 lodges with private pools, and several other cabins.

Recalling the pleasure of watching a little girl having her first dance with her father at Joe Jimmy's, Yvonne says, "My husband and I sit there and sometimes wish we had a place to go to like this. Here, for us, it's work. But it's really good work."

If you aren't staying at Neal's Lodges, at least one old-school breakfast or chicken-fried steak dinner at Neal's Dining Room is practically mandatory.

And that best little swimming hole in Texas? Still the most swimmable spot on the Frio, even in droughts. An 83-foot inflatable waterslide has been added to Neal's swimming hole in a nod to modern times. You can still jump off big boulders into the water, same as ever. Swimming hole access is restricted to Neal's Lodges guests.



FROM TOP: The Frio River with Old Baldy in the background; a father and daughter share a dance at Garner State Park.



TEXAS' YELLOWSTONE

Garner State Park, about 8 miles upriver from Neal's, is the Frio's other "big dog" and a self-contained experience. For many city folk, Garner is their first introduction to the great outdoors in Texas.

The park spreads through 1,774 acres of river valley. The original park buildings were constructed in the 1930s by the Civilian Conservation Corps, which created a look and feel that earn Garner the reputation as Texas' Yellowstone, offering the full-on state park experience for both daytrippers and extended-stay guests. It is by far the most popular overnight camping

destination in the state parks system.

The Frio runs through Garner for almost 3 miles. If rope swings and fishing poles aren't enough, there are tubes, floats, paddleboats, and kayaks for rent.

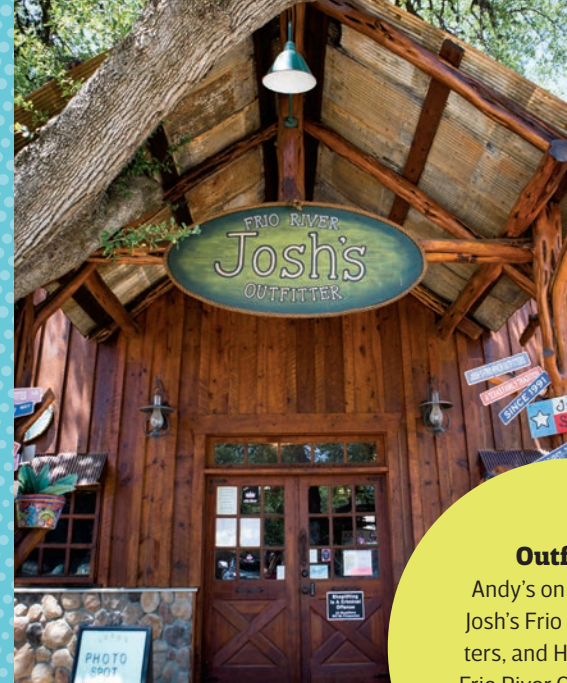
The river is only part of the adventure at Garner. Among the 15 miles of hiking trails is the steep, must-do half-mile trail to the top of Old Baldy, the landmark 480-foot bluff overlooking the park with sweeping views of Frio Canyon. Other hikes lead to Crystal Cave and White Rock Cave, and to geocaches located throughout the park.

Garner has amenities and amusements not found at other Texas state parks—a gift and souvenir store with camping supplies and firewood, a laundry room, the Garner Grill food trailer, a miniature golf course, snow cones at the Garner Boat House, an ice cream shop, and the Stinkin' Sweet candy store.

On summer evenings from Memorial Day to Labor Day, crowds gather at the limestone-and-cypress pavilion to dance to music played on Garner's jukebox, arguably the most famous jukebox in Texas, a tradition that goes back to the 1940s. "Garner State Park," recorded by singer B.J. Thomas and his band The Triumphs in 1965, is the last song played at every dance. The parking lot fills up by 8:30 p.m. for summer dances. Admission for non-park guests is \$8 for adults.

In other words, don't come to Garner State Park expecting solitude, peace, and quiet, unless it's the offseason. But if you want to experience an active, full-blast celebration of summer in the great outdoors, this is where it's at.

Spoiler alert: Garner is so popular that planning ahead of time is required. Purchase admission fees and reserve camping sites online or by telephone before coming. Even then, expect to wait for an hour or longer to check in. The park regularly reaches capacity by noon from May through August (more like 10 a.m. on weekends) and additional day-use visitors are turned away. Real-time updates are posted on Garner's Facebook and Twitter feeds. Regulars know to reserve spaces for overnight camping at Garner in the summer five months in advance.



Outfitters

Andy's on River Road, Josh's Frio River Outfitters, and Happy Hollow Frio River Outfitters rent tubes and offer shuttle services on the Frio.

OUTDOORS, OFF THE WATER

Frio Canyon is also a popular destination for hiking, mountain biking, cliff jumping, birding, bat watching, and motorcycle riding. More than 225 bird species have been sighted in Frio Canyon, including the much sought-after endangered golden-cheeked warbler. Hill Country Adventures' nature center, 5 miles east of Garner State Park, has hiking, birding, and mountain biking trails on its property, in addition to offering guided nature hikes and kayak tours. Between March and September, the second-largest single mammal population in the world, 10 to 20 million Mexican free-tailed bats, emerge from Frio Cave every evening at dusk, 6 miles southeast of Concan. Adults \$12. 888-502-9387; friobatflight.com

If Old Baldy in Garner State Park isn't towering enough, Holt Helicopters offers even higher views of Frio Canyon on Fridays and Saturdays in the summer next to the House Pasture Cattle Company in Concan. \$50 per person on a first-come, first-served basis. 830-278-9463; holthelicopters.com

If you prefer being where the crowds aren't, go against the grain and time your Frio visit during the week instead of weekend; in May, late August, or September, instead of June or July; or in spring when bird migration peaks, autumn when the cypress trees turn golden, or winter when all is quiet and the stargazing is at its most brilliant.

A TRIP INTO TOWN

Leakey, with a population under 500, is the commercial center of Frio Canyon with several independent cafés, retailers, and businesses; the only chain business in town is a convenience store. Leakey Mercantile is your best bet for whatever you need. Restaurants include the Bent Rim Grill west of town, Mill Creek Cafe, Mama Chole's, and Chickin' Earls, a quirky fried-chicken emporium open only on Tuesday and Fridays. Watch out for motorcycles: Leakey is the resting stop for weekend motorcycle excursionists riding the Three Sisters (Ranch Roads 335, 336, and 337), the Hill Country's most famous rides.



FROM TOP: Josh's Outfitters in Concan; hikers enjoy the view from the top of the summit of Old Baldy in Garner State Park.

CHOCK FULL OF HISTORY

Human habitation in Frio Canyon dates back 12,000 years. When Spanish explorer Alonso De León encountered the river in 1689, he declared it the Río Sarco—roughly translated as "the river of light blue color."

If you're curious about the past around

these parts, the Real County Historical Museum in Leakey, a half block from the courthouse, is full of artifacts telling the stories of people who settled the canyon in the 19th and early 20th century. Or stop by the Garner State Park Visitor Center.

"The first advice I give is to respect the area," says Linda Kirkpatrick, who retired in April as the

visitor center manager. "The quiet, the stars, the trees, the flowers, animals like they have never seen before. They will embrace the jackrabbits that one young lady swore just yesterday was a kangaroo, and she had a photo to prove it."

OK. Got all that? Now you know. You're a Frio pro. Time to go start your own family vacation tradition. 🐾