

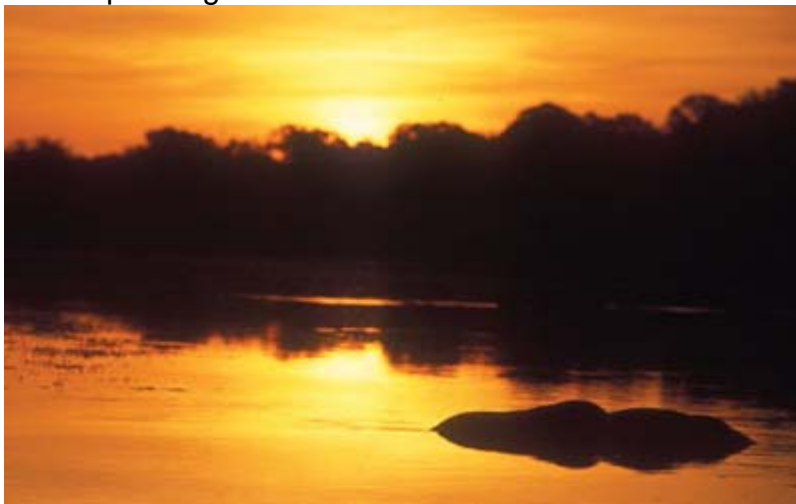
Regional Spotlight – Brady, Mason and Junction

Rivers Run Through It

GET BACK TO NATURE AT THESE HIDEAWAYS IN THE HILLS

By Melissa Gaskill

ON THE WESTERN EDGE OF THE HILL COUNTRY, in and around a triangle formed by Junction, Brady and Mason, nestle countless settings perfect for certain types of events. Those centered around, say, outdoor activities such as bird watching, kayaking or hiking. Retreats sans distractions that invite you to relax on the porch, or sit back and soak up the starry skies. After all, dozens of studies prove that spending time in nature reduces stress.



Brady

Charles and Nancy Becker's 700-acre ranch surrounds Dry Hollow Hideaway guest-house, 60 miles northwest of Brady. Bunk up to 12 people in two bedrooms flanking a great room with a fireplace and fully-equipped kitchen. The 12-foot-wide covered porch overlooks two small lakes (where everyone can fish or canoe later).

Teri Covert, administrative coordinator for Healthy Families San Angelo, holds training retreats here. "The Beckers had everything set up," she says, "and brought fresh breakfast every morning. We had presentations outside and inside, and broke into small groups. It's perfect for a business retreat or meeting. We ended early and spent the evening barbecuing and relaxing."

Mason

Raye Carrington on the Llano River's compound of cabins facing the water, about 10 miles south of Mason, accommodates 26. Carrington teaches fly-casting on the grassy shoreline before turning folks loose to fish. Breakfast is served in the Great Room, where other meals and meetings can be arranged. Kayaks and canoes are available, along with trails for walking, bird watching or biking.

At the hacienda-style, four-room Kothmann Creek Inn, 16 miles south of Mason, owner Nonie Stringer hosted a seated dinner, including wine tastings and music, for more than 200 Habitat for Humanity supporters. "I refer people to Nonie all the time," says attendee Elaine Overgaard, senior sales manager for the Hilton Post Oak, Houston. "Her food is wonderful. Out there you can see the stars at night. It's a good place to take small corporate groups for stress management, to just sit on the porch."

On Highway 29 between Mason and Menard, the 750-acre Hat Creek Cabins has six two-bedroom cabins, and a large common room with a commercial kitchen. Trails criss-cross the ranch, which is dotted with small ponds perfect for paddling a canoe, swimming, fishing (no license required) or as the backdrop for a barbecue or picnic.

Homer Martin Ranch offers a more camp-like experience in nine cabins deep into 2,800 acres just south of Mason. A main building includes a fully-equipped commercial kitchen, 50-capacity dining room and social room. Guests can fish or swim in the river, mountain bike, walk, or arrange canoe or kayak outings. "It's mainly for people who want to relax and hang out," says owner Homer Martin. "We have had executive and management retreats here."

Junction

CAVU Canyon Ranch just east of Junction sleeps 12 in three cottages situated along a creek. Erin Fry of Houston booked the facility for a family reunion. "We ended up around the fire pit, roasting marshmallows and drinking wine. We walked quite a bit. It worked well for a big group; everyone could stay together but have privacy at the same time."

A few miles outside Junction, the wide, covered porch of Cool River Cabin overlooks Native American Seed farm fields. The two-bedroom-and-loft house is a short walk from the Llano River, where guests can canoe, kayak or fish. A weekend retreat for officers in the Native Plant Society of Texas was, says Jolyn Piercy, former treasurer of the Austin chapter, "a blast." The group went out on kayaks, rode bikes, did a plant survey and toured the farm. "We went for night walks because the night sky is so wonderful. The cabin is off to itself and very private. Everything we needed was there."

Nearby Red Creek Nature Ranch, a working ranch since 1909, fronts three miles of creek. Guests in two no-frills cabins have access to four bird blinds, walking trails and roads for bicycling.

Supper Time!

In Junction, Sunshine Café & Bakery caters events, with menus running the gamut from barbecue to "fancy stuff," says Becky Long, co-owner with brother David Lawrence, who used to cater at the Ohio State Fair Grounds. The bakery makes pies with meringue higher than a debutante's hair, and a slew of other delicious items. Or get into the Texas spirit with authentic barbecue brisket, turkey, chicken, pork and cabrito from Cooper's Bar-B-Q.

At Jacoby Café near Brady, order steaks from Angus cattle raised here on the Jacoby Ranch. Tender meat is sold by the pound, but the beer and beans are free at Hard Eight Pit BBQ, rated one of Texas' top 50 BBQ joints.

In Mason, the specialty is fresh, homemade Mexican food at Santos Taqueria on the square, and Sandstone Cellars serves Texas wines next door.

Keller's Riverside Store, a restaurant and former blacksmith shop on Highway 87 south of Mason, overlooks the Llano River. Jeff Durst, owner of The Green House, Mason's natural health store, has booked events here. "There is more atmosphere on the river. The historic blacksmith shop is unique. Crockett is personable and puts his stamp on everything. It is also completely private."

Many Reasons to Visit

Obviously, beautiful scenery and rivers are main attractions here. Fly-fishing, canoe and kayak excursions are cool. Another big attraction is, well, the lack of big attractions.

"It is so quiet and peaceful," says Lynn Foreman, owner of CAVU Canyon Ranch and president of Central Texas Hills & Rivers Region, a six-county organization. "If you have to get something accomplished without any distractions, this is the place to go. It's perfect for small groups that want team building or board meetings."

Local caterers and others bend over backward for visitors, says Nicki Harle, executive director, Texas Midwest Community Network. "They go all out for you, and it is so down-home, friendly and affordable. When small communities like these have visitors, they make you feel right at home."

Margaret Hoogstra, regional coordinator for the Texas Forts Trail, has held and attended meetings in the area. "The local chambers of commerce help with set up and registration, coordinating catering, everything. I wouldn't hesitate to recommend hosting a meeting here."

The area has several must-sees, including Campbell Ranch in Paint Rock, where Kay and Fred Campbell give guided tours of more than 1,000 ancient pictographs (appointments preferred). A nightly "bat tornado" is created at Eckert James River Bat Cave Preserve, southwest of Mason, when one of the country's largest bat nurseries emerges, mid-May through October. Catch a first-run movie at the oldest continually operating theater in Texas, the Odeon Theatre, on the square in Mason, Friday through Mondays. Tickets under \$5— with a price like that, you can bring the whole group—if you can get them off the porch.

*IN TOUCH

CAVU Canyon Ranch

325.446.9135 / www.cavucanyonranch.com

Central Texas Hills and Rivers Region

325.446.9133 / www.texashillsanddrivers.org

Cool River Cabin on the Llano River
866.417.4837 / www.seedsource.com

Cooper's Bar-B-Q
325.446.8664

Eckert James River Bat Cave Preserve
www.nature.org/wherewework/northamerica/states/texas/preserves/art6022.html

Hard Eight Pit BBQ
325.597.1936 / www.hardeightbbq.com

Jacoby Café
800.329.2080 / www.jacobyfeed.com

Keller's Riverside Store
325.347.0055 / www.kellersstore.com

Kothmann Creek Inn
325.347.5220 / www.kothmannranch.com

Martin Guest Ranch
325.347.6852 / www.homermartinranch.com

Paint Rock Excursions
325.732.4376 / www.paintrockpictographs.com

Raye Carrington on the Llano River
325.347.3474 / www.llanoriver.com

Santos Taqueria
325.347.6140 / www.santostaqueria.com

Sunshine Café & Bakery
325.446.2497