

TEXAS HIGHWAYS--MASON CO.--MALLORY

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Along scenic Hill Country backroads discover ...
MASON COUNTY BLUE

OR

**MASON COUNTY:
HILL COUNTRY GEM**

If Mason County ever takes a poll on an official color, vote blue.

Indeed, the pastel blue topaz found here already bears the title "Official State Gem," courtesy of the Texas Legislature. And who wouldn't rally 'round the area's deep azure skies--viewed straight up or reflected in clear creeks and rivers?

But the main campaign for Mason blue emerges in spring in a landslide of color. That's when Texas bluebonnets (the official state flower) burst into bloom, blanketing hills and hollows. With Indian paintbrushes and prickly poppies mixed in, the countryside seems decorated by a bunting of red, white, and mostly blue.

For visitors eager to "vote blue" each spring, the Mason Chamber of Commerce makes it easy by providing a guide to three scenic drives which start at Mason's historic square. They take you down 120 miles of paved and well-maintained dirt roads during April and May when wildflowers reach their

peak...and when wildlife abounds within easy eyesight of roadways.

Myriad birds flutter among scattered clumps of mesquite and liveoak trees. Small groups of whitetail deer graze in meadows lush with green grass and wildflowers. Jackrabbits the size of small dogs zig-zag beneath underbrush. And, on a rare occasion, wild turkeys gobble by.

Mason County's German heritage permeates all three scenic drives. In the 1840s and 1850s German-origin farm families began moving northward from the Fredericksburg area to this area to farm and ranch. They cleared fields of stones and, in the days before barbed wire, stacked them into fences to keep cattle out of their crops. Today, rock fence remnants stretch along many roadsides, flanked by stone farmhouses, water tanks, barns, and churches more than a century old. (Don't be shocked, however, by the sight of an occasional tennis court. A tennis stronghold since the 1970s, Mason County sports twenty-three private and 10 public courts and hosts major public tournaments annually.)

The longest wildflower drive, the 50-mile-long Fredonia-Pontotoc Drive jaunts past fields of peanuts, a top local farm product, once you leave Mason. At Fredonia, an old general store, blacksmith shop, and antique windmill suggests rural life of an earlier era. At the community of Art, the Upper Willow Creek General Merchandise and Feed Store has brought new life to an 1883 store and post office. On a gas-and-wood cookstove, Mary Ann Lockeby makes breakfast and hamburgers all day, plus blueplate specials from 11 until everything's gone. If you've got the time, her husband, Larry, will show you his collection of "old stuff"--including shelves filled with metal toys and cowboy and Indian figurines he played with as a child, as well as tools handed down by his father.

Across the road from the store, the Art United Methodist Church actually comprises two 19th-century churches in one. After the Civil War, internal squabbles divided the church into two factions, each of which erected its own

building. In the 1940s, members reunited and moved their congregations and their church structures back together again.

Down the road, at the Hasse House Bed & Breakfast, innkeeper Lavern Lee loves showing guests around the stone house which her great-grandparents, Heinrich and Fredericka Hasse, built in 1883. The B&B, part of a working ranch, features a two-mile nature trail.

Forty-four-mile-long Hilda Drive passes numerous 19th-century German farmhouses, including the striking Brandenberger House with its red and white stonework and wide view of the surrounding pastoral countryside. Nearby, down a dirt lane, the Hilda Methodist Church displays fine cut stonework and Gothic arches built by skilled German craftsmen around the turn of the century. In April the country church sits in a sea of bluebonnets. The drive also passes the 1884 Ben Grote Ranch House, once a Pony Express stop, and the elegant two-story Ellerbracht House (ca. 1850s), framed by a picturesque rock fence.

The 24.5-mile-long Lower Willow Creek Drive is the shortest and perhaps most laid-back of the three wildflower tours. Mostly a dirt lane, the drive makes for slow going. But the easy pace affords you the chance to roll down your windows, smell the scent of wildflowers in the air, and enjoy more rock fences, old farm structures, and a one-room schoolhouse reborn as the Art Community Center. You even get the chance to navigate a low-water crossing or two.

The drive takes you past another B&B located on a working ranch and farm. In 1996 Willow Creek Ranch Bed & Breakfast owners Kay and Dennis Evans turned the smokehouse and root cellar of their 1870s-era farmstead into a quaint, cozy guest cottage and wine cellar. A short walk from the cottage, the Llano River borders the ranch for a quarter mile, with tranquil pools for wading or swimming and shallow rapids that flow past the ruins of a water wheel.

At the Llano, you might want to toss a hook in its crystal-clear, slow-moving waters. (There are several other river crossings in the county as well.) River fishing, including fly fishing, remains a long-standing tradition for locals and visitors alike. A roaring flood in 1997, however, washed away normally teeming bass and sunfish populations, says fly fishing guide Leonard Wilson. But there's a silver lining, he adds. With much of their food supply (bass and sunfish) reduced, large river catfish--yellows, channels, and humpback blues--remain all the more hungry for anglers' bait.

If you're hungry after a morning's ramble along the county's wildflower drives, stop by Cooper's Pit Bar-B-Q, in Mason where owner Duard Dockal smokes meats on the premises. In fact, you can select your portion of beef, chicken, pork, or cabrito right from his smoker. For dine-in patrons, Duard serves his hearty fare the old-fashioned way on butcher paper; then you add what sauce you want and choose side orders such as beans, cole slaw, and potato salad.

Freshly prepared foods also await you on Mason's downtown courthouse square at the Willow Creek Cafe. You can't miss this eatery's turn-of-the-century cast-iron front, tall glass windows, and wide doors--holdovers from its previous life as a Model-T Ford showroom. Inside, owners Cindy and James Morris show good taste in decor as well as dishes. Exposed brick walls, pleasant paintings, and high ceilings create a light and airy atmosphere. Lunch specials range from King Ranch chicken to chicken fried steak, with vegetarian entrees thrown in for variety. Dinners lean toward steaks, salads, and homemade desserts.

After lunch, why not saunter next door to the chamber of commerce and pick up their informative guide to a walking tour of the courthouse square. It's one of Texas' few "two-block squares," meaning it forms a rectangle two blocks long and one block wide.

The 1910 Classical Revival Mason County Courthouse--in which almost every room has a fireplace trimmed with ornate pressed metal-- dominates the square. Beneath towering pecan trees on the courthouse lawn, the statue of a trail driver pays tribute to ranching, the area's economic mainstay for more than 100 years. Local sculptor Mitch Mikeska created the piece. Its base bears the names of early pioneers--including one cattlegwoman, Anna Martin, reportedly also the first woman bank president in Texas. Across the street from the courthouse, the bank she founded, now called Commercial Bank, displays caricature woodcarvings about ranch life created by Gene Zesch, a nationally-known artist from Mason.

For a leathery feel of Mason's Old West heritage, stop by Schooley Saddlery. Steve Schooley moved his saddle shop from San Angelo two years ago. Now he builds saddles from scratch and sells many of them through dealers back East. He also crafts belts, holsters, and purses at his shop.

Local heritage, western and otherwise, thrives on the square. At Davenport Pharmacy, historical photos on display chronicle the growth of the county seat. A chat with owner and local historian Grace Ray Davenport reveals her years of research on the history of buildings on the square. More history awaits you at the Mason Square Bed & Breakfast. Built in the late 1880s, the structure served as the Buckhorn Saloon from around 1900 to 1905 and still contains a well and pump that supplied water for the entire block. Innkeepers Monica and Brent Hinckley line the walls of their upstairs B&B with original maps of Texas and the Southwest, dating from 1601 to 1905. The inn's second-floor balcony offers a grand view of downtown.

On the square's west side, restoration continues on the 1920s Odeon Theater. Operated as a movie house until 1993, it premiered Walt Disney's *Old Yeller*, based on a novel by Mason native Fred Gipson. (The M. Beven Eckert

Memorial Library has a permanent exhibit on Fred Gipson's life and work.)

Today, the Odeon periodically features classic films and live performances.

The square proffers plenty of antique shops...some with surprises. One shop, Antiques and Crafts, resides where the Airdome Open Air Theater featured entertainers in the early 1900s performing in traveling tent shows. Today, the building houses not only antiques but also Hemphill Insurance and Kendal Hemphill's Rock Bottom Canoe Company. Kendal rents canoes and sit-on-top kayaks for floating the Llano River during high water.

Other antique shops and stores on or near the square sell Mason County's most prized geological treasure, topaz. Underwood Antique Mall sells and cuts several kinds of gemstones, including the famous pale blue topaz. You can also find cut topaz at Benjie's Books & Gifts and Antique Emporium, as well as Country Collectibles, home of Big Blue, a 587-karat topaz stone that's one of the largest pieces of topaz ever found in the county, says owner Doris Grote.

If you prefer gemstones au naturel, you can dig for them yourself a few miles northwest of Mason. Treasure seekers come, shovels and strainers in hand, searching for topaz and quartz among granite outcroppings rimmed with spring-fed streams and flower-covered meadows.

"Some people dig just about anywhere, anytime," reports rockhound Tom Zayko, who, several years ago, moved to the county because of its geologic wealth. "But it's best to dig in low areas right after a rain where topaz or quartz may have washed from rocks higher up."

Even if you come away empty-handed, topaz hunting makes for a relaxed day's outing on the two private ranches which open their lands to the public, the Hoffman Ranch and the Seaquist Ranch,

The Seaquists also open up another family treasure--one of Mason's top two tourist attractions--the 1880s Seaquist House, a 22-room mansion listed in

the National Register of Historic Places. The three-story landmark features 24 inch-thick carved limestone walls, 16 fireplaces, and an 1,800-square-foot ballroom complete with fiddler's roost. On tours, Mike Seaquist tells how his Swedish immigrant grandfather Oscar Seaquist, who bought the house in 1919, added a tall stone water tower in the Twenties to increase water pressure on the third floor. At the same time, luxury-minded Grandfather Seaquist added inside the tower a 12-foot round shower room with pipes spraying water from above, as well as from the sides.

You'll find Mason's other top tourist draw located a half-mile up Post Hill Street from the square. In 1851, the U.S. Army established Fort Mason on an elevated site overlooking an artesian spring. The cavalry outpost, one of a line of forts stretching from the Red River to the Rio Grande, offered protection from Indian attacks for settlers and travelers headed west. Today, the fort site offers a panoramic view of the town that grew up around it. A reconstructed officer's quarters, the only structure on the site, sits on its original foundations.

The fort and, consequently, the town and county had been named in honor of George T. Mason, a soldier killed near Brownsville in a skirmish leading up to the American-Mexican War of 1846. After the army abandoned the fort in 1869, area residents dismantled all 20 military buildings and used their red sandstones to build many of the Victorian homes which now make up the Mason National Register Historic District, located between the fort and the square.

A historical footnote: 48 officers stationed at Fort Mason--including Robert E. Lee and Albert Sidney Johnston--later became generals in the Civil War, explains local author Jerry Ponder who, last year, published *Fort Mason, Texas: Training Ground for Generals* .

A training ground of a wilder sort lies along a remote stretch of Mason County's James River. Around dusk, from mid-May to mid-October, hushed

visitors nestle down on wooden benches at the Eckert James River Bat Cave Preserve to watch four to six million free-tailed bats stream from one of the nation's largest maternity bat caves. Early in the season, adults go out on their nightly feeding foray, leaving their newborn behind. As they mature, the young bats then try out their wings by joining the twisting "bat tornado," which takes more than an hour to emerge from the cave.

The phenomenal bat emergence has fascinated nature-lovers for generations, says Clinton Schulze, mayor of Mason since 1988. The mayor's grandfather, W. Phillip Eckert, bought the ranch on which the cave is located in 1904. "It has always been quite an event. People would picnic along the river, then go watch the bats come out of the cave."

For more than 50 years, the Eckert family mined the cave's accumulated bat guano--using cable cars drawn at first by horses, then, later, by Model T trucks--and sold it as fertilizer to area farmers. In 1991, the family donated the cave to the Nature Conservancy of Texas with the stipulation that it remain open to the public for enjoyment and education.

It's a shame bats can't vote. As they swirl into the darkening sky over rolling hillsides cascading with wildflowers, they might want to vote Mason blue, too.