

TEXAS HIGHWAYS—W. KERR CO.—MALLORY

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West Kerr County

## *A River Runs Through It*

OR

## *West Kerr County: River Retreat*

LEAD-IN COPY:

*A kind climate, famed folk music festival, and Hill Country charm make Kerrville a perennial darling of Texas travelers. Drive west from Kerrville just seven miles more and discover a long-standing summer hideaway called West Kerr County.*

Spring-fed headwaters rise a few miles apart in West Kerr County. Flowing clear and cool through limestone canyons, they form the north and south forks of the Guadalupe River. The steady streams spawned a tourist industry beginning in the 1920s. Family vacation cabins and summer youth camps sprang up along

the bald cypress-lined banks. (The area still sports one of the state's largest numbers of summer camps.)

These days, West Kerr County boasts a diverse menu of natural and cultural attractions along scenic two-laners that meander through Ingram, Hunt, Divide, and Mountain Home. A jaunt last summer dished me up a WKC sampler plate. Art galleries and outdoor entertainment. Riverfront lodgings and relaxed eateries. Even a replica of Britain's Stonehenge. All beckon against a backdrop of high rolling hills and emerald waters.

### **Texas 39--Ingram to Hunt**

Ingram marks the jumping-off spot for a WKC visit. My outing begins at the West Kerr County Chamber of Commerce where manager Wanda Lucas loads me up with information.

I head west on Texas 39. First stop—the Old Ingram Loop, home to 20-plus art studios and shops.

At Don Atkinson's custom boot and saddle shop, the leather master looks up from his work long enough to spin yarns about famous customers—such as musician Hank Williams and Bob Wills and cowboy Larry Mahan. At Stage House Gallery, 1995 Texas State Artist Roy Lee Ward is out, but wife, Betty, shows me his "Western Historical" style. I can almost hear the cattle bawling in his finely-detailed cowboy paintings.

Over at River Wood Studio, Darrin Potter describes how he gathers pieces of weathered driftwood and carves them into striking wildlife art. "Some pieces

become birds, some fish,” Darrin says. “The wood sort of tells me what it wants to become.”

Strolling the loop, I turn up diverse offerings: Latin American imports at Horsefeathers; off-beat lamp shades at Custom Lamps & Shades; Americana antiques at Southwestern Elegance; and Raku pottery at McKee’s Pottery.

Across Johnson Creek from the Old Ingram Loop sits WKC’s top entertainment draw—the Hill Country Arts Foundation. (See the story on page XX.) Just upstream lies Ingram Lake, a wide spot in the river impounded by a concrete dam during the drought of the 1950s.

Skiers churn up the “lake,” but what fascinates me are the “dam sliders.” These daredevils ride inner tubes down the 100 feet of the dam’s slippery spillway. Sneaker-clad extreme sliders zip down the 45-degree slope standing up.

I find calmer recreation a few twists along Texas 39. Families pitch horseshoes, ride horseback, pond fish, and hang out in 14 cedar and rock cottages at the riverfront Roddy Tree Ranch.

Growing up, Gretchen Asbury spent summers with her grandparents, Rhea and Allie Roddy, down the road from here at a home place called The Roddy Tree. When Gretchen and husband Keith bought an existing 40-acre vacation retreat in 1996, they renamed it Roddy Tree Ranch.

“We offer activities we enjoyed as a family,” Gretchen tells me as we walk past the playground, pool, and petting zoo. “Our repeat customers end up our friends.” Keith invites musician friends over every Friday night in the summer.

As the “River Rats,” they play country-western and classic rock tunes at a free public dance at the ranch.

### **Texas 39—South Fork River Road**

I breeze by other attractive lodgings on this slow-moving reach of the Guadalupe—home of the state fish, the Guadalupe bass. Canoeists drift along in a verdant world: Overhead, a canopy of trees reflects green in the mirror-like water below. At Schumacher’s Crossing, Texas 39 crosses the river. Families picnic at a roadside park, and bathers wade in whitewater cascading over a low dam shaded by giant cypresses.

At Hunt, the road and the river split. Texas 39 follows the south fork, and RR 1340 the north fork. I consider a burger and beer at the relaxed hangout, the Hunt Store. This time I choose nearby Elaine’s Table.

Elaine and Bruce Bicknell opened the eatery in 1998 in a Thirties-era stone cottage. “Our goal was to spoil Hunt,” says Elaine. “I think we’ve done it.” No wonder—with homemade selections of crisp salads and dressings, soups and sandwiches, fresh seafood and steaks, and lavish desserts. My apple pie was about the best I’ve sampled.

Texas 39 shadows the south fork past busy summer camps.

Non-campers drop into the water from the end of a rope swing at Casa Bonita Lodges. An old sign touting “refrigerated air” tells how long this getaway has hosted vacationers. Indeed, the well-kept place opened in 1938, now offering 14 kitchen-equipped cabins, pool and hot tub, BBQ pits, and lawns for volleyball and badminton. “We have a 50-year-old guest who says he first came

here in diapers and has been back every year since,” says innkeeper Dave Nicholson.

Another “old-timer,” Crider’s, nestles into a bluff upriver. Bill and Tracey Moore run the self-proclaimed state’s “oldest outdoor dancehall with a rodeo.” Bill’s granddad, Tom Moore, opened Crider’s in the 1920s. It stages a western band every Friday night in the summer, with Texas two-stepping under the stars. I drop by on Saturday night, when music and boot-scootin’ follows a rodeo featuring local cowboys and cowgirls.

My south fork exploration ends at two primo lodgings.

Al and Sandra Eyster turned their river home into a bed and breakfast five years ago. The three-unit Sundown Carriage House B&B overlooks a secluded bend in the south fork. On the deck, I find two Houston couples—Richard and Collier Blades and Paul and Dana Gill—enjoying a wine and cheese happy hour. They picked up their kids from a nearby camp and decided to hang around for full-family R&R. “Sandra serves such a wonderful breakfast,” says Collier. Paul adds, “We like this so much, we’ve already booked for next summer.”

Every where I go in West Kerr County, I run into repeat visitors.

Farther upstream, I encounter Bill Price and his six daughters floating in tubes at the River Inn Resort. “Our family’s come every summer since this place opened,” says Bill. That was 1969, the year after the resort relocated 60 motel-style condos here from San Antonio’s HemisFair ‘68. Families like Bill’s swim and float the river, ride the “Flume” waterslide, and picnic on shady, grassy banks. “This is one of the Hill Country’s best-kept secrets,” he says.

## **RR 1340—Hunt to Divide**

Back at Hunt, I track the north fork via RR 1340. Around a sweeping curve looms a time-warp to prehistoric Britain. I stop at Stonehenge II, a roughly half-scale replica of Stonehenge, England's legendary megalithic circle of stones. Created in the late 1980s by locals Doug Hill and the late Al Shepperd, it's a dead ringer, even though it's made of painted plaster over metal instead of stone. Doug also added two huge Easter Island-type statues. What a great place to play hide-and-seek! Instead, I head upstream.

Near the north fork's headwaters, I take an eight-mile drive through 6,500-acre Kerr Wildlife Management Area. This is Edwards Plateau habitat. The scrubby savannah of grass mixed with cedar, oak, and mesquite supports white-tailed deer and wild turkey. Three endangered species—black-capped vireo, golden-cheeked warbler, and Tobusch fishhook cactus—are making a comeback here.

RR 1340 rises nearly 800 feet onto a broad ridge that divides the land. Rainfall flows in different directions from this highland, known as "The Divide," says local historian Clarabelle Snodgrass of Kerrville. At the community of Divide (where RR 1340 intersects Texas 41), I drive by the Divide School, established in 1882. A stone, red-roofed one-room school built in 1936 stands beside two rooms added since. As one of the state's smallest independent public schools, it serves 20 elementary students from nearby ranches.

One-half mile east on Texas 41 is WKC's most famous ranch, the Y.O. Ranch. Early Texas Ranger, Charles Schreiner, started the ranch in 1880 and

made a fortune driving 300,000 head of cattle to Kansas along the Western Trail. His descendants still run the 40,000-acre working ranch left from the original half-million-acre property. The Y.O. claims Texas' largest registered longhorn herd (some 1,200), plentiful native wildlife, and 50 species of exotic animals. Guests include hunters in search of native and exotic species, plus tourists eager for a rustic ranch experience. Visitors stay in Western-motif lodges or restored 1880s-era cabins and eat longtime cook Bertie Varner's homemade fare served family-style.

I only have time for a wildlife tour. Horseback riding will have to wait. Rambling across bumpy roads, my bus group spots free-roaming African species such as giraffe, zebra, ostrich, and spotted fallow. Many are so tame, they eat out of your hand. Fellow traveler Sachiko Yaota of Nagoya, Japan, shows her son, Shuhei, the fine art of feeding grain to an interested elks deer—palms up so your fingers don't get nibbled!

### **Texas 41—Mountain Home to Ingram**

A 15-minute drive east on Texas 41 takes me to Mountain Home and Texas 27, which loops back to Ingram. A mile east on Texas 27, I pull over at a small roadside park with a large view of Johnson Creek. The park sits atop a limestone bluff which stair-steps down to water's edge. The rippling blue creek snakes its way toward Old Ingram and the Guadalupe. I'm almost back where I started.

But there's one more stop along the winding bluff road—Lazy Hills Guest Ranch. Bob and Carol Steinruck opened the 750-acre getaway in 1959. Now

semi-retired, they've turned much of the operation over to their son, Robbie, and his wife, Beth.

Many families and groups come back for reunions year after year, Beth says. I see why. All ages can recreate at the pool, playground, shuffle board, and courts for volleyball, basketball, and tennis. Then there's horseback riding and pond fishing throughout the day—plus ample group meeting space.

The Steinrucks make sure each guest experiences their Hill Country air along with Hill Country fare (three meals a day are provided). Most meals are served in the rustic dining room. But two or three times a week, guests pile onto a hay wagon and ride to a pecan grove beside Henderson Creek for breakfast, lunch or dinner cookouts (cookout meals vary weekly). There, they dine on light-and-fluffy pancakes or barbecued brisket and chicken with all the trimmings.

Several nights a week, guests circle around a campfire for chit-chat and “S'mores” (chocolate and marshmallow melted on graham crackers). “It's very rewarding to see families enjoy themselves together out here in the country,” adds Beth.

**B**eth's words ring in my head, as I drive Texas 27 back to Ingram and on the seven miles more to Kerrville. As I reach Interstate 10, headed home, I pledge to bring *my* family to this blithe place. Here, where spring-fed waters roll down limestone canyons to the Guadalupe. Here, where laid-back hospitality remains a summer tradition. Here in West Kerr County.