

TEXAS

## TRAVELOG

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- ★ Irving CVB recognized with 10 awards, special distinction
- ★ Museum of Fine Arts, Houston receives exclusive access to French impressionists collection
- ★ Galveston's Rainforest Pyramid to reopen in May with a new exhibit and renovations

## TRAVEL NEWS

**T**HE LEISURE and hospitality sector—restaurants, bars, hotels, motels, arts organizations, and entertainment and recreation services—is **bouncing back from recession in Texas** and most other parts of the country.

A Business First analysis of new federal data indicates 30 states and the District of Columbia have experienced increases in leisure and hospitality employment during the past year.

The nation lost 505,000 leisure and hospitality jobs between November 2007 and November 2009, as the recession drastically reduced discretionary spending. But the sector has rebounded during the past year, regaining 150,000 of those jobs.

The largest increases are attributed to Texas (19,100 jobs), California (13,400), Pennsylvania (11,000) and Minnesota (10,400).

**T**HE DALLAS Convention & Visitors Bureau signed a **20-year lease** with developer Matthews Southwest to **move its headquarters** into a new office building that will be constructed **in the eight-acre development that showcases the new Omni Dallas convention hotel.**

"The Dallas CVB will occupy 29,000 square feet on the top two floors of the new, four-story building that is built to suit our business needs, from the boardroom to meeting spaces that capitalize on design efficiencies," says Dallas CVB President and CEO Phillip Jones. "Plans include two restaurants, a business center and retail on the first floor." The CVB also will have usage rights of a 4,000-square-foot rooftop deck with great views of the city skyline, which will be built out as a prime reception and event space.

"It's a perfect move for us across from the new convention center hotel and adjacent to the Dallas Convention Center. This will make it

## VERNON NEAL BILLINGS: OCT. 6, 1942–JAN. 16, 2011

**V**ERNON NEAL BILLINGS, retired supervisor at the Texas Department of Transportation's **Judge Roy Bean Visitor Center, died Jan. 16** at the age of 68.

Billings, a Langtry native who attended Texas A&I University in Kingsville and Sul Ross State College, was "a true Texas gentleman full of West Texas humor and cowboy charm," says Brenda Harper, director of TxDOT's Travel Information Division Travel Services Section. "To many in the tourism industry, he was 'The Judge' and a true ambassador for not only West Texas, but for Texas, TxDOT and the Travel Information Division."

Billings managed the Winters Ranch Company before joining TxDOT in 1987 to manage the Judge Roy Bean Visitor Center. He supervised a \$1 million renovation of the visitor complex.

He retired in 2005 to spend more time with his family, which included his wife Eddie Jean Wurz Billings, daughter J.J. Thompson and son Neal Billings Jr. He often said it was "time to go fishing with the grandkids."

Upon his retirement, the House of Representatives of the 79th Legislature passed a resolution, "as an expression of high regard" to honor "this noteworthy gentleman" for his exceptional tenure with the center. The resolution—H.R. No. 63—also recognized Billings' dedication to his community.

Billings, a Purple Heart recipient who served in the U.S. Army during Vietnam, served on the Comstock School Board from 1977-98. He also served on the Langtry Community Center board of directors since 1972 and the Langtry Water System board since 1985. He was a mem-

ber of the Big Bend Area Travel Association since 1987.

much easier for us to showcase the Dallas Convention Center and sell the city," Jones says.

Dallas Mayor Tom Leppert says "This development is perfectly situated to be the premiere showcase for both the Dallas Convention Center and our city. With its prime location, its stunning views and the anticipated growth in that part of downtown, this facility gives us a competitive edge that will translate into solid convention and tourism business for the city."

In the 15 months since the hotel announcement, the Dallas CVB doubled its citywide bookings compared with the 15 months prior. The bureau has already confirmed 18 citywide

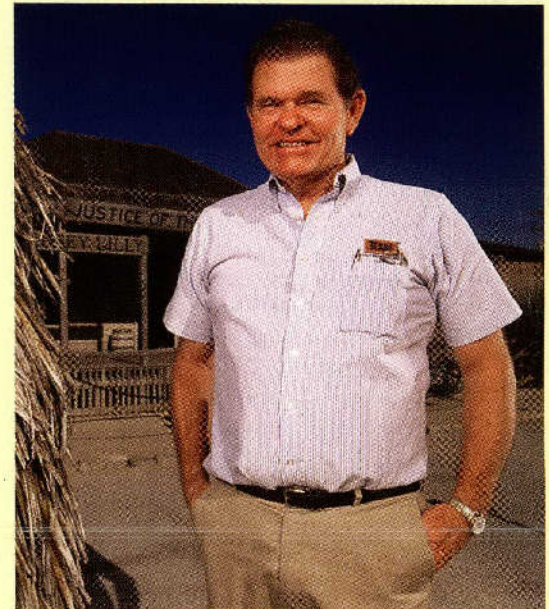
conventions for 2012 and another 19 citywide meetings for 2013, which is significant considering the historic average for the city of Dallas is 14 such conventions annually.

**B**ROWNSVILLE's Sabal Palm Sanctuary, a premier birding destination that closed for budgetary reasons in May 2009, **reopened to the public** at the beginning of this year thanks to an agreement reached by the Gorgas Science Foundation of Brownsville and Audubon Texas.

Audubon will help raise funds for operating expenses during an initial transition period, while GSF becomes

the new overseer of the sanctuary, opening the trails and operating the visitor center with the help of volunteers and donations. Former sanctuary manager Jimmy Paz has returned as a volunteer sanctuary manager.

The Sabal Palm Audubon Sanctuary sits on a 527-acre tract of land on the Rio Grande River and is one of the most uniquely biodiverse habitats in the country. It contains one of the last vestiges of original Sabal Palm forest in the U.S. The sanctuary provides a breeding habitat for many endangered or high-priority birds and is a critical source of shelter and food for migrating and wintering species.



Vernon Neal Billings spent more than 18 years as manager of the Judge Roy Bean Visitor Center in Langtry.

COURTESY OF THE NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART, WASHINGTON

Visitors to the sanctuary can discover more than three miles of nature trails with wildlife viewing areas, a wheelchair-accessible observation deck, forest trail and photo blind.

There also will be wildlife presentations, workshops and special events to encourage local residents to visit.

An 1892 plantation house onsite, built for land preservationist Frank Rabb, will be restored by the GSF and reopened as a visitor center.

The sanctuary will be open from 7 a.m.–5 p.m. daily. Entry fee is \$5 per person.

### WINNING WAYS

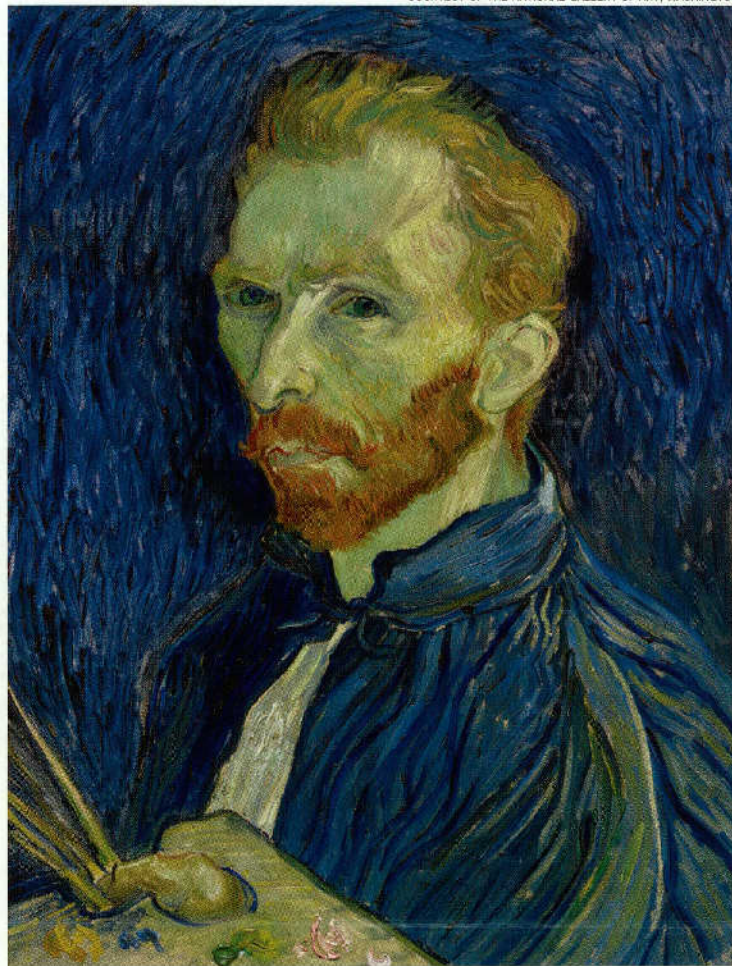
**T**HE IRVING Convention and Visitors Bureau made an outstanding showing as the Hospitality Sales and Marketing Association International Adrian Awards were announced. Aside from taking home 10 awards—the most for any business or CVB this year—the bureau’s vice-president of marketing, **Mark D. Thompson**, was named among the **Top 25 Most Extraordinary Minds in Sales and Marketing for 2010**.

The CVB received four gold, one silver and five bronze awards that were given for top achievements in advertising, digital marketing and public relations in the hospitality, travel and tourism industries.

“The Irving CVB is being honored this year with an amazing 10 Adrian Awards for travel marketing excellence, the most awards for any business or CVB in 2010,” says Fran Brasseur, executive vice president for HSMIAI. “The feedback from Adrian Awards judges was remarkable and indicated that this year’s competition had some of the best work they had seen in their many years of judging, making the Irving CVB’s awards achievement even more impressive.”

Thompson and other Top 25 recipients were judged by a panel of senior industry executives for their recent work based on creativity and innovation, cutting-edge sales or marketing campaigns, triumph in challenging situations, and sales efforts that resulted in dramatic gains.

Thompson, an 18-year industry veteran who joined the Irving Convention and Visitors Bureau in 2004, oversees the CVB’s marketing and communication initiatives.



Vincent van Gogh’s *Self-Portrait* (1889 oil on canvas) and other French impressionist works will be showcased at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.

Irving CVB Executive Director Maura Allen Gast says, “Faced with a year that included beyond-dramatic reductions in resources, the opening of a convention center and the implosion of an iconic landmark, Texas Stadium, he led a team that delivered mightily on every front.”

### ON EXHIBIT

**W**HILE UNDERGOING renovations, the **National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.**, has chosen the **Museum of Fine Arts, Houston** as the **only U.S. venue to host its French Impressionists exhibit** featuring works by 19th and 20th century artists. The 50-piece exhibit, “Impressionist and Post-Impressionist Masterpieces from the National Gallery of Art,” will be on view at the museum’s Audrey Jones Beck Building from Feb. 20 through May 23.

Until now, the National Gallery has never loaned this collection, which is ranked among the finest in the world. It features the works of 17 painters,

including one of Paul Cézanne’s earliest paintings—“The Artist’s Father, Reading L’Evenement”—which he completed in 1866 at the age of 27.

Edgar Degas, a founding member of impressionism, has three works represented, as does Vincent Van Gogh. Auguste Renoir, Édouard Manet, Claude Monet and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec also are represented in the exhibit.

Before his passing in December, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston director Peter C. Marzio, said, “While museums serve as repositories for the world’s art, the collections belong to everyone and serve to enlighten the public about our cultural heritages. This is our third initiative in a decade to bring some of the world’s greatest collections to the public of this region, beginning with the Museum of Modern Art in 2003 and continuing with The Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2007. With this extraordinary selection from the National Gallery of Art, we are once more offering the public in the Southwest and greater Western

region the unique chance to see artistic treasures that complement the MFAH’s own splendid collection, right here in Houston.”

National Gallery of Art Director Earl A. Powell III says, “We are pleased to respond to the MFAH’s request to share these masterpieces with audiences in the Southwest.”

Admission to the exhibit requires a timed-entry ticket, which includes general admission to the museum. Untimed tickets also are available at a premium price.

For information, call (713) 639-7300 or visit [www.mfah.org](http://www.mfah.org).

**M**ORE THAN 11,000 years after an adult male and a young girl were buried near today’s **Clifton, the Bosque Museum presents a replica of the ancient Paleo-American site—today, called the Horn Shelter**—that was discovered in Bosque County in the 1960s.

The 600-square-foot exhibit depicts a portion of the Horn Shelter and portrays the burial of a man and small girl as it took place 11,200 years ago. Another section of the exhibit demonstrates the excavation, along with tools used at the site and a plat of the excavation area that also yielded burial goods such as turtle shells, deer antler tools, bird and animal claws, and coyote teeth.

The site holds particular significance because it is only one of three Paleo-American sites in the U.S. with skeletal remains and burial goods. The exhibit includes replicas of the discovered items and photographs of the originals.

Visitors may view narrative panels about the Horn Shelter, as well as an eight-minute video featuring Albert Redder, one of the archeologists who discovered the double burial. He discusses his interest in archeology and the excavation.

For information, call (254) 675-3845 or visit [www.bosquemuseum.org](http://www.bosquemuseum.org).

**E**L PASO Museum of Archaeology offers a **free exhibit—Settlement Legacy: Native Americans of the Pass of the North**—that explores the **origins of the El Paso and Ciudad Juarez region**. It will run from Feb. 12–Aug. 14, with tribal members attending the exhibit opening.

The exhibit, by guest curator and local anthropologist/historian

Nicholas P. Houser, tells how the region originated with the Manso, Suma, Piro and Tigua tribes who, more than four centuries ago, founded the missions and pueblos that evolved into the sister cities.

This exhibit, including historic images and cultural artifacts, is dedicated to the Tigua Indians of Ysleta del Sur Pueblo but also recognizes the contributions of all of the area's native people.

The Manso and Suma occupied this land when the Spanish arrived and built the first missions. The Tigua and Piro Indians fled south to El Paso del Norte (Ciudad Juarez) after the 1680 Pueblo Revolt in New Mexico, which resulted in the formation of the Ysleta, Socorro and Senecú pueblos.

For more information, visit [www.elpasotexas.gov/arch\\_museum](http://www.elpasotexas.gov/arch_museum).

**W**ITH ITS LATEST acquisitions for the renovated **Rainforest Pyramid, Galveston's Moody Gardens** becomes one of only six zoos and aquariums in the United States to house endangered Giant River Otters, the world's largest.

The three female otters—found only in the rivers and creeks of the Amazon, Orinoco and La Plata river systems in Brazil—are among about 30 Giant River Otters being kept in the United States. They came to Galveston by way of the Philadelphia Zoo.

"The Giant River Otters are a great addition to the Rainforest Pyramid, and we are excited to be among the few facilities in the country to have this amazing animal," says Greg Whittaker, animal husbandry manager at Moody Gardens. "They are very intelligent and curious animals that I'm sure Moody Gardens guests will enjoy watching."

The otters—between two and three years old, weighing about 60 pounds each—will be on exhibit when the Rainforest Pyramid re-opens on May 28. The new exhibit is specially designed for the active otter trio as part of the Rainforest Pyramid's \$25 million enhancement.

The exhibit will feature a sandy riverbank with a complex waterfall feature as well as an area that allows guests to watch training sessions. The exhibit will be viewable from a tree-top canopy-level entrance to the Rainforest Pyramid.

With the completed redesign of the



COURTESY OF MOODY GARDENS

The renovated Rainforest Pyramid at Galveston's Moody Gardens will be unveiled in May to include a unique two-level experience (illustrated here) and a new Giant River Otter exhibit.

Rainforest Pyramid, visitors will be able to explore rainforests of the world from both the ground and the sky, watch new exhibits like the Giant River Otters, and see more than 1,000 species of exotic plants and animals.

For information call (800) 582-4673 or visit [www.moodygardens.org](http://www.moodygardens.org).

### IN THE RANKS

**E**VERY YEAR, AAA evaluates more than 60,000 lodging establishments and restaurants and rates them on a scale of one to five diamonds. With one-diamond properties meeting the basic standards, the **five-star properties—including a few from Texas**—are premier establishments that provide the ultimate in quality and service.

Earning the five-star status is Dallas' Rosewood Mansion on Turtle Creek and the Ritz-Carlton, Dallas, as well as Irving's Four Seasons Resort and Club.

Dallas' The French Room (in The Adolphus hotel) was the only restaurant garnering five stars.

**H**OUSTON ranked among Budget Travel magazine's top value travel destinations for 2011.

The Jan. 7 issue described Houston as "all about scaling down" when

it comes to costs, with a typical meal averaging \$32.50, \$2.50 cheaper than the national average.

The article speaks highly of the Houston Zoo's new African Forest exhibit, downtown's lavish Hotel Icon and the recently created \$39 Houston CityPass, which offers access to any combination of six attractions—including Space Center Houston, Houston Aquarium and Museum of Fine Arts.

Budget Travel says the best time to visit Houston is late spring and mid-autumn—the best odds for T-shirt weather and minimal rain.

Other top spots mentioned, along with Houston, were Colombia; Shanghai, China; the Gulf Coast (Florida, Mississippi and Alabama); Sri Lanka; Jamaica and Alberta; Canada.

**R**EADERS OF *Condé Nast Traveler* magazine have selected their picks for **best places to stay in the world**, and those choices include **Texas establishments**.

Top Texas rankings were doled out to Dallas' Rosewood Crescent Hotel and Rosewood Mansion on Turtle Creek, Houston's Hotel Sorella, San Antonio's Mokara Hotel and Austin's Lake Austin Spa. Rosewood Crescent Hotel, an Uptown hotel in a mixed-use limestone

development, is noted for offering a traditional design of marble flooring from Italy and Spain, French doors and sitting areas in the rooms. Four restaurants include Nobu and are "all so elegant."

Rosewood Mansion on Turtle Creek impressed readers with staff who are "like mind readers" at this former cotton magnate's residence, whose steeple has ornate crosses. "Coral-red velvet couches embolden airy rooms with French doors and peach accents (the hotel's signature color.)"

Hotel Sorella, described as a "modern and borderline hip hotel," features rooms in "European décor with dark hardwood floors, black glass table lamps, upholstered headboard, chaise sofas and ottomans in a deep aubergine velvet."

Lake Austin Spa and Resort was noted as a "Hill Country rustic retreat in a tranquil, green, hilly area" with a "wizard at work in the kitchen."

Mokara Hotel and Spa, San Antonio features rooms with a minimalist décor and "high ceilings, four-poster beds swathed in Egyptian cotton sheets, and oversized marble bathrooms with whirlpool tubs." The hotel restaurant Ostra flies in seafood daily from around the world and there's a "ridiculously large tequila menu" to boot.

TEXAS TRIVIA

What noted event preserves the tradition of the American West in words and music?"

Stated for Feb. 25-27, the Texas Cowboy Poetry Gathering in Alpine—now in its 25th year—is bringing together more than 50 wordsmiths who keep oral traditions alive by sharing poetry, stories and music about the working cowboy. This event, the second-largest cowboy poetry gathering in the country, includes performers from Texas, Utah, South Dakota, Arizona, Oklahoma, Colorado, Nebraska, New Mexico and Kansas, as well as Canada and Australia. The event, held in classrooms and on stages at Sul Ross State University, includes a chuck-wagon breakfast and a student poetry contest. For more information, visit [www.cowboy-poetry.org](http://www.cowboy-poetry.org).

TEXAS TRIVIA

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TEXAS TRAVEL INFORMATION CENTERS

VISITOR NUMBERS as of December 31, 2011

TRAVEL CENTER	Month Visitors	Percent Variation*	Year-to-Date Visitors	Percent Variation*
AMARILLO	4,974	+1.55	91,828	-3.31
ANTHONY	4,923	-26.48	80,242	-5.22
CAPITOL	5,703	-1.96	85,411	+2.30
DENISON	25,745	-10.06	329,214	-11.35
GAINESVILLE	18,565	-20.13	289,775	-4.86
LANGTRY	3,036	-13.48	54,545	-9.66
LAREDO	5,956	-35.76	93,744	-17.02
ORANGE	34,642	+25.19	414,513	-10.56
TEXARKANA	10,919	-60.97	240,445	-23.68
VALLEY	9,769	-34.45	155,265	-0.46
WASKOM	25,229	-24.40	360,953	-8.00
WICHITA FALLS	12,210	+31.79	155,468	-6.27
<b>CENTER TOTALS</b>	<b>161,671</b>	<b>-17.20</b>	<b>2,351,403</b>	<b>-9.74</b>

\*Compared to last year

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