

Travel Log

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A NEWSLETTER FOR THE TEXAS TRAVEL INDUSTRY

T x D O T

With the construction and renovation of seven TxDOT **Texas Travel Information Centers** comes a new **promotional opportunity** for rural and regional tourism organizations and greater metropolitan areas. Beginning in June, display cases in high-traffic areas will be offered free of charge on a first-come, first-served basis. Over the last few years, centers in Anthony, Denison, Langtry, Laredo, Orange, Texarkana and Waskom have been rebuilt or expanded and restored. Display areas in prominent locations were incorporated into each design. Exhibits will showcase photographs and other promotional items from throughout the state. TxDOT's Travel Division will accept the first round of proposals in June. Participants will be selected from qualifying proposals based on date and time of receipt. Exhibit space will rotate to other tourism organizations at six-month intervals. TxDOT will call for proposals each December and June. The program marks the first time exclusive space has been offered for an extended period of time to any entity. For details, contact **Milton Meharg**, **Bobby Johnson** or **Brenda Harper** at 512/486-5800.

MEXICO TRAVEL

It's been on-again, off-again. Folks in the hospitality industry wish it would just go away. At press time, a change in regulations for visitors traveling into **Mexico's interior** was scheduled to go into effect December 1, in spite

of protests from border cities and U.S. representatives. In addition to the \$16.50 permit fee and \$11 documentation fee, a **bond on vehicles** (as far as we know) is now required. The amount ranges from \$400 for models built before 1994 to \$800 for new vehicles. Cash or credit cards are accepted. On their return, visitors can collect their refund at any border post, regardless of where they entered Mexico. Mexican government officials argue the bond is necessary in their never-ending fight against illegal importation and sale of motor vehicles, which, they say, deprives the government of revenues and undermines the domestic auto industry. **Leo Garza**, manager of TxDOT's Travel Information Center in Laredo, said U.S. officials worry the new requirement could hurt tourism and trade. Though Mexican Ambassador **Jesus Reyes Heróles** indicated last month the policy may once again be reviewed, officials in Mexico City have denied they are considering withdrawing the plan.

Y 2 K A N D T H E F A A

For those of you flying off for the holidays to such far-flung places as Iowa and New York, the **Federal Aviation Administration (FAA)** reports major U.S. air carriers are free of **Y2K glitches**. Of 2,822 carriers checked, 91 percent, including the nation's 10 largest airlines, received the highest of three FAA ratings. The top rating indicates the planes have no Y2K issues that would affect their ability to comply with FAA rules. About 200 smaller passenger and cargo carriers still face problems that could prevent them from complying with air safety standards, which could cause flight cancellations or delays.

COMING UP

In 1992 Dallas investors **Joel T. Williams III** and **Roy C. Coffee Jr.** bought a 380-mile stretch of rail between Brownwood and

Presidio and named it the **South Orient Railroad**. Now, seven years later, trains have quit running along a 307-mile section between San Angelo and Presidio, and South Orient Railroad Company Ltd. has lost more than \$9 million. *The Dallas Morning News* reports the owners' attempt to abandoned the unused tracks were defeated by West Texas businesses and political leaders, who claim once gone, the infrastructure could never be replaced. *The News* reports a Mexican holding company could turn out "to be the savior." **GrupoMexico**, which owns controlling interest in a Mexican railroad company, wants to buy the right to operate the line. Experts say GrupoMexico has the resources to revive freight service southwest from San Angelo and offer a gateway to Mexico. Besides the potential to become part of the Big Bend tourism industry, South Orient Railroad hooks up with the Copper Canyon rail line in Mexico, with links from Chihuahua to Los Mochis on the Gulf of Cortez.



HOLIDAY ON ICE Texans dreaming of a white Christmas can find the same picture-perfect nostalgia in Houston's Theater District. The Theater District Association has staged its own version of Rockefeller Center with the addition of an outdoor ice-skating rink in front of the Wortham Theater. Ice Plaza spans the width of Fish Plaza between the Wortham and Texas Avenue, and comes complete with holiday lighting, seasonal music and performing arts. Open daily through **January 2, except December 25 and 31; in the 500 block of Texas Avenue at Smith Street. For hours, call 713/250-3670.**

PLACES

Visitors with a thirst for Old West nostalgia can join the nation's latest **Rails and Trails** program at **Amistad National Recreation Area** near **Del Rio**. The National Park Service has teamed up with Amtrak to provide narrated train rides from Amistad to Sanderson and Alpine. As the train makes its way through the West Texas desert, passengers learn about important landmarks, flora and fauna, cultural and natural history, railroad history, the area's ranching industry and pre-historic people. Exhibits onboard of old photographs, artifacts, rocks and fossils, and prickly pear jelly offer a hands-on experience of the Lower Pecos region. One-way treks to Sanderson; round-trip excursions between Amistad and Alpine. For more info, call Amistad National Recreation Area at 830/775-7491. To book your space, call Amtrak at 1-800-USA-RAIL.

The long-awaited restoration of an East Texas depot marks the return of a bustling train station and the opening of a new museum. The **Marshall Depot and Museum** opened on November 13 with ribbon-cutting and dedication ceremonies featuring keynote speaker Sen. **Kay Bailey Hutchinson** and other

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Ann Kelton, Editor

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TRAVEL TALES OVERHEARD

GAINESVILLE TIC Manager Cheryl Cash reported another first, with the request last month for 17 cone-shaped paper drinking cups. A children's Sunday school class wanted to decorate the cups, fill them with candy and use them as Christmas ornaments. "Just when I thought I'd heard every possible

request, someone came up with something new," Cheryl said.

VALLEY TIC When Sam Martinez isn't managing the center in Harlingen, he's battling his way across the tennis courts. His team in the Men's Spring League placed first, sending them to sec-

tionals in Corpus Christi. When his team in the Mixed Doubles League beat out the rest of the Rio Grande Valley, they worked their way up to last month's national finals in Tucson. This month Sam heads to the D/FW area to compete against other winning teams in the Men's Doubles League.

distinguished guests. The 1911 depot has long been a stop along the Amtrak line. With the structure's \$1.2 million restoration, passengers can now enjoy the convenience of a spacious waiting area. A full-service ticket office will open soon. The museum spotlights railroad history with memorabilia from the Texas & Pacific Railroad, old photographs and model trains. The museum is open Wednesday through Saturday, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., and Sunday, 1 to 4 p.m. At 800 N. Washington. For more info, call 903/935-7868.

Fred Gipson grew up the son of a Mason County cotton farmer. He never fancied a life spent hoeing and baling, so became a famous author instead. In his 12 books and more than 175 published short stories, Gipson brought to life the Texas of his boyhood. In 1956, he penned the story of a boy and his dog, and called it "**Old Yeller**." The folks in **Mason** honored their favorite son with the unveiling on October 2 of a life-size **bronze statue** of the boy and Old Yeller. The monument, which stands on the grounds of the Mason County M. Beven Eckert Memorial Library, was created by **Garland Weeks**, Official Texas State Sculptor of 1995. Call 915/347-9016.

SeaWorld San Antonio and the nearby **Hyatt Regency Hill Country Resort** are offering a holiday package on December

weekends and between Christmas and New Year's Day. The new **Family Animal Adventure** includes comfortable accommodations at a renowned resort and personalized interaction with whales, sea lions, walrus, sharks, penguins and other ocean animals. For an additional fee, participants can opt for the Beluga Interaction Program for unforgettable encounters with great white whales. To register, call 210/523-3900.

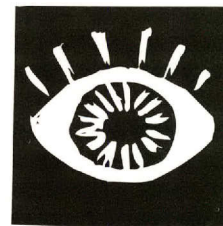
After 12 years as one of **Fredricksburg's** most endearing attractions, the **Bauer Toy**

Museum has closed. Some 3,000 toy soldiers, fire trucks, model planes, trains and tiny villages were sold to new owners in Amarillo. We have no word as to whether or not the collection will become part of a new museum. If we find out, we'll let you know.

When you wake up aboard **Galveston's** new overnight accommodation with visions of Christmases past, it may not be "in your dreams." For the floating **Stacia Leigh Bed & Breakfast** has a few not-so-romantic stories to tell. The

A WALK IN THE DARK
Handheld coal oil lanterns
light the way through
remote passages in
Longhorn Cavern near
Burnet. The state park's

new **Historic Lantern Tour** offers a rare
adventure into nooks and crannies,
challenging visitors to crawl, climb and
squeeze through small passageways.
Participants learn about the cavern's pre-
historic history and geology, and about its
use as a Confederate stronghold, rumored
hideout for outlaw **Sam Bass** and nightclub
during Prohibition days. The tours are
scheduled on Saturdays beginning at 6:30
p.m. Call 512/756-4680 for reservations.



Chryseis, a 120-foot staysail schooner, was built in 1906 for Frenchman Louis Renault, inventor of the Renault automobile. The yacht was sold in 1937 to Count Galeazzo Ciano of Italy, who married Edda Mussolini, daughter of the Fascist Italian leader of World War II fame. After the count was killed in 1944, the *Chryseis* became the possession of Benito Mussolini until his own execution in 1945. Now owners **Pat and Bonnie Hicks** have restored the dilapidated old vessel into a historic, top-rated B&B. Eleven state-rooms come with oversized beds and private baths. Rates of \$125 and \$150 include a full breakfast served in the comfortably furnished salon and dining room. The *Chryseis* is permanently moored at Pier 22 on the north edge of The Strand. Call 409/750-8858 for reservations.

Sam Houston Race Park in **Houston** was honored by the American Quarter Horse Association as a winner of the **AQHA Racing Council Sprint Awards**. The awards recognize excellence in the coverage and promotion of quarter horse racing. Sam Houston Race Park is a Class I racetrack offering pari-mutuel wagering on live Thoroughbred and quarter horse races and off-track races simulcast from other tracks. On Sam Houston Tollway near F.M. 249. For racing schedules, call 281/807-7223.

T H C

The **Texas Historical Commission (THC)** unanimously voted to adopt the **Texas Independence Trail** as the second region to participate in the Texas Travel Trails Program. The agency will assist communities with development and promotion of the trail as a vacation destination and publish a trails map brochure. The program was designed

to increase tourism at cultural and heritage sites and revitalize local economies through regional marketing. The ten Texas Travel Trails were initiated by TxDOT in 1968 and reintroduced by THC. The Texas Forts Trail was the first trail revived. For more information, contact **Mario Sánchez** at 512/463-5754.

MUSEUMS

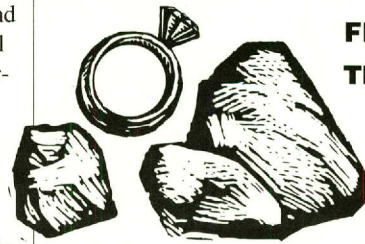
Work will begin in April on the \$6.1 million renovation of **Canyon's Panhandle-Plains Historical Museum**. When construction is complete in May

? TEXAS TRIVIA

How did Texans celebrate Christmas in 1836?

December of 1835 found most Texans too involved with independence to celebrate. But by the next Christmas independence was fact. In 1836, citizens were free to observe the holidays with any kind of religious or secular ceremony they desired. Though poor, Texans were full of high expectations and celebrated the season with zest. The holidays were filled with dinners, dances and parties from Christmas Eve through New Year's Day. Many traditions of today were not yet established. Only a few German immigrants had Christmas trees, and not many Texans had heard of Santa. On December 25, Texas hero Sam Houston informed an audience at Washington-on-the-Brazos that Santa Anna was a compulsory guest in Washington, D.C. He declared that "only by continued sobriety and endeavor can a worthy republic be formed." The speech was followed by a huge party with free-flowing eggnog and dancing late into the night.

TEXAS TRIVIA



FROM ROCKS TO RICHES
The Last Frontier Museum
in Alpine opened on
October 16. The area's
newest attraction offers
a sampling of the rocks,

gems, minerals and fossils of the Big Bend region, and includes exhibits of various types of quartz and agate and theories on how they were formed. Visitors can learn how jewels are created from rough rocks and stones, and about local resources with info on how to become a rock hound. Open daily at 2310 W. U.S. Highway 90. Admission is free. For details, call 915/837-3881.

2001, visitors will be greeted with a highly interactive experience that promises to be both educational and entertaining. Pioneer Hall will serve as a point of introduction and as a gateway to the history of the Panhandle Plains. Videotaped interviews with farmers, ranchers, rough-necks, Native Americans and other living witnesses will give voice to the area's heritage. Since opening in 1933, the museum has earned national recognition as the primary repository and interpreter of history, science and culture as related to the region. On the campus of West Texas State A&M University. Call 806/651-2244 for more info.

The **Texas Air Museum-Caprock Chapter**, at Slaton Municipal Airport in **Slaton** presents the **Cold War Museum** through January 3. The traveling museum is managed by **John C. Welch** and **Francis Gary Powers Jr.**, son of the late U-2 reconnaissance airplane pilot who was shot down over the Soviet Union in 1960. Exhibits chronicle Cold War events through the

fall of the Berlin wall and the Soviet Union, including the U-2 incident, the Berlin airlift, the McCarthy era, the Bay of Pigs invasion, the Cuban missile crisis, and the Korean and Vietnam wars. Open Saturday, 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., and by appointment. Call 806/828-4664 for more info.

E V E N T S

More than 100 illuminated and animated displays at **Belton Lake Outdoor Recreation Area** set the stage for **Nature in Lights**, Fort Hood's annual holiday lighting spectacular. Visitors can experience the sights and sounds of Christmas from the comfort of their cars with drive-through tours of the 800-acre park. Santa arrives each evening at Santa's Village Workshop for visits and pictures with the kids. The weekends come alive with holiday entertainment, arts and crafts booths, and tours aboard old-fashioned hay wagons. Open daily, through January 2, from 5:30 to 11 p.m. Call 254/287-2523 for details.

TRAVEL CENTER	Month Visitors	Percent Variation*	Visitors Year-to-date	Percent Variation*
Amarillo	9,180	+17.11	135,486	+5.83
Anthony	12,066	+33.27	122,685	-13.40
Denison	22,260	+26.36	241,401	+15.81
Gainesville	29,352	+8.19	339,084	+4.07
Langtry	6,075	-19.71	80,706	-16.42
Laredo	6,213	-13.20	85,983	-29.56
Orange	30,579	-17.26	445,554	-9.32
Texarkana	31,821	-4.68	408,864	+7.13
Valley	16,023	-37.42	276,090	-9.96
Waskom	39,204	+8.62	426,717	-15.97
Wichita Falls	14,931	+12.99	193,347	-1.43
Capitol Complex	5,448	-19.65	92,466	-6.30
CENTER TOTALS	223,152	-2.30	2,848,383	-5.21

	This Mo.	Y-T-D
Mail Services	28,554	1,032,082
Literature Distributed at Trade Shows	0	12,600
Automated Attendant Road Condition Calls	3,996	129,175

Dial toll-free 1-800-452-9292 for travel assistance from TxDOT's Texas Travel Information Centers (8 a.m.-6 p.m. daily, Central Time)

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Data as of November 30, 1999

*Compared to last year

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