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Finding fall: Small-town Texas

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North Texas can seem seasonless -- an endless stretch of driving rain, alarming heat and breathtaking humidity with a few ice storms thrown in so you can tell it's winter.

In the city, the only signs of fall are trendy lunchboxes on sale, temporary school-supply aisles, tax-free weekend. Nature's autumn comes to Texas in the country, where fields of sunflowers have already replaced long-gone bluebonnets, and rows of corn stand tan and withered or chopped to the ground. Here, instead of the endless hustle through long lines at beeping scanners, shopkeepers are proud to have customers take their time, and they handwrite receipts over carbon paper when you're done.

The air even seems a little cooler here, away from the ribbons of sidewalk and asphalt.

Consider taking a weekend trip, or just an afternoon away. Here are a few places that will help turn the dog days into good days, keep your mind off the chores and maybe even help you find a little peace of mind as the busy months approach.

Clifton

Not very many small towns have a conservatory made of a tin building, and an old brick college joined by a soaring atrium. Or, a museum that holds a bust of a 10,000-year-old man who could have been royalty of a sort, definitely was a Texan before Texas existed and might have belonged to a people from Japan.

But little Clifton, pop. about 3,600, is a growing arts concern, anchored by the Bosque Conservatory, several Western artists who live and work in the area, and two galleries; there are plans to turn old buildings into more retail spaces for arts or a restaurant and apartments. It also has depth and history as a repository for Norwegian immigrant artifacts and remnants of a significant archaeological find.

Getting here from Fort Worth takes a couple of hours, but once you're off Interstate 35 you can start to breathe. And eat. As you drive through Hillsboro on Elm Street (Texas 22), stop at Country Czech bakery on your right for fresh, warm, yeasty kolaches made on the premises (bags of day-old pastries to take home are a buck apiece for four kolaches). But save room for tender, juicy brisket at Bunkhouse Barbecue later, on Texas 6 in Clifton.

You're not going to find lines of boutiques as you drive into town -- "We're working on 'cute,'" says gallery owner An Thompson -- but you could easily spend an afternoon here.

Thompson brought her L.A. Thompson gallery to Clifton from McKinney Avenue in Dallas a year and a half ago. She sells fine Western art, some of it starkly contemporary, at 114 Avenue D. Up the street, Stonewall Collections, owned by Clifton native Pamela Shannon and her husband, is a spacious setting for work by artists Bruce Greene and Martin Grelle, among others. Greene, whose work is shown in Vail, Scottsdale and elsewhere, lives in nearby Norse. Grelle lives in Clifton.

It was Shannon, proud of being a lifelong Clifton girl, who urged me to take a drive to make sure I saw the country she and the artists love so much. This is the part of Texas that calls itself "the other Hill Country," and seeing the pretty, tree-covered bluffs stretching for miles helps wash away the city. When I took her directions, the long way to Our Savior's Lutheran Church, the road crests hilltops and then plunges down to a creek bed among the trees.

The simple brick church was built from 1875 to 1885. It is home to an active congregation today, and its doors were open on a weekday to anyone who wanted to "Enter to worship, depart to serve," as the plaque over the door says. Many Norwegian immigrants are buried in the cemetery across the road.

You can see what their everyday lives might have been like at the Bosque Museum back in town, at 301 S. Avenue Q -- rooms and rooms of everything from guns to bedsteads, carvings and furniture brought from Norway years ago, even a scary set of surgeon's tools that included a saw and something that looked like an auger.

The museum's pride and joy is the Horn Shelter exhibit. Office manager Willene Pack made me sit down and watch the video before she'd field many questions, but once that was done she was ready to talk. The bones of a 44-year-old man and a 10- to 12-year-old girl, carbon-dated at 9,500 years old, were uncovered during excavation in 1970 at the rock shelter on the Brazos River, downstream from Lake Whitney.

Though the actual skulls are at the Smithsonian Institution, Pack said, a bust re-creating what the man must have looked like stands in the museum's entrance, and other items from the excavation are showcased nearby. We stood together looking at him, wondering who he might have been. His bone structure resembles those of the Ainu, indigenous people of Japan.

The Bosque Conservatory around the corner, which recently got a \$2.3 million expansion, is worth a stop to see the permanent photography collection and art gallery on the second floor. The local theater troupe performs regularly in the Tin Building Theatre, including occasional dinner theater shows, says employee Martha Erickson.

There are regular classes for pottery, guitar, yoga, etc. "Books on the Bosque," a conference for readers

and writers, is scheduled for November.

If none of that appeals to you, Clifton may be one of the only places in Texas where you can watch a current movie for \$2, and the lines probably aren't very long. When I visited this month, the latest Harry Potter flick was showing at the CliffTex theater on Farm Road 219. You can grab a bite to eat at Timeless Treasures and Tea Room at 102 N. Avenue D and get a major antique fix at Bosque County Emporium across the street from the galleries and filled with exquisite, pricey goods.

In a year when Lake Whitney is useable, Clifton would be a fine place to visit during a lake trip, but this year, the state park is closed indefinitely while crews repair flood damage.

Mineola

Clark Broadhurst has a theory about why he's not married: He thinks it might be the 3,000 or 4,000 pairs of boots he likes to keep around at home and at his shop.

The proprietor of Broke-In Boots in Mineola knows everything imaginable about boots, and then some. He says he's done everything from simple repairs to dyeing whole sets for bridesmaids. Anyone in need of a good, broken-in (used) pair of cowboy boots can start looking here, at his shop in Mineola, northwest of Tyler on U.S. 69, about two hours from the Metroplex.

The main attraction everyone talks about in this part of Texas is the Tyler Municipal Rose Garden, a fine and amazing piece of horticulture that regular people should see once and that rose fanatics probably already know about. But you'll need more to do. To fill out a trip to this part of East Texas, you'll want to relax in Mineola, pop. about 5,600, or head south of Tyler to Kiepersol Estates, a winery with an elegant restaurant and an opulent bed-and-breakfast within stumbling distance of the bar.

It's a good idea to stop in Mineola first, because most shops close at 5 p.m. We wished we had started here and gone to the Rose Garden later.

After you check out Broadhurst's boot shop, wander in and out of shops down South Johnson Street. I was taken by a gigantic lipstick tube in the window at Memory Lane, an antiques shop. If you have an interest in ceramics, Pine Mills Pottery studio and gallery 14 miles east of Mineola off Farm Road 49 looks like a good bet for unusual, artistic work. The Web site at www.pinemills.com will give you a good idea of what's there and whether you'd like to include a stop to Pine Mills in your trip.

When the shopping gets too hot, take a break at Holly Perk Coffee Company, 105 S. Johnson St., with its full menu of lattes, espresso, Italian cream soda, etc. Mineola also has several restaurants downtown: Kitchens Deli and Restaurant (attached to a hardware store); La Waffalata for breakfast and lunch; and East Texas Burger Co., all on Broad Street, the main drag. The burger company also serves salads, chicken-fried steak and, seasonally, chili pie.

But if you're looking for a place to stay or an elegant meal, Kiepersol Estates, about 11 miles south of Tyler, will afford you both.

Proprietor Pierre De Wet, tall and lean in jeans and a cowboy hat that were incongruous with the accent he brought with him from South Africa, gave us a personal tour. His daughters help run the estates, which include real estate offerings and cattle for sale as well as the winery, which largely produces red varietals -- cabernets, merlots, syrahs -- in a tranquil, green setting.

The five ornate Victorian rooms, part of the restaurant and bar, have free Wi-Fi, satellite television and claw-footed tubs. Three of them have private porches and hot tubs. Rates start at \$140 during the week, \$155 on weekends.

Eating here is all about the beef -- De Wet says he serves only USDA prime -- but seafood also is served. A 6-ounce filet mignon runs about \$32. Reservations are required. Take a table near the tall windows and you might see the resident peacock strolling by. A fun way to enjoy dinner here could be to reserve a spot at one of the Vintners Dinners, \$45 for a four-course meal with wine pairings. "Food Fetish" culinary classes also are taught here.

If you feel like getting out after dinner, the estate's Clydesdales will take you on a carriage ride, \$10 per person, \$60 minimum.

Turner Falls

If you're in the mood for something besides lakes (staff writer Carolyn Poirot steers you to nearby sandy beaches on 3H) one of the most popular swimming holes is at Turner Falls in Oklahoma's Arbuckle Mountains.

But you have some things to do before you get to the falls in Davis. Shoppers will want to stop at Prime Outlets in Gainesville (I-35, Exit 501), with more than 80 factory stores including Reebok, Nike and Brooks Brothers. Then, a mile north of the Texas state line, gamblers will want to get a fix at Winstar Casinos in Thackerville. The sprawling, tentlike complex offers slots, poker, blackjack, bingo and more.

When you tear yourself away or run out of money, get back on the interstate. Soon, the idea of a ham sandwich will begin to come over you. This is because the Robertson's Hams people know what they are doing. Their red-and-white signs burn the words "ham sandwich" into your brain every few miles until you cannot bear to pass the home of the ham, Marietta. Give in, because there isn't much to eat in Davis, anyway.

Robertson's Hams has been in business since 1946, slow-smoking hams until the enterprise has grown into a 31,000-square-foot plant behind the store. They also sell sausage, beef jerky, pork loin and most every other kind of meat that can and should be smoked. A ham sandwich here is just exactly that. No panini, no sub rolls, no cilantro-infused mayo. I ordered ham and American on white and that's what I got. It's up to you to add mustard, mayo or whatever else you want from the condiment stand. The ham really

is quite good. Grab some sausage and jerky, too, while you're at it, for a picnic at Turner Falls.

Sadly, the Broken Cookie Factory that once also made Marietta a good stop is no more -- a cookie factory still exists, and it smells really good, but the retail store is closed, and the woman at the front will not give you any cookies, no matter how persistently you ask.

You still have one more stop to make: Gene Autry. Yes, the town is named after the singing cowboy. It used to be named Berwyn, but the town voted to change it in 1941, because Autry owned a nearby ranch where he kept rodeo stock. Autry himself showed up for the renaming, along with thousands of other people. He lassoed the Berwyn sign, pulled it down and the town was his, in name anyway.

OK, I'll admit there's not much in Gene Autry -- "100 people, including dogs," according to Tim Wodarz, a volunteer at the Gene Autry Oklahoma Museum. But you have never seen the likes of the cowboy kitsch in the museum. (Admission is free, though donations are appreciated.) Here you will find a bedroom all decked out in Gene Autry stuff; pictures of Autry with both his wives (separately); memorabilia from many other singing cowboys; Autry's rodeo saddle on a ... well, it's a life-size fake horse; life-size cutouts of Autry and John Wayne; room after room of cowboy trivia, both for real and from the movies.

Once you've absorbed as much of that as you care to, get back on the interstate. Now you can go to Turner Falls.

This place is cool because of the 77-foot falls from Honey Creek that crash down into the main pool, depositing travertine on the way and actually building the falls instead of wearing them away.

A long stream continues through the park, with grassy areas for sunbathing and shallow water where you can just sit and chill, or explore caves. Park admission is \$9.99 for adults through Oct. 1, and \$3.50 per person after that, less for kids. Camping is available, and so are cabins, but administrative assistant Shannon Bengé says "give it a good month in advance" because they're often booked. Rates are \$100-\$125 plus the park admission fee.

Warning: A lot of people love Turner Falls. A whole lot of them. The park can get really crowded on a hot weekend afternoon. If you want to wash off the sand in something besides rustic cabins or a campsite, go on into Davis, and try La Ville Inn. The tiny hotel has a coffeehouse on the first floor and offers the luxury of nightly turndown service. Some of the rooms -- themed with names like Safari, Paris, Tuscany, etc.-- have hot tubs. Rates start at \$125.

Otherwise, there are motel chains and rustic cabins to choose from in Davis. If you want to dine at something besides Sonic and Pizza Hut, the pickings are slim. There are a couple of Mexican restaurants, and an employee at La Ville recommended Corree's Dougherty Diner nearby -- but a sign in the diner says it's closed on weekends. Fried pies are an option -- Original Fried Pies, in fact. These are made fresh at the location off I-35, (Exit 51), and they might help the ham sandwich drive up your cholesterol level.

If you're looking for something else to do here, I recommend you call first if you want to try the "Arbuckle Wilderness," a drive-through and walk-through zoo near Turner Falls. When I visited, much of the walk-through zoo was under construction, and the only excitement was two hyenas fighting over a dog dish.

For peace and quiet, try driving around the Chickasaw National Recreation Area, which includes the Lake of the Arbuckles, with camping and pretty views. The camping area I saw on a weekday was nearly empty.

More information

Upcoming events: Gene Autry Oklahoma Museum Film & Music Festival Sept. 26-30, celebrating the 100th anniversary of Autry's Sept. 29 birthday and Oklahoma's centennial, www.geneautryokmuseum.com

Details: www.turnerfallspark.com; www.robertsons-hams.com; www.lavilleinn.com;

More information

Upcoming events: Fallfest/Oktobertfest Oct. 20.

Details: clifton.centraltx.com www.lathompsonsgallery.com www.stonewallcollections.com

More information

Upcoming events: Tyler Rose Festival is Oct. 17-12; the next Vintner's Dinner at Kiepersol's is Sept. 12, and the theme is Greek cuisine (spinach salad with bacon, dates and feta, fried eggplant Galatoire's, fig sorbet, lamb rib roll) paired with syrah.

Details: Tyler Rose Garden, www.texasrosefestival.com; Kiepersol Estates, www.kiepersol.com, 903-894-3300

MAP: Locations in Texas. STAR-TELEGRAM