



Gruene Hall has been a draw since the 1880s. The Gruene Mansion Inn (right) was originally home to the town founder.

• USA/SOUTHWEST

Doin' the Texas Two-Step

The historic district of **Gruene** (say “green” to sound local) is only a single intersection, but what a crossing it is. Original structures from the late 19th and early 20th centuries put this hamlet 25 miles north of San Antonio on the National Register of Historic Places.

An 1870s barn houses Buck Pottery,

where you can look on as Texas clay morphs into utilitarian and decorative pieces. Around the corner, the former bank and mercantile building is stocked with antiques, from Depression glass to an old gas sign riddled with bullet holes. The general store across the street retains its original ceiling—and feel of the past.

Wine lovers, especially those surprised

to hear the phrase “Texas wine,” should stop in at Grapevine, a wine-tasting room. Texas is the fifth largest wine-producing state; some of the best bottles are here.

No visit to Hill Country would be complete without an evening in Gruene Hall, the oldest continually operating dance hall in Texas. Look forward to live music, Lonestar beer, and a two-step with the locals. After the last dance, stroll over to your digs at the Gruene Mansion Inn, next door. You’ll be glad you requested a river-view room.

At the Gristmill River Restaurant, a cotton gin renovated with old barn wood, order chicken-fried steak or “best wurst,” a local variation of Polish sausage. End the evening with some pecan pie.

—RHONDA HANKINS



LOGISTICS: Gruene, www.gruenetexas.com, is located between San Antonio and Austin. Gruene Mansion Inn, from \$190, www.gruene-mansioninn.com. Gruene Hall, www.gruene-hall.com. A Christmas Market the first weekend of December showcases handmade ornaments and decorations. Folks gather to watch the Pony Express deliver a greeting from the governor, and Cowboy Kringle rides through town on a white horse for the Town Lighting. By the time he rides off, the buildings sparkle.

• USA/WEST

Upper Missouri River, Montana—Hear the Past Whisper

It’s usually people that make history interesting, but in the near ghost town of **Virgelle**, it’s the resurrected bits of the past and the B&B/antiques shop. Sure, Scotty Allen, bank robber and trapper, led an interesting life, but so did his sheep wagon, which you can rent. Ask Don Sorensen about the time, maybe 75 years ago, that a bear crashed through the wagon’s canvas top, landed on Allen’s bed (with him in it), then ran out as Allen fired off a few shots.

Sorensen, grandson of area homesteaders and de facto mayor of Virgelle (pop. 2), has similar tales for each of the structures he’s revived for overnight stays. You’ll find him behind jumbled display cases in

the B&B-based antiques shop he runs with business partner Jimmy Griffin or sitting down to malted waffles topped with his 79-year-old mother’s chokecherry syrup. (Stay in one of the four upstairs B&B rooms and enjoy

Mrs. Sorensen’s syrup yourself.)

The river has been shaping this valley for tens of millions of years. Explore the area with guide Glenn Braun: You can paddle a canoe or head off by horse.

Wind up your weekend down

Best season to canoe the Upper Missouri River Breaks is summer.



the river piece. Now a National Historic Landmark, Fort Benton started out in 1846 as a fur trading post. Eat dinner and stay at the 26-room Grand Union Hotel, seven years older than the state of Montana. Jim and Cheryl Gagnon are happy to tell you the history of the place, even if it doesn’t include a bear falling through the roof. —DINA MISHEV

LOGISTICS: Virgelle, www.russell.visitmt.com. Canoeing the Missouri, www.canoemontana.com. Virgelle Mercantile B&B, rooms from \$115, incl. breakfast; cabins with continental breakfast \$45 per person, available May–Sept., www.virgellemontana.com. Grand Union Hotel, from \$95, and Union Grille, www.grandunionhotel.com.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: WOODY WELCH/AURORA PHOTOS; GALE ZUCKER/AURORA PHOTOS; MACDUFF EVERTON