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A TEXAS STATE OF MIND

Connecting with the town of Fredericksburg

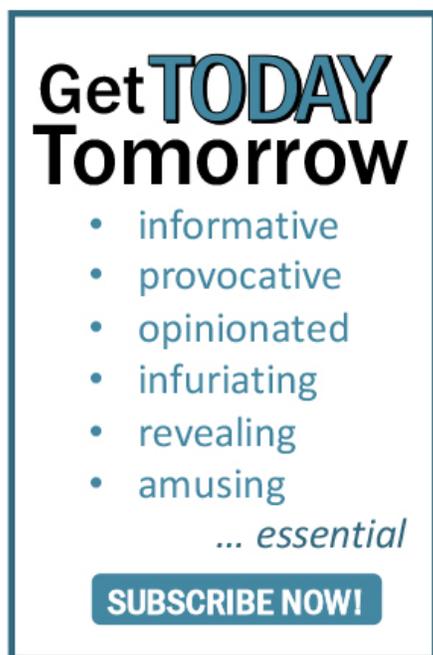
Steve Gillick

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17 APR 2017: John Muraglia sat comfortably before a flat screen television, sipping Truman's Pardon, and watching the New York Rangers play the Montreal Canadiens. After chatting for a few minutes, during which he discovered that I was Canadian, John quickly pointed out with a teasing

glint in his eyes, that New York was winning the game.



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John is the owner of The Treaty House, an easy-going, upscale cocktail lounge that is the ‘go to’ place for locals and visitors in downtown Fredericksburg. Literally located in the centre of the State, Fredericksburg is a 70 minute drive north of San Antonio or 90 minutes west of Austin. And The Treaty House is really a microcosm of what Western Texas and the Hill Country are all about: family, fun, hard work, personal stories, great food, history, reverence for military service, and pride in being American.

‘Truman’s Pardon,’ is actually a traditional Martini infused with fresh, red grapefruit juice. With a sense of admiration and respect, John explained that back in 1933, his Dad served 11 months in Leavenworth Penitentiary for making alcohol in violation of Prohibition. Times being what they were, the sentence included the revocation of his Citizenship.

It took several years after his release but eventually a pardon, signed by President Harry Truman re-instated his Dad's citizenship. The framed document graces the wall of 'Independence Bar', close to one of three colourful murals that explain "The Treaty House" name:



- 1) The Battle of San Jacinto in 1836 led to Mexico's surrender and the establishment of the Republic of Texas;
- 2) The Treaty of Peace signed between John Meusebach and the Comanche Indians in 1847 that allowed the Fredericksburg community to settle and grow; and
- 3) The Unconditional Surrender of Japan that ended the War in the Pacific in 1945.



During our four days in the area we were continually touched by personal stories that brought home the Western Texas "sense of place", but almost always included that engaging Texas sense of humour.

John Thomas, the owner and founder of Wildseed Farms, told us the story of how his company became one of the top five producers of wildflower seeds in the world. When he went to tell his dad about the new business venture, the life-long cattle rancher and farmer of rice, hay and corn told his son “You’re planning to go into business, growing all the things that I’ve been trying to kill all my life”. When asked about the growing seasons in Texas, John rhymed them off without hesitation: “Hot, Hotter, Still Hot, and Deer Season”.

The next day, we met Bobbi McDaniel, the Operations Manager of Luckenbach, about 18 miles from Fredericksburg, and known as one of the meccas of Country Music (thanks to Willie Nelson, Waylon Jennings and others). After telling us that the town population was “zero”, Bobbi paused and corrected herself by noting that four cats and 20 chickens considered the 15 acre private town site to be their home. And when we visited LBJ State Park, our guide told us that when President Lyndon Baines Johnson gave tours of the Western White House and his Ranch, he would often stand at the reconstruction of his birth home—only 300 feet away from the family cemetery - and comment, “See? When I die they’ll say that I didn’t really make it far in life”.

Amidst the festive mosaic of colourful wildflowers that grace the highways and roadsides, the outdoor activities that include bicycling and climbing Enchanted Rock, and celebrating the lives of Presidents George H.W. Bush, Lyndon Johnson and others, it became obvious that special interest travel was synonymous with Western Texas.

We visited only three of the 42 wineries along Route 290 and we were told that this was the 2nd

most popular wine trail in the US next to Sonoma, California.

Fredericksburg 'Romance' blooms especially around Valentine's Day when accommodations anywhere near the town are sold out. Visual Arts are celebrated in upwards of 20 art galleries and with the unique town architecture that ranges from log cabins to Sunday Houses and on to limestone, balconied buildings from the late 1800's.



The culinary scene includes creative dishes that pay homage to the German origins of the town. The Duck Schnitzel at Otto's is famous, as is the Wurstplatte (which some say is the best platte!) Breakfast Tacos and muffins are the specialty at Twisted Sisters Bake Shop and the local rule of thumb is to get to Backwoods BBQ before your favourite meats and side dishes are sold out.

Some visitors aspire to become cowboys and cowgirls, and the place to go is Texas Jack Wild West Outfitter, named after Jack Omohundro, a contemporary of Buffalo Bill and Ned Buntline.

Under the Buffalo head there is a display of rifles and other guns for sale, but the store also carries an impressive selection of Western wear to perfectly complement invitations to Cowboy Weddings, Cowboy Day Festivals, Cowboy life re-enactments and even as ‘must-buy’ accessories before heading to Luckenbach and line dancing in the famous Dance Hall while guzzling bottles of Shiner Bock Beer. (Nothing’s finer than a Shiner!)



On a more sober note, the statue of Fleet Admiral Chester Nimitz on Main Street stands next to the National Museum of the Pacific War. It was under the command of Nimitz, a Fredericksburg native that the Pacific War ended. The Museum paints personal pictures of the men and women who fought for their country. One of the hundreds of stories relates to the five Sullivan brothers. When their mom heard rumours that her five sons had been killed she wrote to the Bureau of Naval Personnel for clarification. The actual granddaughter of Mrs. Sullivan records the words in the letter and she chokes up half-way through the reading. It’s a very touching encounter for the museum visitor. The Sullivan incident inspired the movie ‘Saving Private Ryan’.

And on our trip, connections were what it was all about. Fredericksburg has its share of standard hotel/motels but also many guesthouses sprinkled throughout the city and beyond, that allow the visitor to 'live' the experience. I stayed at the Palo Alto Creek Farm, about 13 miles outside of town, in "The Barn", a converted 1880's building, with an ultra-comfortable, cowboy-themed interior design and an assortment of curious neighbours. There was the family of Long Horn cattle that included the cow Loretta, the heifer Emmy Lou and the bull, 'Clearout', as well as the donkeys: Dolly, Patsy, Faith and George, all of whom loved to have their muzzles patted and ears scratched, to the accompaniment of the multi-tuned repertoires of mockingbirds and the whistles of Grackles in the nearby trees.

Fredericksburg is really a celebration of people and the land, and how hard work created a community whose roots, work ethic, humour and cuisine have become a tourism magnet. Like the first German settlers who escaped poverty, sailed to new world and built a community on a tract of land that became Fredericksburg, travellers today who are seeking a 'sense of place', need look no further.

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Inside “The Barn” at Palo Alto Creek Farm. The décor might be described as ‘comfortable cowboy’.



Steve Gillick

A tireless promoter of "infectious enthusiasm about travel", Steve delivers his wisdom once a month in his column *The Travel Coach*.

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