

Texas Chock-Full Of Affordable Adventures **Cost-Friendly Options Available In Lone Star State**

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They say everything is bigger in Texas, but that doesn't mean your vacation budget needs to be. The Lone Star state offers attractions for even the leanest pocketbooks.

Zilker Metropolitan Park is considered "Austin's most loved park." With 351 acres, hiking trails, canoe rental, and educational exhibits like the botanical gardens, "Splash" Environmental Exhibit, and Austin Nature and Science Center, it's easy to spend an entire day exploring the different areas. There are plenty of activities for all age groups, like the Zilker Zephyr ride for kids and the Umlauf sculpture gardens for adults. Active adventurers can rent a canoe and paddle the picturesque Town Lake or swim in the spring-fed Barton Springs Pool, which maintains an average temperature of 608 degrees year-round. Best of all, most of the attractions are free while others have coupons available online and cost less than \$10.

If you want a trip along truly Texan trails, then a visit to **Palo Duro Canyon State Park** is right up your alley. The daily entrance fee is a mere \$4 for anyone over the age of 12, although seniors do qualify for discounts. Whether you want to hike, backpack, or ride on horseback, there are 25,275 acres full of scenic canyon views to take in. Riders can bring, ride, and camp with their horses or **rent horses for guided tours**. For those wanting to sleep under the stars in the Lone Star state, the park has no fewer than five different types of accommodations. For \$12, up to four people — along with leashed pets — can stay at one of the backpacking campsites; up to eight horses and their corresponding riders can camp at one of the Equestrian campsites; or up to eight people can camp at the developed sites, which come with fire rings, shade shelter, and nearby water. Those with RVs can connect to an electrical campsite for \$22, and two vehicles are allowed per unit. For those who are looking for something a little less rustic, there are also cabins available for varying amounts.

Texas isn't all tumbleweeds. You could spend a sunny afternoon tubing down the crystal-clear Medina River in Bandera, Texas. There are several drop-off locations, so you can choose a long or short float down the lazy river. You can bring your own tube or kayak, or **rent tubes for \$7 at the Bandera Beach Club**, which also offers a shuttle to your location for \$3 with a rental. Large groups can get a discount on tube rentals and shuttles, and several neighboring guest ranches include tube trips with your stay. There are also plenty of hiking and biking trails in the area. Lush with plants and birds, the **Medina River Natural Area** is popular with bird watchers and is also a great spot for geocaching.

Houston has a tremendous lot to offer, but paying to see an assortment of attractions can add up quick. Luckily, there's the **Houston City Pass**, which gives you access to six of the city's main attractions and is valid for nine days so you have plenty of time to take everything in. For \$34 per adult and \$24 for children between the ages of 4-11, the pass saves almost 50 percent off admission charges and offers a lot of options. You can visit the Houston Space Center and explore the outer limits, go under the sea at the Houston Aquarium, meander through the menagerie at the Houston Zoo and expand your cranium at the Houston Museum of Natural Sciences. After all that, you can choose between The Children's Museum of Houston, the George Ranch Historical Park, or the Health Museum to round off your trip. Talk about getting a bundle for a buck!

Those with an appetite for adventure will be drawn to the romance of the Rio Grande. There are plenty of activities to satisfy both the novice adventurer and the extreme explorer at **Big Bend National Park**. Big Bend is sometimes considered to be three parks in one because it encompasses mountain, desert, and river terrain. For just \$20, you can gain access to all the park has to offer for a full week. Back-country backpacking, bringing canoes or kayaks for river floats, and camping all require an additional but minimal fee, but the views and accommodations are worth the extra couple of dollars. Within the park, you can take a soak in the natural hot springs, climb one of the several Chisos Mountain trails, or cruise the paved, dirt, or primitive roads depending on the type of terrain your vehicle can handle. For a little extra dinero, there are several local outfitters who offer white-water rafting trips, jeep tours, and also rent ATVs, horses, or watercraft to up the ante on any outdoor adventure.

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