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BruceTurner

# The Top 10 Free Things to Do in Austin

## Austin, 1 Day

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# Guide Description



**AUTHOR NOTE:** Sometimes the best things in life are free, which is exactly the case for some of Austin's most worthwhile sights. From historical points of interest to outdoor activities, this city has got its bases covered when it comes to free fun. Traipse to the top of Mount Bonnell for an unparalleled panoramic view or head over to the Congress Avenue Bridge for a stunning sunset spectacle of bats taking flight. Whatever your interests, there's bound to be a match in this best-of list of Austin activities.

# Itinerary Overview

things to do  
restaurants  
hotels  
nightlife

## Day 1 - Austin



### Texas State Capitol

The colossal house of the Texas state government



### Mount Bonnell

Breathtaking views from above Lake Austin



### Ann Richards Congress Avenue Bridge Bats

The front-row seat for nightly bat watching



### Lyndon Baines Johnson Library and Museum

Presidential library that takes you back to the '60s



### Town Lake Hike and Bike Trail

Perfect for urban hiking



### South Congress Avenue

Hip shopping and local eateries embody "Keep Austin Weird" motto.



### Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center

Cultural relics ranging from Kerouac manuscripts to the first photograph



### Zilker Park

Wide open green space in the heart of downtown, plus cool spring water



### University of Texas at Austin

Hook 'em Horns!



### Zilker Botanical Garden

Beautiful themed gardens covering 30 acres

**contact:**

tel: 512-463-0063

<http://www.tspb.state.tx.us/spb/plan/tours.htm>

**location:**

1100 Congress Ave  
Austin TX 78701

1

## Texas State Capitol

**DESCRIPTION:** The Texas State Legislature meets only once every two years, so if the cavernous building seems oddly deserted, the legislature is probably not in session. Considered one of the nation's most distinguished state buildings, the Texas State Capitol, with its strong red granite facade and Renaissance Revival architectural style, sits regally on a hill overlooking Congress Avenue. Largest of all state capitols and only second in size to the National Capitol in Washington, D.C., the Texas State Capitol anchors the north end of downtown, just four blocks south of the University of Texas at Austin campus. Free tours of the capitol building cover Texas history, fun facts about the 17 monuments on the 22-acre, park-like grounds, and information about the Texas legislature, or take the self-guided tour to explore at your own pace. You'll need to go through a quick security check at the entrance, including having your bags scanned by a metal detector. © NileGuide



**contact:**

tel: 512-974-6700

<http://www.austinparks.org/apfweb/park.php>

**location:**

3800 Mount Bonnell Road  
Austin TX 78702

**hours:**

Daily 5am-10pm

2

## Mount Bonnell

**DESCRIPTION:** Known for its beautiful, unobstructed view of the Austin area since the mid-1800s, Mount Bonnell hosts family photos, sunset picnics and romantic marriage proposals on a regular basis. Visitors park at the base of the hill and work their way up nearly 100 stone steps -- a 190-foot elevation gain -- to the wide open outcropping overlooking the southern side of the city and Lake Austin below. It's a fairly easy climb, but elderly relatives might find it challenging. A short gravel trail leads slowly downhill and to the left, offering up quiet spots for personal reflection with a clear view of the massive Pennybacker Bridge. Look left from Mount Bonnell to find the Texas State Capitol and the University of Texas Tower on the University of Texas campus. A number of nearby radio towers detract from the beauty of some of the views. At night, the towers' red lights give the spot an otherworldly feel. © NileGuide

**contact:**

tel: 512-478-0098

<http://www.batcon.org/index.php/get-involved/visit-a-bat-location/congress-avenue-bridge.html>

**location:**

100 S. Congress Ave.  
Austin TX 78701

3

## Ann Richards Congress Avenue Bridge Bats

**DESCRIPTION:** Though it may look like your average overpass, Ann Richards Congress Avenue Bridge houses one of Austin's natural wonders -- the world's largest urban bat colony. Small spaces in the expansion joints on the underside of the bridge are just the right size for little bat condos -- very crowded bat condos. From March through September, approximately 1.5 million bats make this simple structure their summer home. The Mexican free-tailed bats take flight nightly at dusk, consuming nearly 20,000 pounds of insects with each evening meal. As they emerge and head eastward, it looks like a ghostly dark river in the sky. Just 10 blocks south of the Texas State Capitol and a mile north of the popular South Congress Avenue shopping district, this fascinating sight draws thousands of onlookers to both sides of the bridge, as



Photo courtesy of torres21

well as just below on the southeast bank of Lady Bird Lake (previously known as Town Lake.) There's a free parking lot near the bridge, but it fills up fast, so get there before sundown. © NileGuide

**contact:**  
tel: +1 512 721 0200  
<http://www.lbjlibrary.org/>

**location:**  
2313 Red River  
Austin TX 78705

**hours:**  
Daily 9am-5pm

## 4 Lyndon Baines Johnson Library and Museum

**DESCRIPTION:** In 1971, the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library and Museum opened its doors on the University of Texas at Austin campus, housing millions of historical documents and other memorabilia of the 36th President of the United States of America. The 14-acre memorial, located adjacent to UT's LBJ School of Public Affairs, is one of the only Presidential libraries that's free to the public. Visitors browse items from the museum's permanent collection as well as touring exhibits, all fun and surprisingly educational. © wcities.com



wcities

**contact:**  
tel: +1 512 477 7273  
<http://www.ci.austin.tx.us/parks/trails.htm>

**location:**  
S First Street between MoPac Blvd and Pleasant Valley Road  
Austin TX 78701

## 5 Town Lake Hike and Bike Trail

**DESCRIPTION:** The City of Austin has developed one of the finest trail systems in the nation. Currently, over 50 miles of well-surfaced scenic paths follow natural greenbelts into all areas of the city, making an excellent trail accessible to all.



Courtesy of dionhinchcliffe

**contact:**  
<http://www.austintexas.org/visitors/listing.details.php>

**location:**  
South Congress Ave  
Austin TX 78704

## 6 South Congress Avenue

**DESCRIPTION:** Known for its funky style, South Congress Avenue, located about a mile south of the Ann Richards Congress Avenue Bridge and with a clear and brilliant view of the Texas State Capitol, draws Austinites and area visitors for its shopping, eating, and live music opportunities. Stylish boutiques filled with eccentric and often locally made clothing and accessories share South Congress Avenue with fun local eateries and antique stores brimming with undiscovered treasures. Food trailers offering everything from cupcakes to Vietnamese sandwiches congregate near Monroe Street. There's often a band playing on Guero's outdoor patio, and the Continental Club is rocking seven nights a week. The first Thursday of each month brings the aptly titled First Thursday event, where SoCo storefronts remain open later, often serving margaritas or cold beer to a slew of people meandering the street in this open-to-the-public street festival. People watching is at its prime on South Congress Avenue during weekend afternoons when many emerge for a lazy day of window shopping. © NileGuide



wcities

**contact:**  
tel: 512-471-8944  
fax: +1 512 471 9646  
<http://www.hrc.utexas.edu/>

**location:**  
21st and Guadalupe  
Austin TX 78713

**hours:**  
Galleries Tues-Wed and Fri  
10am-5pm; Thurs 10am-7pm;  
Sat-Sun noon-5pm; call for  
reading-room hours

## 7 Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center

**DESCRIPTION:** The Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center on the University of Texas campus is a cultural hub for U.S., British and French literature. Though its development began in 1897 with the gift of a 10,000-volume library from Swedish book collector Swante Palm, the center got its official start in 1958. The free museum/research center holds 36 million pages of manuscripts, 1 million rare books, 5 million photographs, and 100,000 works of art. Step into the lobby for a look at the Gutenberg Bible, as well as the first successful permanent photograph. These permanent displays share space in the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center with an array of touring exhibitions. Also a part of the archive: Edgar Allan Poe's writing desk, Jack Kerouac's journal written in preparation for *On the Road* and the personal library of Ezra Pound. Other nearby museums include the Jack S. Blanton Museum of Art and the Bob Bullock Texas State History Museum. © NileGuide

**contact:**  
tel: 512-974-6700  
<http://www.ci.austin.tx.us/zilker/>

**location:**  
2100 Barton Springs Rd  
Austin TX 78746

**hours:**  
Daily 5am-10pm

## 8 Zilker Park

**DESCRIPTION:** Zilker Park, Austin's largest urban green space, occupies 351 acres along the southern shore of Lady Bird Lake with Barton Springs Road cutting through the middle of the park. Grassy fields play host to soccer matches, volleyball games and picnics. Sand volleyball courts are normally first-come, first-serve, but they can also be reserved for large groups for a fee. The Zilker Playground on the park's southern end, complete with the pint-sized Zilker Zephyr train, entertains the little ones. Within the Zilker Park grounds, visitors will find Barton Springs Pool and the Zilker Botanical Garden, as well as seasonal events including the Austin City Limits Music Festival, the annual Kite Festival and the summer music series, Blues on the Green. Kayaks and canoes can be rented by the hour at two sites, one near Barton Springs pool and the other on the shores of Lady Bird Lake. The Umlauf Sculpture Garden and Museum lies along the park's eastern border. © NileGuide



wcities

**contact:**  
tel: +1 512 471 3434  
<http://www.utexas.edu>

**location:**  
Inner Campus Drive  
Austin TX 78712

**hours:**  
9a-5p M-F, 9a-noon Sa

## 9 University of Texas at Austin

**DESCRIPTION:** Founded in 1883, the University of Texas at Austin is the state's largest educational institution. The original campus was laid out as only 40 acres, but today the 50,000-student university encompasses well over 350 acres. This public university has earned numerous honors for both academics and athletics and offers a wide range of area to study. © wcities.com



wcities

**contact:**

tel: 512-477-8672

fax: +1 512 481 8253

<http://www.zilker garden.org/>

**location:**

2220 Barton Springs Rd.  
Austin TX 78746

**hours:**

Grounds dawn-dusk.

Garden center Mon-Fri

8:30am-4pm; Sat 10am-5pm

(Jan-Feb 1-5pm); Sun 1-5pm

(sometimes open earlier Sat-Sun for special garden shows; phone ahead)



## Zilker Botanical Garden

**DESCRIPTION:** Located in the heart of Austin, the Zilker Botanical Garden provides a beautiful urban retreat amid 30 acres in Zilker Park. This free and year-round attraction encompasses seven different garden types -- everything ranging from wildflowers, native plants, roses and herbs to butterfly-attracting plants and succulents. Springtime brings an explosion of color; don't miss the tulip garden. The butterfly trail is also a can't-miss area in spring. The City of Austin's Green Garden gives visitors tips about utilizing native plants, selecting drought-tolerant trees, composting and conserving water. The Hartman Prehistoric Garden recreates the environment that once existed on this land, including casts of dinosaur tracks found in 1992. An authentic Japanese garden and teahouse add to the serenity of the Zilker Botanical Garden. Massive koi fish swim through a series of ponds connected by stepping stones. A gift shop offers souvenirs, seeds and educational information. The spring plant sale is an annual tradition for many longtime Austinites. © NileGuide



# Austin Snapshot

## Local Info

With its perfect proportions of adventurous spirit and laid-back atmosphere, Austin wins visitors over time and time again. Nestled in the southern portion of the Lone Star State, the capital city doubles as the hub of serious government affairs and the supreme getaway for outdoor recreation and cultural escape.

### Downtown

The heart of Austin lays downtown, among the busy streets and inner workings of the state government. The Texas State Capitol--built of pink granite and native limestone and standing 14 feet taller than the nation's Capitol in Washington, D.C.--anchors the area's main thoroughfare, Congress Avenue. The street that once paved the way for horses and carriages now houses some of Austin's tallest buildings, including the futuristic-looking Frost Bank Tower--the first high-rise to be constructed in the U.S. following the September 11, 2001 attacks.

The downtown area juggles work and play with a handful of areas organized especially for after-hours fun. Comparable to New Orleans' famous Bourbon Street, Austin's East Sixth Street is often the first place rowdy tourists visit for a memorable night out. Within an eight-block stretch, more than 100 shot bars, live music venues, dance clubs, restaurants and souvenir shops line the street, which is cordoned off from vehicular traffic most nights of the week.

The post-collegiate crowd heads a few blocks west to one of three nearby areas: the Warehouse District, West Sixth Street or the Second Street District. Each neighborhood offers an array of trendy eateries alongside classy pubs, bars and clubs and is only a pedicab ride away from one another.

As the self-described "Live Music Capital of the World," Austin touts a constant schedule of bands and musicians throughout the city, though most performances are concentrated in the downtown area. The Red River District, located one block west of IH-35 between Sixth and 10th Streets, attracts a mixture of punk, heavy metal and indie rock acts at venues like Emo's, Mohawk and Red-Eyed Fly, while Stubb's regularly schedules

big-time touring acts of all genres at the barbecue joint's outdoor amphitheater.

Other popular downtown music venues include Antone's, Austin Music Hall, La Zona Rosa, the Elephant Room and Cedar Street Courtyard, among others. All of these locations and hundreds of other venues host musicians, film premieres and interactive parties during the South by Southwest Music, Film and Interactive Conference held each March.

### University of Texas/ The Drag

Part of Austin's draw is the highly ranked and centrally located University of Texas at Austin. The 40-acre campus sits right in the midst of the city's action, with more than 50,000 students enrolled each semester. The grounds also holds some of Austin's finest museums, including the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library and Museum, the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center and the Jack S. Blanton Museum of Art. The campus' western border--Guadalupe Street--is known as the Drag, a mile-long section of coffee shops, cafes and Longhorn-centric stores like the University Co-Op. The open-air Renaissance Market houses local artisans peddling their wares under shady tents, while the nearby Toy Joy stocks the largest array of random baubles fit for all ages.

### South Austin

Lady Bird Lake, formerly known as Town Lake, intersects the city just south of downtown, creating the unofficial divide between Central and South Austin. The Lady Bird Lake Hike and Bike Trail keeps Austinites and travelers alike in shape with nearly 10 miles of landscaped trails amid the hustle and bustle of downtown. Zilker Park, a 400-acre park along the southern shores of the lake, provides wide open space for kite-flying, Frisbee and other outdoor activities, including dancing at the Austin City Limits Music Festival each October. Kayak and canoe rentals let people enjoy a view of the skyline from the water, while Barton Springs Pool, a natural spring-fed swimming hole, offers up a cool and refreshing respite from the infamous Texas heat. A handful of quirky restaurants--namely Chuy's, Shady Grove, Romeo's, Austin Java Co. and Uncle Billy's Brew & Que--line Barton Springs Road, offering quick and easy meal options for

those enjoying the beautiful weather year-round.

Along with university students, musicians and outdoorsy-types, Austin also hosts the largest urban colony of Mexican free-tail bats in North America, which take up residence under the Ann Richards Congress Avenue Bridge from March to November. Their nightly flight for food occurs around dusk and attracts hundreds of visitors eager to see the throngs of insect-eating bats take to the skies.

Just a couple blocks south of the bat haven sits the hip and trendy South Congress Avenue, referred to locally as SoCo.

This strip, only a mile or so away from St. Edward's University, houses some of the city's most unique shops (Uncommon Objects, Parts & Labour, Lucy in Disguise) alongside hip hotels (Hotel San Jose, Austin Motel, Hotel Saint Cecilia) and locally owned eateries (Zen Japanese Food Fast, Home Slice Pizza, Guero's Taco Bar). On the first Thursday of each month, area businesses keep late hours while hundreds mingle along the street, shopping and enjoying live music during the free event appropriately dubbed First Thursday. Another SoCo highlight: Airstream trailers-turned-food vendors, and not just of the sno-cone variety. From cupcakes to chicken cones (you have to try one to understand), the block of food trailers draws quite a crowd every night of the week.

© NileGuide

## Restaurants Insights

Spread out over roughly 300 square miles, Austin offers a limitless supply of dining options, ranging from festival-style handheld bites to indulgent, multi-course meals that last hours. Tex-Mex restaurants like Chuy's, Maudie's and Matt's El Rancho and barbecue joints such as Stubb's, Ironworks and Salt Lick might have put Austin on the map for their tried-and-true ways, but some of the city's most daring spots are the most popular. Uchi, a hip sushi restaurant along South Lamar, is the mastermind of nationally recognized chef Tyson Cole, serving innovative dishes to a capacity crowd. Flip Happy Crepes, an Airstream trailer-turned-creperie, has wooed patrons with their sweet and savory French delicacies, including celebrity chef Bobby Flay who challenged the owners

## Austin Snapshot continued

on a Season 3 episode of his Food TV competition, "Throwdown with Bobby Flay." (Spoiler: Flip Happy Crepes won!) Another local favorite, Baby Greens, brings healthy to the drive-thru with fresh salads and house-made dressings. With options like these, it can be difficult to make a decision on an empty stomach.

© NileGuide

### Nightlife Insights

Austin provides something for everyone when it comes to nighttime entertainment. The title of "Live Music Capital of the World" is well deserved, as live music bellows from not just bars and clubs, but restaurants, coffee shops, museums and more on a nightly basis. For some of the city's best up-and-coming acts, check out Antone's, the Mohawk or Hole in the Wall, while big-name touring groups stop by Stubb's, La Zona Rosa or Austin Music Hall. Couples (or courageous singles) can get their two-steppin' on with the help of house bands at Donn's Depot and Broken Spoke.

The bar scene in the capital city is varied--the collegiate crowd heads to the infamous East Sixth Street, where shot bars and dance clubs share the street with souvenir shops and tourist-driven restaurants. The Warehouse District and West Sixth Street areas attract more sophisticated clientele. Hotspots like the Belmont, Union Park and the Ranch couple breezy rooftop patios with swanky cocktails and skyline views. Casual spots like Opal Divine's, the Key Bar and Ginger Man serve pints and more to a laid-back crowd.

© NileGuide

### Things to Do Insights

Part of Austin's appeal stems from the array of outdoor activities the area offers. From hiking and biking to window-shopping and bat-watching, there's something for every level of physical activity. Tourist hot spots are scattered throughout the city--Mount Bonnell offers a short 100-step trek to a sweeping view overlooking Lake Austin; Zilker Park provides hundreds of acres of wide open space for sports and the like right in the city center. Bicyclists take to the Hike and Bike Trail around Lady Bird Lake, while others opt for the Veloway, a paved closed course for bikes and rollerbladers only.

Cultural opportunities also abound in Austin, with a combination of museums, music and special events. The Jack S. Blanton Museum of Art--the latest addition to the University of Texas campus--spans centuries and genres of painting and sculpture, while the Bob Bullock Texas State History Museum encompasses the pride of the Lone Star State with its larger-than-life exhibits and state-of-the-art technology that makes taking a step back in time fun for all ages. Smaller museums and galleries make way for the local artisans--Wally Workman Gallery exhibits oils, watercolors and other media from area artists, as does Women & Their Work, Yard Dog, Flatbed Press and a handful of other galleries.

© NileGuide

### Travel Tips

#### Getting There

##### Air

Austin-Bergstrom International Airport (ABIA) +1 512 530 ABIA <http://www.abia.org/>

ABIA is located eight miles from Austin and is serviced by the following airlines:

American Airline (+1 800 433 7300/<http://www.aa.com>) America West (+1 800 235 9292/<http://www.americawest.com>) British Airways (+1 800 247 9297/<http://www.british-airways.com>) Continental (+1 800 525 0280/<http://www.continental.com>) Delta (+1 800 221 1212/<http://www.delta.com>) Frontier Airlines (+1 1 800 432 1359/<http://www.frontierairlines.com>) Southwest (+1 800 435 9792/<http://www.southwest.com>) Northwest (+1 800 225 2525/<http://www.nwa.com>) United (+1 800 241 6522/<http://www.ual.com>)

Car Rental: Alamo (+1 800 327 9633/<http://www.alamo.com>) Avis (+1 800 831 2847/<http://www.avis.com>) Budget (+1 800 527 0700/<http://www.budget.com>) Dollar (+1 800 4000/<http://www.dollar.com>) Enterprise (+1 800 325 8007/<http://www.enterprise.com>) Hertz (+1 800 654 3131/<http://www.hertz.com>) National (+1 800 227 7368/<http://www.nationalcar.com>) Thrifty (+1 800 367 2277/<http://www.thrifty.com>)

Shuttles: SuperShuttle (+1 800 BLUE VAN (258 3826)) +1 512 258 3826 Carey

Austin (+1 512 929 5009/<http://www.carey-austin.com>)

**Train** Amtrak services Austin daily from nationwide locations (+1 800 872 7245/<http://www.amtrak.com>).

**Bus** Greyhound (+1 800 231 2222; +1 512 458 4463/<http://www.greyhound.com>) accesses Austin daily.

**Highway** The I-35, I-10, and the US-290 will take you into Austin from any direction.

#### Getting Around

##### Train

Take the historic Austin Steam Train (+1 512 477 8468/<http://www.austinsteamtrain.org>) through Austin. Open year-round on weekends only.

##### Bus

The Capitol Metro Bus (+1 512 474 1200/<http://www.capmetro.org>) serves the airport as well as all areas of the city.

##### Taxi

Ace Taxi (+1 888 582 8646) American Yellow (+1 452 9999; +1 800 874 0278) Austin Cab (+1 478 2222; +1 800 TAXICAB) Roy's Taxi Inc. (+1 482 0175; +1 800 845 ROYS)

#### Traffic Information

To find out city traffic information go to: <http://www.traffic.com/>

If traveling overseas, take the safety precaution of registering your trip at <https://travelregistration.state.gov> and for helpful, practical advice about traveling technicalities and safety standards check out: <http://travel.state.gov/>

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### Fun Facts

#### Austin

**State:** Texas

**Country:** United States **Austin by the Numbers:**

Population: 710,000

Elevation: 597 feet

Average Annual Rainfall: 32 inches

Average Annual Snowfall: .9 inches

## Austin Snapshot continued

Average January Temperature: 50 degrees F

Average July Temperature: 85 degrees F

### Quick Facts:

Major Industries: Oil, Electronics, Computers, Automobile Manufacturing, Aerospace Industries, Agriculture, Telecommunications, Higher Education

Ethnic Mix: Caucasian(65%), African American(10%), of some Latino descent(30%), Asian(4%)

Electricity: 110 volts, 60Hz, standard two pin plugs

Time Zone: GMT- 6

Country Dialing Code: 1

Area Code: 361& 512

### Did You Know?

Austin is not only the state capital of Texas, it is also home to the University of Texas,

Austin. On further note, Austin is the site of the President Lyndon B. Johnson Library and Center.

### Orientation:

Austin is located deep in the heart of Texas, about 160 miles west of Houston, 80 miles northeast of San Antonio, and 200 miles south of Dallas.

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