



Star att

In Texas, bigger is better. So how else to tour the Lone Star State

'EVER DRIVEN ONE OF THESE babies?' asked Richard, our mechanic. He was friendly enough, but I wasn't sure what he meant by 'babies' – this was a monster.

At 40ft (12.19m) long and 12ft (3.66m) high, this wasn't your ordinary 'recreational vehicle'. This would take some getting used to. However, the size, space and gadgets promised an interesting journey. We set off in our palace-on-wheels, anxious and excited as Richard bid us farewell, 'Y'all have fun now'.

Flying into Dallas for an RV trip around the glorious state of Texas, it's advisable to spend a couple of days in the city before heading out. It's a great place to visit and no one wants to drive with jet lag. As well as excellent food and shopping, there are frequent live games starring the famous Dallas Cowboys American football team. For a taste of horse racing, the Lone Star Park hosts big events. And if you crave some culture, the Dallas Museum of Art is home to many great impressionists.

Texas, otherwise known as the Lone Star State, is enormous – bigger than

France – and the distances are deceptively large. There is plenty to do and see, from the beautiful state parks to the cowboy ranches to the booming cities. A trip around the Hill Country in the south-west could take a couple of weeks, if not more.

So why did we choose Texas? Well, Texas is the USA's RV Mecca. It's as if the state was made for touring in these giant vehicles. The number of RV rental companies and camp sites as you drive along the interstates is astonishing, and the state parks have all the amenities you could wish for. Hill Country gets very busy in spring when the rolling hills come alive with bluebonnets, which cover the landscape like a soft, colourful blanket. If you prefer to have the wide open roads to yourself, try the less busy autumn period.

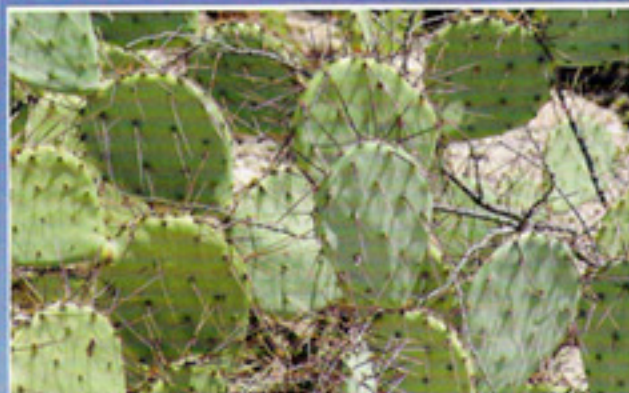
As a first stop, the 1826-acre nature preserve of Cedar Hill is ideal, being just 10 miles southwest of Dallas off Highway 67. It is the perfect introduction to the lay of the land without steering too far from your point of departure, and it's worth getting used to the RV before heading out into the sunset.

The park office at Cedar Hill closes at 6pm but if you have a reservation you'll find a map and instructions pinned to the door. Arriving after 10pm is risky as most parks tend to close their gates at night. Reversing the oversized RV into the pitch in the dark wasn't much fun so aim to arrive during daylight. What was that we were told about avoiding trees?

Each pitch has hook-ups for water and 30A electricity, a fire-ring and a picnic table. Thankfully, the pitches were large enough to accommodate our 'expanding' RV. The living room and bedroom both possessed James Bond-type features where – at the flick of a switch – the room extensions slide out to almost double the size of the rooms. Much fun was had deciding on the size of the living room!

Remember to stock up on supplies before leaving, and don't forget the cutlery and cooking equipment too. Luckily, the giant WalMart superstores have ample parking space to accommodate RVs.

Waking up in the early morning sunshine, it's hard to imagine you're so ▶



Texan flavours: the unique sights of the state are all around

raction

but in an American RV? **Rowena Carr-Allinson** took to the road



TOP FIVE TOURING TIPS

- Bring some CDs – a landscape like this deserves a good soundtrack!
- Don't worry about the height of bridges, they are all at a convenient 13-feet or higher.
- Rest areas are plentiful. Most interstate exits have RV-friendly stops. No fast food drive-throughs on this trip though – park and walk in.
- Be aware of wildlife on the road. Roadkill like racoon, armadillo and deer attract vultures and hawks. As they have a tendency to wait until the last minute before leaving their meal, the birds often hit car windscreens. Also, don't frolic barefoot in the high grass in September. It is 'chigger' season – and the little bugs have a nasty bite.
- Make sure the rental company has a 24-hour assistance line like Motor Hall has. You never know...

Supersize me:
American RVs are
palaces on wheels



THE RV

The Diplomat II RV we took on tour came with a high specification, including a 330HP Cummins Diesel engine, 7.5 Onan diesel generator, automatic transmission, leather interior, two TVs, VCR, and DVD, ceramic tiles, CD player, water purifier, raised rail storage with slide-out tray, sleeping for six people, automatic awning, all hoses and connectors needed for exterior, set of fresh queen-size linens, road atlas, nationwide camp ground directory, biodegradable toilet paper, chemicals to treat holding tanks and modem connections. What more could an aspiring cowboy wish for to explore the Lone Star state?



With the slide-outs in action, there is loads of room inside

close to Dallas. The park's enormous Joe Pool reservoir has over 100 miles of shoreline and a marina renting paddle-boats, jet skis and pontoon boats. Go fishing for largemouth black bass and catfish or take a hike across the picturesque, wooded hills covered in purple coneflowers, blue sage flowers and cedar elm. If you hear a rumpus in the bushes, it's probably bobcats, armadillos, or raccoons.

Bird-watching enthusiasts will be spoilt in Cedar Hill. The park is home to neotropical migrants such as the yellow-billed cuckoo and the indigo bunting. Throughout autumn, ruby-crowned kinglets and American kestrel flock to the park, as well as black vultures and many other species.

While you're enjoying the outdoors, remember that all camps have rules to abide by. It's worth checking specifics, but most are common sense.

Austin powers

Reluctantly departing from Cedar Hills, we headed south on the 135, towards Austin. Here, the highway is lined with hundreds of fast-food outlets, malls and discount stores. Everything seems to have been built in XXL size. Lorries are so big it's like *Alice in Wonderland* gone wrong.

Austin and San Antonio are both worth a visit. Austin, the capital city of Texas, is a vibrant city and the gateway to the Hill Country. With 300 days of sunshine a year, the town breathes the great outdoors. Even downtown amid the skyscrapers, Town Lake offers 10 miles of hike-and-bike trails. The city is the self-professed 'live music capital of the world' with blues, country, and jazz performed nightly.

It's worth mentioning here that, as you might expect, navigating an unknown city in a 40-foot motorhome can be extremely tricky. The best solution is to find a state park camp site that also has a rental car office. A day's car rental should only set you back around £25. Some parks even have free shuttles to take you to the

closest attractions – unless, of course, you find a friendly parking attendant willing to take a bribe for an exotic bit of parking!

To spend a couple of days somewhere just a short drive away, the McKinney State Park is perfect. The park – only 13 miles from Austin, off Highway 183 – boasts the attraction of the weir on Onion Creek, where waters cascade over a 10ft limestone edge under ancient pecan trees.

In fact, driving across Hill Country to San Antonio, we found the region was riddled with breathtaking natural parks. Although they don't all accommodate RVs, they are always worth a day trip. From the Longhorn Caverns and Enchanted Rock State Natural Area to Honey Creek, there is a wealth of splendid scenery to see, including clear rivers and stunning rocky canyons.

On the road, tarmac stretches as far as the eye can see. Sweeping hills, lush countryside and gleaming white ranch fences line the roads for miles. And, as soon as you get used to the wide-open space, you pass a hill or a corner and the

view makes you ask in amazement, 'Just how much space is there here?'

Heading to San Antonio, the eighth largest city in the United States, meant a hook into South Texas Plains country. You can't visit San Antonio without stopping by the Alamo. Dating back to 1718, the mission building is seen as the shrine of Texas liberty, and a symbolic reminder of a few men's fight against all odds. Today, the infamous building is totally refurbished and in pristine condition.

A typical evening's entertainment ranged from reading a good book to stargazing, to catching up with the news on one of two satellite TVs. Eating al fresco on the picnic bench can also be a sociable event as you chat to friendly RV veterans in the pitch next door.

The van had ample storage space for any surplus shopping acquired in town, and it's just a case of remembering what went where. The catch is not to store essentials away in cupboards that disappear when the cabins are 'shrunk' – we learned that fast enough!

MONEY MATTERS

Hiring an RV in the US is not cheap, so here's a list of some of the costs and conditions of hire we experienced when hiring an RV from Hall Motorhomes

- Basic weekly cost of \$2500 (about £1340)
- Reservation deposit of \$200 (about £107), applied towards your base rental price
- Refundable security deposit of \$2000 (about £1072)
- Off-season (15 September to 1 April) 150 miles per day free; peak season (2 April to 14 September) 100 miles per day free
- Additional mileage is \$0.20 (10.7p) per mile for Economy coaches and \$0.35 (18.8p) per mile for Luxury and Elite coaches. Prices do not include Texas state rental tax of 10 per cent
- Minimum driver age is 25
- No propane charge (additional propane is

responsibility of renter)

- No cleaning charge (unit must be returned in the same condition as received)
- Generator usage: five hours free per day and \$2 per hour over usage
- All rentals are for five days minimum
- Nationwide delivery is available, call the office for pricing
- Flights, petrol and the rental all add up, but, on the bright side, National Parks charge around \$25 (about £13) per night including hook-up and a mere \$1 for laundry!
- Food in supermarkets is also cheap and comes in large portions

For more information contact:

Hall MotorHome Rental, 6615 East I-30, Royce City Texas 75189
www.hallmotorhomerental.com
469-721-5047

Tourist information

For a free tourist information pack call 800-888-TEX (US), or visit www.traveltex.com

Austin www.austintexas.org

Bandera www.banderacowboycapital.com

San Antonio www.sanantoniocvb.com

Camp sites

KOA www.koakampgrounds.com

Things to do

Texas Parks and Wildlife www.tpwd.state.tx.us

Texas Outside www.texasoutside.com

Farm Country RV Park www.farmcc.com

Silver Spur Ranch www.ssranch.com

RV lifestyle

Woodall's www.woodalls.com

Trailer Life Directory

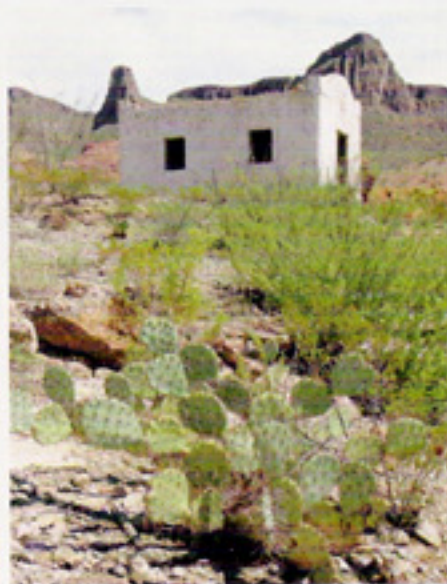
www.tlirectory.com/index.cfm



Ideal home: fixtures and fittings are more like a typical house than a motorhome



Heart of America: from working horses to ruins in the hills, the spirit of the Wild West is everywhere



One thing to consider is that the heat in Texas can be unbearable. Remember to stay hydrated and, although I am not a big fan of the air conditioning frenzy in the USA, it's useful to have aircon at hand. The Diplomat II allows you to use the generator while driving to power the extra aircon, which is most useful.

One of the highlights of Hill Country is Bandera, the cowboy capital of the world. The tiny town looks like a western movie set, complete with tumbleweeds that blow by and iron signs that swing in the wind. We were deep into cowboy territory, where men really do wear Stetsons on their heads and chaps over their Wranglers. The atmosphere was fascinating and the locals' friendliness shone through rustic manners and demeanour.

The historical town, located on Apache and Comanche Indian ground, has plenty to keep you busy, whether it's visiting the old jail or the frontier museum, or shopping for your first pair of genuine cowboy boots. Rodeo season runs from May to September, but ranches operate all

year round. Hook up at the Farm Country RV Park, to mingle with their 'critters', and spend the day at a local ranch.

Back to the ranch

The Silver Spur Ranch is a cosy family-run ranch where it's hard not to feel at home in minutes. Joe Bob, the affable wrangler with weathered features and a kind smile is an old hand here and knows the 14,000-sq.ft ranch inside out. He'll take you on a tour 'out yonder' to look at the livestock. As well as their American quarter horses, the ranch keeps longhorn cows, the pride of Texas. Before I knew it, I was on the payroll feeding a calf his bottle - and it's surprisingly hard work!

For just \$40 (about £21) each you'll get a cowboy breakfast, lunch or supper, an hour-long horseback ride, and the use of the pool. Hearty, delicious meals are served up in the ranch house dining room or Texas BBQ-style at the picnic grounds. When it was time to leave, we had to tear ourselves away from the offer of some fresh fried chicken and lemonade.

Southern hospitality is not a myth, it's alive and well in Texas!

By now, the RV held no more secrets; the sheer volume of the interior, the gadgets and the pneumatic levelling came as second nature. Lessons we learned included filling up at truck stops with larger nozzles. And for filling yourself up, these stops are full of Shellys and Kellys ready to serve you fresh coffee in bucket-sized cups and make small-talk.

Heading back towards Dallas, Highway 279 is one long straight stretch of road that seems to snake on forever. Lone letter boxes sit on the side of the road, but there is not a house in sight. Romantic names like Comanche Creek, Cherry Mountain Loop and Pecan Bayou are bound to make you smile. Occasionally, a small picture-perfect western town disrupts the rule of nature with western outfitters, hardware stores and even chocolate shops lining the streets. Pick-up trucks are everywhere, being the only vehicle to drive in working cattle country.

At night, the six-mile stretch on the Park Road 15 to reach Lake Brownwood State Park will feel like eternity, but the park is there, I promise. Somehow, it just seems that a Texan mile is longer than its British counterpart.

The 537-acre park is almost at the heart of Texas and the lake's shores are home to white-tailed deer, raccoons, and armadillos, while the water teems with perch, catfish and bass. It's rare to see black bears in Hill Country but they have been spotted, so make sure you use the bear-safe dustbin hook or you may have unwanted guests!

Texas is a fascinating place to visit at the best of times, but exploring by RV is really special. This is the one place where Americans don't compromise. When it comes to comfort and ease, they have thought of everything. It may not be a cheap holiday, once you budget the flights, the rental and the petrol, but our tour of the Lone Star State was worth every cent ■