



8 Things to Do in San Antonio for First-Time Visitors

San Antonio Missions Trail

If you love history, you'll be fascinated by the San Antonio Missions Trail! This 12-mile route connects five original missions that were established by Spanish missionaries in the late 1600s to spread Christianity.

Four of the five missions (excluding The Alamo) are part of the [San Antonio National Historical Park](#). All 5 missions have been collectively designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. It is considered the most complete and intact group of Spanish Colonial mission complexes in the world!

You can easily drive to the different missions, rent a bike, or take a [guided e-bike tour](#) and ride the 12-mile El Camino de San Antonio Missions Trail, also known as the Mission Reach Hike & Bike Trail.

The four missions within the park have active Catholic congregations and it was fascinating to learn that many of the church members are descendants of those who built the original churches!

Mission Espada

Mission Espada is the furthest south and the best starting point for the trail. The mission was founded in 1690, making it the oldest mission in Texas. The chapel you see now was built in 1731.

Another unique feature of this mission is the historic Espada aqueduct system that can be found about 2 miles north. This aqueduct system was built by the mission community approximately 150 years ago and is the only aqueduct in the US from the Spanish Colonial period that still functions!

Mission San Juan

Mission San Juan has an interesting history, the chapel was originally built in the 1790s as a granary for food storage. When plans for the construction of a large church fell through, they

turned this building into the mission's chapel instead.

The inside of the chapel is simple with a rustic intimate feel. As an interesting side note, notice the statues on either side of the altar, these are actually puppets that were used during outdoor processions.

Only a few buildings remain standing in this mission complex, but it was once home to a bustling and thriving community of about 200 residents. There are a few walking trails on the outskirts of the mission where you can see the historic irrigation system and farmlands.

Mission San José

Mission San José was built in 1720 and underwent a major restoration project in the 1930s. It is the largest of the 5 missions and has been nicknamed the "Queen of the Missions."

Mission San José is my personal favorite, I love the intricate stone carvings around the door. It is also known for the famous "Rose Window" that can be seen on the side of the church. This Baroque-style window was constructed by Pedro Huizar supposedly for his beloved, Rose, who was lost at sea in 1780 when she was coming to visit him.

In addition to the church, the walled mission complex also includes a granary, mill, and living quarters.

This mission complex is the headquarters of the San Antonio Missions National Historical Park and you'll find a visitor center and park store here. You can also pick up a Junior Ranger booklet and participate in free daily ranger-led programs.

Mission Concepción

Mission Concepción is the most well-preserved church in the mission, in fact, it stands as the oldest unrestored stone church in America. It is also home to the largest single collection of Spanish Colonial frescos in the US.

Construction of the current church started in 1740 and it took 15 years to complete. Today, the mission's architecture stands as a perfect example of Spanish colonial design.

The Alamo

The Alamo is considered part of the San Antonio Missions Trail, however, it is not part of the San Antonio National Historical Park. It has been designated as a US National Historic Landmark, but it is operated by the Alamo Trust, and not the National Parks system.

This may be an unpopular opinion, but I thought that the Alamo was a little anti-climactic. After visiting the impressive chapels along the Missions Trail, the Alamo was smaller and less

grand than I had expected. However, it is the events that took place here, not the actual building, that make this place such an important landmark.

The Alamo was originally the Mission San Antonio de Valero. It was established in 1718 as the city's first mission, and construction of this church began in 1744. It was abandoned in 1793 and used as barracks for Spanish soldiers during Mexico's war for independence from Spain.

The soldiers were from Alamo Del Parras, Coahuila, Mexico, which is believed to be how the name "Alamo" came about. However, some historians believe the name derived from a grove of cottonwoods nearby, since "Alamo" is the Spanish word for cottonwood.

The Alamo also housed the first recorded hospital in Spanish Texas. The infirmary was established in 1805 and was used to care for the frontier soldiers.

This Franciscan mission later became the site of the famous 1836 battle during the Texas Revolution. During the siege, a small group of around 200 Texan volunteer soldiers (including Davy Crockett) were severely outnumbered. They put up quite the fight and held their own for nearly 2 weeks before finally being defeated by an army of thousands of Mexican soldiers.

Although the battle was lost, it was a turning point in the war and Texas gained its independence later that year. Today, the Alamo stands as a symbol of Texan independence and resistance to oppression.

To make the most of your visit, I recommend doing the self-guided audio tour so that you can really dive into the history of the Alamo.

If you're looking for a place to stay in San Antonio, I recommend the Menger Hotel. This beautiful historic hotel is located adjacent to the Alamo Plaza and within walking distance of the River Walk and other attractions and historic landmarks.

It was built in 1859 and is considered the oldest continuously operating hotel west of the Mississippi. The hotel has hosted dignitaries and celebrities over the years, including Theodore Roosevelt and the Rough Riders.

San Antonio River Walk

The San Antonio River Walk is the beating heart of the city and one of the most popular spots to hang out and relax.

This network of walkways along the San Antonio River is lined with numerous shops, bars, and restaurants. It has such a fun energy, especially in the evenings when the sun goes down and the lights come on!

Eating dinner on the River Walk is such an iconic thing to do when visiting San Antonio. You do have to choose wisely, there are a lot of restaurants with mediocre overpriced food.

However, we were impressed with the delicious food, wonderful ambiance, and reasonable prices at Fiume Pizzeria. I'm still dreaming about the bruschetta with whipped honey goat cheese, peaches, and heirloom tomatoes. It was an unexpectedly delicious combination!

We also enjoyed dinner on the beautiful patio at Domingo. The food was delicious, but a little more on the pricey side. You do need to make reservations if you would like a seat by the water.

A few more of the best places to eat in San Antonio include Carriqui, Ocho, Pete's Tako House, Augie's Alamo City BBQ, and The County Line.

Taking a river cruise is also a must. The narrated cruise lasts about 35 minutes and the tickets are reasonably priced.

The tours run about every 20 minutes from 10 am until 10 pm daily. There are 3 different docks with ticket booths located along the River Walk, so it's easy to access. We hopped on the boat at the Market Street Bridge location. They also offer unique experiences like a dinner cruise or a Cocoa Cruise during the holidays.

There are a few points of interest along the River Walk that you'll likely pass by on your cruise, or you can walk to them.

The Selena Bridge is featured in the movie *Selena* and is located at St. Mary's Street and Navarro Street. Marriage Island is a small island in the river where over 200 weddings a year are performed. The Grotto is a 3-story man-made artistic structure with tunnels, sculptures, and waterfalls that is free to visit.

If you have time, I recommend purchasing an inexpensive [self-guided walking audio tour](#) that takes you to important historic landmarks along the River Walk.

King William Historic District

The King William Historic District was my favorite neighborhood in San Antonio and a must if you love stately historic mansions! It reminded me of [Savannah](#) and the homes in [New Orleans' Garden District](#).

This neighborhood is located just south of downtown and is known for its beautiful 19th-century homes. This area was settled by German immigrants and showcases Victorian, Italianate, and Greek Revival architecture.

I loved just strolling along the tree-lined street admiring the homes. If you're interested in seeing the inside of a historic mansion, the Villa Finale Museum & Gardens is open for self-guided tours Tuesday through Saturday. There is a charge to tour the restored 1876 home, but you can walk through the gardens for free.

While you're in the area, grab brunch at Guenther House. The food is delicious and is served in a charming historic building.

Spanish Governor's Palace

I was pleasantly surprised by how much I enjoyed touring the Spanish Governor's Palace. It is a little lesser-known attraction and we were lucky enough to have the whole place to ourselves.

The Spanish Governor's Palace is located in the heart of downtown San Antonio, but once you step inside you'll feel like you're a world away from the city.

The home is a National Historic Landmark that served as the residence and working office for the captains of the military garrison from 1722 until the early 1800s. Today, it operates as a museum, showcasing Spanish colonial architecture and artifacts.

The tour is self-guided and you'll find informational signs and plaques in each room. The gardens are also beautiful and serve as a little oasis in the city. There is a small fee to tour the home (\$5 at the time of our visit), and it is open Tuesday through Sunday.

Historic Market Square

Historic Market Square is such a fun area, it reminded me so much of La Quinta Avenida in [Playa del Carmen](#). As we walked along the pedestrian-only street, I felt like we had been transported across the border!

This is the largest Mexican market in the United States with over 100 locally owned shops and stalls. It's the best place to pick up handmade Mexican crafts, clothing, and souvenirs.

They also have restaurants serving authentic Mexican food. Be sure to stop at Mi Tierra Cafe to pick up some delicious baked goods!

In the summer, the market often hosts live music and cultural performances, it has such a fun vibe!

San Fernando Cathedral

San Fernando Cathedral was founded in 1731 and is one of the oldest active cathedrals in North America. It is considered the mother church of the Archdiocese of San Antonio and is a significant historical landmark.

This Gothic Revival Cathedral is located in downtown San Antonio and is within walking distance of other landmarks. A [Hop-on Hop-off bus tour](#) is also a great option for seeing the main sites in the city.

What makes this cathedral even more special is that you can find the ashes of some of the heroes from the battle at the Alamo here.

There is also a fantastic light show that is projected on the exterior of the church depicting the history of San Antonio. The Saga Light Show is held Tuesdays through Sundays at 9 & 9:30 pm and lasts about 24 minutes.

Natural Bridge Caverns

Natural Bridge Caverns is a cool roadside attraction located about 28 miles outside San Antonio. If you are driving to San Antonio from Dallas, it's the perfect stop on your way in or out of town (see our [Dallas Guide](#) for recommendations in the city). Even if you aren't traveling from Dallas, it is still worth the extra drive to visit!

Natural Bridge Caverns is the largest known commercial cavern in Texas and it blew me away! I was surprised I hadn't heard of this place before, it is definitely one of San Antonio's best hidden gems.

The cavern was discovered on a private ranch in 1960 by 4 students from St. Mary's University in San Antonio. They received permission from the ranch owners to explore what they thought to be a small cave on their land.

To everyone's surprise, the small cave was actually a massive cavern with miles of tunnels and chambers. The owners of the ranch invested all they had to commercialize the cavern, and it was opened to the public in 1964.

Today, the cavern is still open to the public and there are a few different guided tours available. We did the Discovery Tour and I highly recommend it. This is the most popular tour and the one where you'll be able to see the emerald pools filled with crystal-clear water.

The guided tour takes visitors about 3/4 miles through the cavern and lasts approximately 1 hour. You'll learn about the history of the cave and fascinating facts along the way. For example, we learned that it takes 100 years for the stalactites to grow 1 inch, which is insane when you look at the massive size of the stalactites in the cave!

I was amazed at how big the cavern is, and it blows my mind that there are still miles of new chambers being discovered and mapped each year.

If you are an adrenaline junkie, you might want to consider booking the Adventure Tour where you'll have a chance to go spelunking and visit hidden parts of the cave.

In addition to the tours, they also offer activities like gem and fossil mining, a ropes course, and zip-lining.

Conclusion

I hope this guide will help you discover the best things to do in San Antonio for first-time visitors! It is an amazing city, perfect for a girls' trip, family vacation, or romantic getaway.

I recommend spending 2-3 days here so that you can soak up the history and enjoy the amazing food!

The best time to visit is in the spring or fall when it's not as crowded and the weather is nice. It can get miserably hot and humid in the summer. The holidays are also a great time to visit when the River Walk is all decked out with holiday lights and decor.

No matter when you visit, you're bound to fall in love with this beautiful city!