

Come and See the Bats in Texas and While You're At It, Check Out the Alamo

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By Susan Dunn

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Dunn, MA, The EQ Coach

Q: What is Texas best known for?

A: The Alamo

Q: And what else?

A: Having the largest bat colony in the world, and the largest urban bat colony in North America

WHO KNEW?

Interested in partaking of this opportunity? It could even bring you luck. To the Chinese, bats are thought to bring good luck and happiness. They symbolize health, long life, prosperity, love of virtue and natural death.

If you're looking for something different to do that's also educational and generally not expensive, consider having a bat outing. Many of the bat colonies in Texas are near some of the best tourism areas - San Antonio, TX for instance, with the Alamo, Fiesta Texas, Sea World, and the RiverWalk, and since the bats take off at dusk, you can add it to the end of a day of sightseeing.

QUICKIE PRIMER

Did you know a bat can hear the footsteps of a walking insect?

Chances are you aren't a bat expert, and if you take an adventure like this, you can wrap it around a really fascinating learning experience. For instance, did you know that:

- Bats are the only mammals that can fly.
- One quarter of all mammal species are bats.
- Little brown bats can live over 32 years.
- A bat will eat half its weight in insects in a single night and doesn't harm the environment. They love mosquitoes, and crop pests such as cutworms, cucumber beetles, and corn borer moths.

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- A bat uses a kind of natural sonar called "echolocation" to find insects which accounts for their weird faces. They send signals through their mouths or their noses, and they need those big ears to hear the sonar.
- They fly out together in the millions, but are able to navigate around the sounds of one another.

This data is from the National Park Service, and you can read more here:

<http://www.nps.gov/wica/bats.htm> .

ECO-HELPFUL?

In addition to eating insects and not being harmful to the environment, according to the National Park Service, "bat droppings (guano) support entire ecosystems of unique organisms, including bacteria useful in detoxifying wastes, improving detergents and producing gasohol and antibiotics."

RABIES

You're far more likely to get it from a closer friend, an unvaccinated dog or cat. Chances of getting it from a bat are very small. 16 years of bat-watching at the Congress Avenue Bridge have yielded no cases. In the whole bat-rich area of Central Texas, no death from rabies from a bat has ever been recorded. Nationwide, only 10 people in the past 30 years have gotten rabies from a bat. It's also good to know that when a bat gets rabies, it doesn't get aggressive, like other mammals. It just lies there and dies.

OTHER MYTHS

They love to fly into your hair! This and other myths are countered on the Bat Conservation International (BCI) site: <http://www.batcon.org/> . One of the researchers at the BCI tried to get a bat to stay in someone's hair (wonder who volunteered?) and was unsuccessful.

PLACES FOR VIEWING IN TEXAS

Austin, Texas

One of the most popular places is - you won't believe this - the Congress Avenue bridge in downtown Austin, TX. A colony of over 1.5 million Mexican free-tailed bats lives there from mid-march to early November, having their babies (pups) in early June. In mid-August, they'll make their first hunting trip out with their mums.

Over 100,000 people come annually to see them fly out at dusk. For driving directions and map, go here: http://www.batcon.org/discover/congress_map_outoftowners.html .

The spectacle has all the elements of a good watch - mystery, a bit of the creeps, expec-TA-shun, and results that don't disappoint. Tension builds as dusk falls and all eyes turn to the bridge, waiting. Then you see one bat and the crowd cheers, then another, then a million. Silently they head out into the night and to think of where all those bats are heading - well, I often used to see them dive-bombing my

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swimming pool at night.

How can you see them?

·You can bring a blanket and picnic basket and view them from the Bat Observation Center at one corner of the bridge. They offer educational kiosks, and BCI "interpreters" on summer weekends, Thursday through Sunday, June through August.

·From a cruise on Capital Cruise Boats (<http://www.capitalcruises.com/html/bat.htm>) or Lone Star River Boats.

·From the outdoor bat-observation decks of the Radisson Hotel on Town Lake, TGI Fridays, and the Hotel on Town Lake, and the Shoreline Bar & Grill restaurant in the Hyatt-Regency Austin hotel.

There is ample free parking around, and it has the element of an "old timey" adventure. This is not Disney World; non-commercial, loosely structured, and basically free. I've taken people of all ages to see this, and even those hard-to-impress teens were spellbound.

Call the Bat Hot Line – 512-416-5700 (Category 3636) for information.

The Eckert James River Bat Cave Preserve

A combined effort of the Texas Nature Conservancy and the BCI, this cave is one of the largest bat nurseries in the US.

Located southwest of the town of Mason, TX near State Highway 290. 8 acres, open mid-May to early October for interpretive tours, Thursday - Sunday, 6-9 p.m. Some sunrise tours are available, where you can see the bats coming back. A donation of \$5 is suggested.

<http://nature.org/wherewework/northamerica/statesexas/preserves/art6022.html> .

Go here to see a photo of the bats emerging at sunset:

http://nature.org/wherewework/northamerica/statesexas/images/o_bat_emergence1.jpg . The bats fly out in a funnel formation that's fascinating to watch. And if you're an early-bird, they sometimes offer sunRISE watchings. For information, call (325) 347-5970.

The Frio Bat Cave

About an hour and a half northwest of San Antonio, TX you'll find the Frio Bat Cave. It's near Lost Maples State Natural Area and Hill Country Adventures offers birding and wildlife tours, river tours by kayak (4 and 8-hour versions), SAG support for road cyclists, and our goal here, the Sunset Bat Flight Tour.

To "reserve your date with Nature," they say, call 830-966-2320, and visit them on the web here: <http://www.hillcountryadventures.com> .

This 2000 foot cave houses around 10 million Mexican free-tailed bats. Wear traction shoes, as there's bat guano on the floor of the cave.

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The history of this cave is fascinating, including the fact it figured in a very unusual project involving bats at the beginning of World War II. Bats were going to be fitted with "incendiary devices" and dropped like little fire bombs on Japan. I am not making this up. You can read about it in "Bat Bomb: World War II's other Secret Weapons," (<http://inyurl.com/26d2h>) by Jack Couffer, or on this website: <http://www.chiropteraphilia.com/cavehistory.html> .

You may wish to take home a jar of Guano–Gro, or a bat house, available here: http://www.hillcountryadventures.com/hca_store.htm .

Bat–watching can add an element of ecology and learning to your vacation trip. Combine it with a spring trip when the wildflowers are in bloom! If, when you get back home, you want to build your own bat house for the many endangered species of bats, there are instructions here: <http://www.nps.gov/wica/bats.htm> .

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The Stars at Night, Are Big and Bright, Deep in the Heart of Texas, and Often Accompanied by

Bats

By Susan Dunn

Ooops. Oh those engineers. When they reconstructed the Congress Avenue Bridge in Austin, Texas in 1980, they inadvertently created a unique ECO–TOURISM DESTINATION, and an experience not available many places in the world. The bridge was evidently the perfect roosting place for bats and now houses the largest urban bat colony in North America. Yes, not only does Texas have the Alamo, it's very batty! The largest bat colony in the world is also near San Antonio (about 60 miles from Austin).

Who knew?

A huge colony roosts under this bridge in downtown Austin, and when they egress of a summer night to go out and hunt for food, it is a sight to behold. I have taken visitors of all ages to see the spectacle and even the teenagers (you know how hard they are to impress, or admit it) sat spellbound. It's just creepy enough. For driving directions and map, go here:

http://www.batcon.org/discover/congress_map_outoftowners.html .

Popular? It's estimated that over 100,000 people come to see the bats fly out every year, generating a healthy hunk of change for the city of Austin.

The spectacle has all the elements of a good watch - mystery, a bit of the creeps, expect–TA–shun, and results that don't disappoint. Tension builds as dusk falls and all eyes turn to the bridge, waiting. Then

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you see one bat and the crowd cheers, then another, then a million. Silently they head out into the night and to think of where all those bats are heading - well, I often saw them dive-bombing my swimming pool at night.

Of course the City had to do some educating when the public became, um, upset about all the 1.5 million Mexican free-tailed bats that migrate from Mexico to call the bridge their home from mid-March to early November. I'd call that "wintering in Texas," but, okay, it's a migration.

Do we love bats? Well, we don't like to touch them - no joke, don't ever mess with a bat. But we must appreciate the fact that those bats heading out across Austin can each eat 600 mosquitoes in an hour and won't poison the environment. They also pollinate plants. (Other favorites include many crop pests such as cutworms, cucumber beetles, and corn borer moths.) 600 mosquitoes x 1.5 million bats x 8 night hours? You do the math! For a quickie on bat lore, go here: <http://www.nps.gov/wica/bats.htm> .

Might you get rabies? According to the National Park Service, only 10 humans have contracted rabies from bats in more than 30 years. Most people who do die of rabies contract it from our much better friend, the dog. In the Austin-area, bat rich as it is, there have been no recorded human cases of bat-transmitted rabies.

It sort of adds to the excitement of the adventure, but when you're sitting there looking up, how would you catch one? If one falls to the ground, it is probably injured or sick, and your animal-lore in general will tell you to leave any wild animal alone. In this case, just get away. And if you like to grub around under the bridge, assuming you could, well, haven't you heard about guano? Ick!

According to experts, bats are rarely aggressive, even when injured, and do we appreciate them ecologically? I haven't checked, but I doubt if you're swatting a lot of mosquitoes as you sit there watching.

And, hey, it could happen anywhere. The BCI warns, "Persons who wake up with a bat in the same room [now where might that be?] where they have been sleeping are advised to submit it for testing, especially if the bat is unable to fly or seems weak."

Now wouldn't you rather have the bats out in the open heading for insects than in a room with you!

Yes, you would.

I'll throw my personal experience in here. Incredibly my son and I were draped around a statue across from the Alamo trying to get a good view of some president who was arriving, when a bat torpedoed into the statue and fell, stunned, at our feet. While mothers and kids screamed, the former in fear, and the latter in delight, the poor bat just flailed around. You could've picked it up with gloves, but we just walked away. It was unable to fly, and uninterested in humans.

But let me stress again, there's no heroism involved; the bats coming from the bridge are far away and they're on a mission. You might suggest to thrill the older children, if you're that type, that they are going to turn your way, but they have a plan and I guess they're herd animals. What would you do

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anyway? Whistle?

One way you can view them is from a cruise on Capital Cruise Boats (<http://www.capitalcruises.com/html/bat.htm>) or Lone Star River Boats.

Another way is sitting on the outside bat-viewing decks of TGI Friday's in the Radisson Hotel on Town Lake, and the Shoreline Bar & Grill restaurant in the Hyatt-Regency Austin hotel. If I bring adults, we usually enjoy a gourmet meal at the latter. If I bring kids or teens, TGI Fridays is the place.

When do they leave? Depends on time of year, weather conditions, colony size and bat mood. But of course there's a Bat Hot Line to tell you -- 512-416-5700 (Category 3636). BCI suggests mid-August as the best time, as the new pups are making their first sojourns out to hunt with their moms. Best viewing months in general are July and August.

You can also bring blankets and picnic baskets and watch from the Austin American-Statesman's Bat Observation Center, located at the southeast corner of the bridge. It offers educational kiosks and BCI "interpreters" on summer weekends, Thursday through Sunday, June through August.

There are several lots where you can park FREE, no refreshment stands, no public restrooms. Are you getting the picture? That you can have a fun and educational outing that doesn't cost A CENT? Part of the fun of the excursion is the "old timey" feeling.

Spending my summers in Texas each year in a town about 60 miles northeast of Austin, our major

entertainment in the evening was to drag a quilt outside on the front lawn and lie down and look at the stars ("The stars at night, are big and bright, clap clap clap clap...). Well, same deal here - the quilt, the picnic basket, nature's own show, and no money changing hands. Very novel these days and the kids won't fail to miss that something's very different. This is no Disney World.

Incidentally, to the Chinese, bats are symbols of good luck and happiness. They symbolize health, long life, prosperity, love of virtue, and natural death.

Check out here (http://www.batcon.org/discover_xguide.html) for other bat observing locations nearby and ya'll come, y'hear? You won't see something like this very often.

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