

Experiences

TRAVELERS' TALES, FROM NEAR AND FAR

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HIDING OUT IN HILL COUNTRY

Texas has a new refuge: an unspoiled village surrounded by lush, forested landscapes—and dreamy accommodations to soak them in from. **MARCIA DeSANCTIS** falls for Wimberley.

Relaxing with a book at Getaway Hill Country, a new collection of cabins outside Wimberley, Texas.

IS IT COLD?" I asked Nathan Glaiser. I was standing on a dock, studying my reflection in the Blue Hole, the vivid turquoise pool this 127-acre park is named after. "It sure is, ma'am," Glaiser, the park's natural resources manager, replied.

"Here goes," I said, and dived under the glasslike surface.

The swimming hole—a bracing 68 degrees—occupied a deep, wide section of a creek fringed with centuries-old cypress trees. The chalky blue of the water reminded me of the calanques near Marseille, where I splashed a lifetime ago. This was not the French Mediterranean but Wimberley, a town set among the rolling

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Climbers who reach the top of Old Baldy are rewarded with 360-degree views of the Hill Country.



pastures, peach orchards, and vineyards of Texas Hill Country. A morning plunge is as crucial to Wimberley's identity as a catcher's-mitt-sized cinnamon bun from the **Sugar Shack Bakery** (fb.com/sugarshackbakerytx.com), one of which I devoured on my first morning in town.

Over the past few years, Wimberley has acquired a reputation as a well-calibrated refuge midway between Austin and San Antonio (the town is about an hour's drive from each). In these cities, many people longed for a simpler template on which to base their lives—or at least their weekends—even before the pandemic interrupted the vibrancy of urban centers around the world.

In Wimberley, visitors can float over white limestone in the Blanco River or in Cypress Creek, another scenic swimming hole, then have a dinner as fine as any they might find in the Texas capital. And now they can relax at the end of the day while taking in the stars and the distant coyote howls in two intriguing new places to stay.

Despite all the newfound polish, small-town values still hold fast in Wimberley. "We're moving toward being a gentler, more outdoor version of Austin, but we still treat locals and visitors all the same," said Ashbi Wilson, Sugar Shack's owner. The bakery inhabits the

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Lunch at Los Olivos Market: braised beef, ahi tuna, and frozen wine-a-ritas.





▲ Texas-made pickles, salsas, and preserves for sale at Los Olivos Market.



▲ Chef Paul Brockwell at Wimberley's Triforks food truck.

Hill-Lowery House, a stone structure built by a Texas Ranger and Civil War veteran in the 1870s. On the terrace, vines erupted with crownlike blue passionflowers. The warm aromas of butter and bacon, the sun shining through the leaves—it all felt so comforting that I had to remind myself I had flown in to Austin from JFK yesterday bedecked in full antivirus gear.

Ranchers and celebrities have appreciated the subtle appeal of Wimberley for decades. Country music star Ray Wylie Hubbard lives in town, while Paul Simon and his Texas-born wife, Edie Brickell, recently bought a spread nearby in the Hill Country. A certain cultivated cool may be on the rise, as personified by the young guy with facial hair resembling that of Czar Nicholas II sipping coffee at Wimberley Square, a cluster of small stores selling home goods and penny candy. But just a few yards from that fashionable fellow, an old man in a frayed straw hat swept the sidewalk, while women in well-worn cowboy boots riffled through the racks outside a western-wear store.

Nonchalance and acceptance for all who enter seem to be cornerstones of Wimberley's unspoken ethos. "Local ladies meet here

for lunch, while billion-dollar deals are cut over chicken-fried steak and sweet tea," said Jay Bachman, owner of the **Wimberley Café** (wimberleycafe.com; entrées \$6–\$14). Community spirit grew stronger in the aftermath of a devastating flood in 2015, when a 40-foot wall of water from the Blanco River engulfed much of the town and claimed 13 lives. After the flood, Wimberley got its own radio station, KWVH, and has flourished in other ways, too. In the past year, almost 50 new businesses have joined the local chamber of





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The Blue Hole,
a favorite
swimming spot
on the outskirts
of Wimberley.

commerce—an astonishing number considering the challenging circumstances.

If downtown Wimberley's strength is its people, then it is the surrounding landscape—the filtered light and breathtaking silence—that has drawn visionaries from the hotel world to the region. “As soon as I saw that beautiful tract of raw land covered with Texas live oak trees, I knew this place was right,” said Jon Staff, cofounder of Getaway, the Brooklyn-based group that now has 12 locations nationwide, all based in practical proximity to big cities.

Getaway's mission—to encourage guests to disconnect from the strain of urban life and reconnect with ourselves, and most of all with nature—is serendipitously in tune with the effect COVID-19 has had on the U.S. travel industry. On my way to **Getaway Hill Country** (*getaway.house*; doubles from \$119), the company's new outpost 10 minutes outside Wimberley, I received an entry code for my designated cabin. Inside, I found the pine-clad space stocked with coffee, pasta, olive oil, cans of organic soup, and Tate's Bake Shop cookies. The idea is to strip back to the basics—meaning the cabins don't even have Wi-Fi. (Helpfully, Getaway provides a lockbox for your smartphone.) When I wanted clean towels, I dialed a number on an old-style red Trimline phone, and a bag appeared on my doorstep. “If we're doing our job well, you won't

see anyone from our team,” Staff told me.

On Getaway's 60 acres, there was solitude, but of the welcome, rather than the enforced kind. Sampling beef barbacoa at the nearby **Leaning Pear** (*leaningpear.com*; entrées \$11–\$14), ahi tuna with a glass of Hill Country wine at artisan grocery **Los Olivos** (*losolivosmarkets.com*), or a world-class burger from gourmet food truck **Triforks** (*triforks.com*; entrées \$6–\$12) may have run slightly counterintuitive to Getaway's ethos of isolation, but exploring nature was not. So I hiked to the spookily serene Jacob's Well, a swimmable artesian spring that flows through a vast network of limestone tunnels and caves. Later, I prepared *penne all'arrabbiata* from the larder in my cabin's kitchenette and dined beside my blazing personal firepit. The day vanished, a full harvest moon emerged, and the air filled with the aroma of woodsmoke.

On the other side of town, on property leased from a working organic ranch, **Collective Retreats** (*collectiveretreats.com*; doubles from \$279) adds a slightly more extroverted note to Wimberley's mix. On my evening there, I joined the group campfire and roasted marshmallows in service of my s'mores. Some of my fellow guests seemed comfortable mingling in the outdoor setting, but most stayed within their own groups.

My glamorous tent had, I swear, the most comfortable bed I've ever slept in. “We call it luxury outdoor camping, but we're fine with glamping,” said hospitality director Vanessa Vitale. It also inspired a pleasing nostalgia for the African bush. As did my vista of grasslands over dinner, a hearty beet salad prepared with greens and edible zinnias grown on the ranch below. Chef Laura Collins innovates in her mostly open-air kitchen, where she cooks with a gas-fired grill, a smoker, and a sous-vide, but no traditional oven. “It's really fun to figure out how to elevate dishes when you're cooking basically like a camper,” she said.

In the morning, I snaked back down the road for a last saunter around Wimberley. It was Sunday, and cars streaked into town, full of people headed to the Blanco River for a swim, or to the Wimberley Café for huevos rancheros—perhaps both. Or maybe they were seeking something essential and unarticulated that can only be found—and understood—in Wimberley. For me, that feeling was best distilled by the moment I awoke on my last morning in the hills and realized I still had time for one last cinnamon bun, eaten at a table in the sun. ☀