



Boots 'n' all

Unleash your inner cowboy in the Lone Star State of Texas

DENISE CULLEN

Cattle drive at Fort Worth Stockyards, above; field of bluebonnets, below left; mural in Deep Ellum, Dallas, below right

It should come as no surprise that Texan cicadas are louder than I’ve heard anywhere else. Everything is bigger, bolder and ballsier in the Lone Star State. Our group of seven weaves single file on horseback along a trail lined with mesquite, juniper and live oak trees, a small part of the 600-plus hectares that make up Wildcatter Ranch in Young County, Texas.

I’m riding a horse called Ringo that occasionally dips its head, trying to graze. Our guide, the ranch’s superbly named head wrangler Clint West, has warned us during a pre-ride briefing not to let these well-fed stablemates snack. Any mischief, and we’re to tug upwards on the reins. “If you give them an inch, they will take a mile,” he says in an accent that flows like treacle mixed with tar.

As the sun slides towards the horizon, the staccato racket of the insects discourages conversation. The group falls into a meditative lull, soaking up the soundscape. I feel, rather than hear, the clip-clop of Ringo’s hooves as we follow the 3.5km round-trip trail. We’re accompanied by West’s dog, Copper, an Australian red heeler that makes me homesick for my own.

Wildcatter Ranch is a place to let your inner cowboy loose, even if, like me, you’re wearing a riding helmet rather than a Stetson, and feeling shaky in the saddle. The sprawling ranch lets guests hone their roping, archery and branding skills. (The branding is done on leather coasters, rather than livestock.) You can also shoot at the rifle and pistol range, but it’s BYO guns and ammunition.

Established in 2004, the ranch was purchased by George and Kalli Doubleday in November 2024. The couple have deep Texan roots. Kalli, for instance, was an aspirant in Seasons 1 and 6 of TV show *Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders: Making the Team*. Accommodation options include a four-bedroom ranch house, built by the previous owners as their personal residence. It fea-

tures hardwood floors, dramatic stone walls, a pool with waterfall, and a fine set of antlers over the fireplace. Other lodgings are the ranch’s more modest hotel rooms and cabin suites.

Midpoint on the trail ride we reach a bluff overlooking the Brazos River, which loops in reddish-brown coils through Texas before emptying into the Gulf of Mexico. We slide out of our saddles, tie up the horses, and pull up logs around a fireplace. West hands around chilled cans of hard seltzer, which has about 5 per cent alcohol. With the return journey still ahead, one member of our group asks if we can be charged with riding under the influence. West bows his head and tips his hat. “No, ma’am,” he says. “You’re in Texas now.”

Texans like to write their own rules. Every souvenir shop I stumble into has caps, fridge magnets, and other items bearing the message, “We don’t dial 911”, alongside an image of a gun. This self-governing spirit is said to hark back to the Texan Rev-

olution, when settlers broke away from Mexico to form their own country in 1836, an arrangement that lasted nearly a decade. The post-Civil War cowboy era that followed reinforced respect for self-reliance and, where required, rough justice.

Our trip commenced a few days earlier, in Dallas, where I learned that cowboy hats and boots are still very much in style. Could I pass as Texan? I step into Wild Bill’s Western Store to find out. Handmade boots made sense when cowboys herded wild cattle north to market, but functionality has long since been overtaken by fashion. There are endless rows of boots to choose from, featuring elaborate stitching, intricate inlays, decorative straps, studs, rhinestones, spurs, fringing and all the shades of the colour wheel. The decisions to be made are dizzying. I excuse myself on the pretext of needing some air, and keep on walking.

I’m staying at the Kimpton Pittman Hotel in the Dallas neigh-





Cowboy boots are de rigueur; Fearing's in Dallas, below right; Kimpton Pittman guestroom, below left

PICTURES: VISIT FORT WORTH; TRAVEL TEXAS; VISIT DALLAS

IN THE KNOW

Wildcatter Ranch is at 6062 Hwy 16 South, Graham. A car is essential to make the most of your time on the vast property. Ranch House from \$US2000 (\$3072) a night (sleeps 12). Sunset trail rides from \$US150 a person.

wildcatterranch.com

Kimpton Pittman Hotel is at 2551 Elm Street, Dallas. King premium rooms with spa tub from \$US279 a night.

pittmanhoteldallas.com

Terry Black's Barbecue is at 3025 Main Street, Dallas. Open daily.

terryblacksbbq.com

Fearing's is at 2121 McKinney Avenue, Dallas. Open daily.

fearingsrestaurant.com

Wild Bill's Western Store is at 311 N. Market Street, Dallas. Open daily.

wildbillswestern.com

Fort Worth Stockyards, at 129 East Exchange Avenue, has twice-daily cattle drives.

fortworthstockyards.org

Fiji Airways recently introduced twice-weekly flights from Cairns to Dallas Fort Worth via Nadi in Fiji. The airline also flies to the Texan city from Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Adelaide and Canberra.

fijiairways.com



bourhood known as Deep Ellum, a revitalised industrial area. Its name arose after freed slaves, with their elongated Southern drawl, settled "deep on Elm Street". Deep Ellum became a commercial centre for African-Americans who couldn't do business in downtown Dallas, says Stephanie Keller Hudiburg, of the Deep Ellum Foundation, as she shows me around. "Everyone could find their place here," she says.

Today, the neighbourhood is described as "the soul of Dallas", due to its music, art, and culture. At last count, there were 150 murals, about 100 restaurants and bars, and 25 live music venues. The Kimpton is in the midst of this buzzy district, housed in a red brick building designed in 1916 by African-American architect William Sidney Pittman as a temple for a secret society known as the Knights of Pythias.

The hotel is a haven of calm, at least at first, and contemporary design. My king premium room features caramel wood floors, concrete ceilings, abstract artworks, and floor-to-ceiling windows curtained in royal blue. In the bathroom stocked with Atelier Bloem products, there's a deep free-standing eggshell tub. Though the king-sized bed is cloud soft, the streets come alive at night, pulsing with music, conversation and (with predictable disregard for no-cruising ordinances) revving cars and motorbikes. I'm grateful for the earplugs placed beside the bed.

The next day, I head to Terry Black's Barbecue, in easy walking distance. Upon stepping through the doors, I'm enveloped in an intoxicating fug of smoke, seasoning and spice. As I tuck into succulent brisket with a sweet black crust, spicy jalapeno cheese sausage, and sides ranging from Mexican rice to mac and cheese, I discover that Texan barbecue is more than a method of cooking. It's a style of cuisine so central to the state's history, identity and pride, that the long-established Texas Monthly has a dedicated barbecue editor.

The Dallas food scene has more to offer than casual barbecue joints. That night, I head to the Michelin-recommended Fearing's restaurant within The Ritz-Carlton. As well as steaks, chef Dean Fearing, who authored The Texas Food Bible, showcases Southwestern cuisine, which melds disparate influences such as Mexican and Native American. One signature dish is tortilla soup – a spicy tomato broth swimming with jalapenos, julienned radish, diced avocado, and thin strips of corn tortillas.

The morning after, I hit the road bound for Fort Worth, my



final stop before heading home. I've arrived when bluebonnets, the state flower, are in full bloom along the highways. I'm admiring them when a giant roadside billboard catches my eye. It shows a pugnacious President Trump alongside the tagline, "Born in New York, but TEXAN in SPIRIT".

Fort Worth was once a key stop along the Chisholm Trail, one of the main livestock routes out of Texas. Late that afternoon, at the historic Stockyards, I clamber on to a public bench to gain a better vantage point to watch the Texas longhorns parade down the street, in a distant echo of the original cattle drives. Descendants of the beasts brought by Spanish explorers and settlers, these majestic bovines evolved to have freakishly long horns that span up to 2.5m.

As the crowd disperses, I wander down to Mule Alley, a collection of upmarket shops and eateries. At Flea Style, you can customise your cowboy hat with charms, fabric bands, dried flowers, vintage brooches, pins and more. I sit on the sidelines and watch as a New York visitor pimps hers to perfection.

Behind the counter, a deft-fingered worker heats up a branding tool. As she sets it, sizzling, on the brim of the pale peach hat, a thin plume of smoke rises. As a souvenir, it captures a sense of place, but the customer isn't content. It's missing ... something. She rifles through a selection of feathers, finally choosing the largest she can find to tuck into the band. In Texas, size really does matter.

Denise Cullen was a guest of Travel Texas and Fiji Airways.
traveltexas.com