

## Trail Mix

### GREAT GETAWAYS

**The place:** Hill Country State Natural Area.

**Location:** South Texas, 50 miles northwest of San Antonio, near Bandera, off FM 1077.

**Average climate:** May through October, low 70s to upper 90s; November through April, low 40s to upper 70s.

**Fees:** Trailhead, \$5 per night, per site; Bar-O Camp Area, \$8 per night, per site; Chapa's Group Camp Area, \$40 per night, per site; Ranch House, \$125 per night. You'll also pay an extra \$3 per night, per person at all sites, except for children under 12.

**Seasons:** Open year-round. Specific hours and days vary, so call ahead of time.

**Horse rentals:** For referrals, call the Bandera Convention & Visitors Bureau, (800) 364-3833.

**Reservations/brochures:** Hill Country State Natural Area, Rt. 1 Box 601, Bandera, TX 78003; (830) 796-4413.

**Trails and campsite particulars:** This month, reader-reporter Anne Lang gives you an on-the-trail account of her Hill Country experience.



*A rider and her mount enjoying one of Hill Country's many scenic trails.*



*A sign near the equestrian check-in point welcomes riders from near and far.*

It was a cold, blustery fall weekend with a threat of rain, but that didn't stop me and about 150 riders from descending on Hill Country State Natural Area, to ride the trails near the historic cowboy town of Bandera, Texas. Riding borrowed horses, my 9-year-old daughter and I checked out the area's trails and campsites for a possible visit with our own mounts.

Hill Country's trails took us across terrain that ranged from sandy creek bottoms and lower meadows to steep, rocky ascents. If we come back with our own horses, I'll make sure they're recently shod to reduce the risk of them losing a shoe. I'll also stash a couple of EasyBoot temporary shoes in my saddlebag, just in case.

We also meandered through groves of oaks, across rippling grasslands, and through winding canyons. During frequent stream crossings, the horses drank their fill while we peeked at several swimming holes along West Verde Creek. We'd make use of these in summer months!

We spotted several species of native birds but didn't cross paths with the region's other resident wildlife: armadillos, deer, raccoons, ring-tailed cats, rabbits, and various reptiles. That wasn't surprising. Even after 5 hours

of riding, we'd still left much of Hill Country's 34 miles of trails unexplored.

Back at camp, we came upon a group of endurance riders, including top-level competitors. These hearty souls had staked out a territory that includes the park's most "luxurious" equestrian camping facility, known as the Ranch House. I sure wouldn't mind staying in this heated and air-conditioned structure someday. It sleeps up to 12 people in four bedrooms, and features a full bath, a full kitchen, and a cooking shack with a barbecue pit. Our horses would enjoy spring water, stalls, and corrals.

We then investigated Hill Country's other horse-camping sites. Across from park headquarters, we found the Bar-O Camp Area. Its 6-acre, shaded campsite includes 14 10-by-10-foot open pens, a water trough, wash area, fire rings, a composting toilet, and security light. Its parking area can accommodate up to 25 rigs.

Next, we toured the Chapa's Group Camp Area, situated on two shady acres and featuring a large barn with concrete floor and electricity. Up to 20 rigs can park in this area, which also includes water for horses, fire rings, picnic tables, three picket lines, and a bathroom in a nearby ranch house.

Lastly, we ventured into the park's core, to walk the Trailhead Equestrian Camp Area. We discovered five developed equestrian camping sites with a capacity (at each) for six horses and people combined. There are picnic tables, fire rings, corrals, picket lines, water, a chemical toilet, and pull-through parking for rigs. Here, spring water is fine for horses, but riders must haul in their own drinking water and firewood.

Driving home, I concluded that Hill Country is an ideal equestrian camping destination if: 1) you don't mind camping in close proximity to other campers; 2) you have a horse that's capable and fit enough to be comfortable on a variety of footing (including water crossings) and with frequent ascents/descents; and 3) you don't mind occasionally encountering other horses and riders on the trails. From a camping standpoint, it's about as horse-friendly a spot as you could hope for.

**Do you have a great trail or horse-camping spot you'd like to share? See "Join In" on page 104.**



PHOTOS BY ANNE LANG