

Hit the Road - and Learn History - on Texas Tourism Trails

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Imagine if you could ride your bicycle back into history. If a time machine were available, you could follow the El Camino Real – the Old San Antonio Road of 18th-century Spanish Texas – from the Rio Grande near Eagle Pass, past the San Antonio Missions, and up through Nacogdoches on your way to French Louisiana. Or, you could ride with 19th-century Comanche Warriors between the waterholes and canyon shelters of the Llano Estacado, on their way to raid in Mexico during the "Comanche Moon." You could traverse the Butterfield Overland Stage Route to Horsehead Crossing on the Pecos River on the eve of the Civil War; or saddle up with the Buffalo Soldiers as they moved across the chain of frontier forts in the 1870s, from Ft. Worth to El Paso.

Fortunately, a time machine of this sort already is available through a network of roads and occasional off-road trails that offers the recreated travel experience of our forebearers. Natural and cultural landmarks such as springs, restored presidios and forts, and other old structures still dot the routes. Like the Comanches, the soldiers, the cowboys, and the settlers, we cyclists can still ride our "two-wheeled horses" along these historical routes, feel the same open countryside, and share that same special soreness after a long day's ride.

To increase the public's knowledge of these historic Texas trails, the Texas Bicycle Coalition has developed the Texas Bicycle Tourism Trails initiative. Endorsed by the TBC's board of directors, the Tourism Trails initiative is garnering support in the Texas Legislature for the 2005 session. Several Texas chambers of commerce, bed and breakfast inns, and guest ranches have enthusiastically offered to work with TBC to promote bicycle tourism as a way to create a new revenue source for rural areas. TBC will work with the Legislature to submit "enabling legislation" that will identify the best candidate trails. Partnerships of local tourism businesses, chambers of commerce, government officials, local activists, bicycle advocates and the TBC will then procure funding to prepare these trails for bicycle tourism.

The first necessary improvement to the Texas trails network involves posting simple signage to guide bicycle tourists along the trails, which typically follow a combination of local, county, state and, occasionally, federal roads. Other upgrades to difficult sections will include creating shoulders, paving gravel segments, providing connectors (especially into and out of towns and cities), and possibly constructing big-ticket items such as bike/ped bridges across rivers at historic crossings. Once trunk routes are established, local communities can enhance the trails themselves. For example, a community may decide to repair and maintain a bypassed segment of an old historic road for bicycle

tourists. Or, a rancher whose property features the remains of a stagecoach stop may decide to open a part of his or her ranch land to allow bicycle tourists to ride through the stop. Several of the old frontier forts are on private property, but are open to the public.

Bicycle tourism trails with historic themes tie together many of the roadside markers, architecturally significant buildings, natural features, and local museums that make Texas history so rich. Many of these places of interest are maintained or run by colorful local residents who provide a wealth of stories and legends about the local past. Tourism trails can also serve as trunk routes for many other locally popular bicycle loops, and will entice area residents to bike their local facilities for exercise.

Many opportunities for bicycle tourism trails exist in Texas. In the 1880s, the Texas and Pacific and the Southern Pacific Railroads were involved in a track-building race across Texas. These tracks, which are still active, run parallel to roads connecting the interesting "railroad towns" established along the way. Old Texas Highway 20, which runs from Houston to Austin via Brenham, Giddings, and many villages in between, was one of the first state highways constructed in the 1920s, and is now decommissioned. The Chisholm Trail is just one of many old cattle-drive trails across Texas. TBC will work with the tourism industry to make the first round of trails showcasing our unique Texas history a success.



Gerardo Chavez Garcia is a professional Gregorian Chanter and music teacher from Mexico City who prefers to spend his vacations on a bicycle.
- TBC Staff Photo