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COUNTING CRITTERS

A North Texas farmer uses an old playbook to carve new habitats

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East of Georgetown, a maze of narrow country roads bounded by white fences, tall trees and fields of waving grass leads to Scurlock Farms. The bustling city feels miles — and years — away. This town of roughly 75,000 residents just 25 miles north of Austin makes a great weekend getaway, and the farm will serve as a jumping-off point for my exploration of Georgetown's river and restaurants, courthouse and caves.

pecan orchard below the ridge, where the guest houses sit, to a gate and short path that leads to the San Gabriel River. We pick our way over the rugged riverbed, around several swimming holes, as the points out fossils embedded in the rock.

Then we zoom down gravel roads, past hay fields and pastures where cows graze, through thick woods, and to the horse and goat pens. Guests are welcome to feed apples and carrots to the horses and scoops of sweet feed grain the Boer-Spanish cross goats. The Scurlocks offer a true working farm experience, often giving young guests a ride on a tractor (or a hay baler, if they're baling hay) and letting them gather eggs and feed the free-range chickens. A stay at the guest house comes with muffins made with eggs from those same chickens.

HISTORY UNEARTHED

While the farm offers plenty to occupy guests for an entire weekend, Georgetown and its environs have much to enjoy as well. Saturday morning, I join a tour of the Gault Site, west of interstate 35 just outside Florence. Tours are offered every other month by the Williamson Museum and Gault School of Archaeological Research.

Archaeologists have known about the site since 1929, and it has yielded 600,000 Clovis-era artifacts. Human habitation here may date back 20,000 years. With excavation of the site complete, anthropologists now are working to determine the story the artifacts tell.

Tours cover how the land and resources here attracted people, the ways they lived and traded with others and the rather astonishing variety of tools they used. A sheltered, wooded valley deep into the property contains a former mammoth kill site, burned rock middens and what served as a camping spot. (The tour lasts up to three hours, and we were on our feet most of the time and occasionally in the sun, so plan accordingly.)

I get completely out of the sun and even further back in time — millions of years, in fact — at Georgetown's Inner Space Caverns. Texas boasts more caves than almost anywhere in the U.S. because the state has a lot of limestone, a great medium

Getting Away in GEORGETOWN

CENTRAL TEXAS CITY OFFERS ABUNDANT OPTIONS
FOR EXPLORING, PLAYING, EATING.

BY MELISSA GASKILL / PHOTOS BY MAEGAN LANHAM

A short drive down a gravel road leads to the farm's two guest houses. Rocky Overlook and my home for the weekend, the Palette Pad. It served as an art studio for Pauline Thweatt, who painted Texas landscapes under the name C.P. Montague. (The artist felt her last name was too hard to pronounce, says daughter Sheron Scurlock.)

Montague's work was featured in galleries all over the state, and President Lyndon Johnson owned several of her paintings. Pauline and her husband, Bill, built both structures, selecting every rock used in the interior and exterior from the nearby San Gabriel River and laying them by hand. Two walls of floor-to-ceiling windows that once provided light for the artist now provide me with a view of stately oak trees and several bird feeders.

Scurlock is the oldest of the Thweatt's five children and current owner of the farm with her husband, Dan. The couple built their own home on the property in 1971 and raised two sons here. She gives me a lively tour of the farm, steering a four-wheeler to a sprawling

Clockwise from top left: Swimming at the Hole; Inner Space Caverns; Scurlock Farms; Monument Cafe; San Gabriel Park, KFD; Daynes Picnic; historic courthouse square.



for cave formation. Caves in Central Texas act as natural conduits for rainwater to reach underground aquifers. Water filtering through the ground into caves creates speleothems, or formations such as stalactites and stalagmites.

This cavern, discovered in spring of 1963, is a wonderland of such formations, including massive pendants and delicate soda straws. The latter form when a water droplet collects on the cave ceiling and becomes covered by a thin film of dissolved limestone. The film adheres to the ceiling by surface tension, leaving a rim of

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EATING OUT

Georgetown has a wealth of dining options that pretty much cover the gamut. One not to be missed is downtown's Monument Cafe, which occupies a building styled like an old-fashioned diner. Right off, the wait staff brings out a plate of warm biscuits that are well worth the wait for a table.

Another popular spot downtown, 600 Degrees Pizzeria, has a separate take-out location a block away, so I order a pie and enjoy it back on the Palette Pad's outdoor patio.

You can make an

restaurants serving everything from tacos to seafood, ice cream shops, wine bars, breweries and shops of all kinds.

HEAD OUTSIDE

The Georgetown area really shines when it comes to outdoor activities. I hang out for several hours at its famous Blue Hole Park, a swimming hole on the San Gabriel River bounded by cliffs on one side and tall trees on the other. Free garage parking a couple of blocks away is icing on the cake. The park has picnic tables and walking trails, including one that connects to the San Gabriel Park trails along the North and South San Gabriel Rivers. There's a 1.6-mile loop trail in the park, and another that goes all the way to Lake Georgetown.

Lake Georgetown offers four campgrounds — Cedar Breaks and Jim Hogg Parks with RV facilities, and Russell and Tejas Parks, which have tent camping with drinking water and flush toilets (reservations required).

Several years ago, I hiked the Good Water Trail, a 26-mile loop around the entire lake, taking advantage of multiple trailheads to do the route in a series of shorter hikes. The trail traverses a variety of terrain — wooded areas, open fields, brushy swaths, rocky hills, cactus patches and streams. About 2.5 miles from Cedar Breaks Park is Crockett Gardens, the remains of early settlements that include a spring-fed pool and waterfall. Cedar Breaks requires a day-use reservation.

Several of the Lake Georgetown parks have swim areas and boat ramps, and people fish the lake for black and white bass, hybrid stripers, white crappie, catfish and the most popular quarry, smallmouth bass. Low water levels may affect boat ramp access, but at Russell Park, Ducks on the Pond rents kayaks (singles and doubles available), which can navigate shallower waters. Kayaks also are a great alternative way to access Crockett Gardens.

And no judgment from me if you just chill at the farm all weekend.



material when the drop eventually falls to the floor. Each subsequent drop adds a minute amount, oh-so-slowly creating a hollow tube. Fittingly, the word "stalactite" is Greek for "oozing out in drops."

Cave tours depart every 30 minutes (no reservations required), run about an hour and cover a mile on a paved trail. The cave remains a constant 72 degrees year-round, but feels more like 80 degrees with the humidity.

afternoon or evening of it at South Fork Food Truck Park, a collection of food trucks. It's pet- and kid-friendly with a jungle gym and closed-in gates, shaded areas during the summer and enclosed areas during the winter. South Fork also hosts farmers markets every Sunday from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m.

For more dining choices, simply stroll around the pedestrian-friendly courthouse square, which is surrounded by historic Victorian buildings that now house