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THE ENTERTAINMENT MAGAZINE



OF THE AUSTIN AMERICAN-STATESMAN

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XL Cover Story: Happy Trails

Reflections on the beating heart of Austin

Nov. 10, 2005

We see it, but we don't. We walk it, hike it, bike it, jog it, stroll it, but we haven't come close to exploring all of it. We routinely regard the Town Lake hike-and-bike trail as our town square, but when was the last time we really paid attention?

Outstripping even Sixth Street and Longhorn sports, the trail is the No. 1 single entertainment option in Austin. Every day, thousands ply its byways from the Longhorn Dam to the east to the Roberta Crenshaw Pedestrian Bridge to the west.

So one sunny fall afternoon, we dispatched 18 intrepid St. Edward's University students to different points along the trail. Not surprisingly, they came up with 18 miscellaneous reflections on our leafy and lovable town square.

Michael Barnes



Click on the map to open a PDF file of the entire hike-and-bike trail.

Town Lake tunnel vision

A billowing sycamore shaded my descent from the Longhorn Dam as I ventured off the road less taken and found myself drawn to the sounds of — parrots? Luckily I'm no stranger to this Austin oddity: Quaker parrots, as they're sometimes called in these parts, have been here since the 1970s. Their precise origin is still in question, but their presence this October afternoon beckoned me to their camouflaged serenades.

And then the tunnel sucked me in.

Before long I discovered that the hike-and-bike trail actually trickles through the dark underbelly of the Longhorn Dam. Here, one finds extravagant letters staking claim over the tunnel in the names of Mexico, Hong Kong, Bloods, Crips and even John and Kyle — may their love for each other endure forever. I found that this crypt — hidden from the yuppies north of Town Lake and the bohemians to the south — was a vantage point for seeing Austin as various, unkempt and sanguine — and not how some bumper sticker says to keep it.

But the parrots, begging me to applaud their performance, pulled me toward the light. Emerging from the tunnel, I didn't clap; they flew away and, to them and my beloved Austin, I tipped my flask of tequila before making my way home. (Map locator: 11)

— *Michael Rowland*

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Four-legged fitness

It was this time last year when I adopted my first human. It didn't take long for me to learn that well-behaved humans are well-exercised humans. So when I discovered the Roberta Crenshaw Pedestrian Bridge under MoPac Boulevard, suddenly being man's best friend got a lot easier.

Unfortunately, humans don't respect the simple means of staying fit — fugitive tennis balls, tug-of-war, the occasional tail chase. With humans, it's all about location. So, when I saw the shade, a level jogging trail and packs of perspiring people of all breeds, I knew I'd found the right place for my human.

Free parking by a stretching area and water fountain marked the perfect spot to start a run, with a beautiful view to paw. With a big grassy field on the south side — just right for ball chasing — and lake access on the north side for swimming, I was in dog heaven. But beware the feathered sky rats. Their sneak attacks under MoPac can ruin a dog's day — or coat — instantly. (Map locator: 1)
— *David Amend*

Written in the trees

East of everywhere else, near the Holly Street Power Plant, there's a place where the trees say: "Rosa hearts Karim." Also "Jamie + Celia forever." A dock rises above vertical slats; an Astroturf patch scratches the middle. The only noise is the crunching of the trail's gravel, and, from a park bench, the muffled melodies of a man's radio.

Across the lake, giant houses bloom. In between, the water ripples, as if lusting after the farther shore. Small collections of cigarette butts sit in little piles around my dock. Perhaps I have found someone's meditation spot, some high school students' meeting place, or maybe it is a place where lovers come to settle their quarrels. It could be any of these things, since visitors are rare in quiet cove of trees. (Map locator: 8)
— *Caroline Crow*

Write, don't run

I don't run. I don't jog. I definitely don't put on shorts and run/jog in front of other people, especially the pros down at Town Lake.

So sitting on the side of the hike-and-bike trail was embarrassing, worse than driving by, because all the pros glanced at me as they scampered by. I felt guilty for sitting there, legs crossed, scribbling in my notebook. I felt even more guilty because I was writing about them.

Whenever the hike-and-bikers weren't around, I noticed the abiding serenity, and even though I could see Austin's skyline above, the trail seemed separate from the city. The city was sitting over the lake, rushing by on the bridge, and, down on the trail, life was ruled by squawking birds and mischievous squirrels.

Nearby, the Hyatt cafe smells really, really good. I wandered over there because it was making me salivate a little. Since I can't even sit on the side of the trail doing absolutely nothing without heading for the food, I figure I wouldn't make it very far running in nylon shorts. (Map locator: 14)
— *Sarah Grainer*

Unusual suspects

It was 4:55 p.m. when I started compiling a list of suspects. I knew they all wanted my USB storage device, hanging temptingly from my keychain where I had deposited it on shore. But who wanted it most?



Aubrey Edwards for AA-S

Daniel Garrison, left, and Turbo Terebecki pause on the Pfluger bridge, one of the many gateways to the hike-and-bike trail.



Aubrey Edwards for AA-S

Sometimes, in the shade of the corkscrew ramp on the northern end of the Pfluger bridge, you'll find an artist selling his work. If not, the people passing by may catch your eye.

The first suspect was the University of Texas rowing team. An easy solution for them would be to dock at another bridge and sneak up to grab the silver gadget.

The shadiest suspects were the Couple with a Baby Carriage. Innocent, one would think. I didn't see a baby, so for all I know, a pile of stolen jump drives was wrapped in those wads of blankets. They could even lurk around the hike-and-bike trail all day waiting for unwary college girls to leave jump drives lying around. My top-secret, valuable files and documents would be a tasty addition to their pilfered jump drive collection.

Last, the prime suspect. His shirt read: "www.texaslawyer.com." Need I say more?

All the patrons of the trail eyed me, as if writing furiously in a spiral notebook meant I carried an AK-47 under my belt. Leaving my keys on the ledge seemed so harmless.

5:14 p.m. My USB drive and I made it safely through the hour, thankfully, but I'll keep those suspects in mind the next time I go on the trail. The moral of the story? Keep your jump drive at hand. You never know who's out there. (Map locator: 15)

— Vicki Anne Palmer

Not so gently down the stream

I single haunting sound drifts down the lake, drowning out the traffic, and even the annoying music piped from the Radisson Hotel patio. It is the sound of a woman's voice amplified from a distance. She sounds tough, authoritative and above all else, loud.

Sitting at the bottom of stone steps with squirrels scampering on both sides of me, I peer through a jungle of branches and moribund leaves, when suddenly a team of rowers passes through my field of vision. I finally realize the noise's source.

The rowers listen intently to the booming commands from their coach. Breaking through the tranquil water that blinds me with the sun's reflection, they tear up the smooth surface that they glide on, simultaneously dipping their oars with strong, quick motions of the arms.

Seemingly down, but not yet out, the rowers' exertions are revealed through their strained movements. No one seems to glance back as their coach floats on by, right alongside her team, shouting words of encouragement as well as necessary admonishments.

Town Lake may be an escape for some, but for others, it is a place of punishing work, work that, from the evidence at hand, builds muscle and the strength to endure the lady with the loud voice. (Map locator: 5)

— Kim Griggs

Urban poetry

Perilously close to the traffic on the north side of the Congress Avenue Bridge, and with the faint grinding drone of nearby construction, a white heron and a pack of sun-bleached turtles pose peacefully in an small offshoot of the Colorado River. The Town Lake hike-and-bike trail, with its constant pound of tanned and toned runners and occasional dog bark, is nevertheless in tune with nature. With City Hall in the distance, two fishermen aimlessly pace the river's edge, so far unsuccessful in their mission. A lonely fishing line is tangled in a drooping tree branch, just above the water's surface.

Shaded by immense trees, benches face the lazy river as the dry Austin breeze pushes the water downstream. A mother and child sit silently on a bench, while a group of after-school students weaves through the steady flow of the trail's pedestrian traffic. A few solitary wanderers walk slowly with appreciation for the lush natural surroundings within eyeshot of downtown Austin. Under a bridge on the trail, graffiti gives a well-intentioned ultimatum: "Love or Die!" (Map locator: 4)

— Ian Renfroe

Canvassing Austin



Aubrey Edwards for AA-S

John Eric Palmer, left, uses the boat launch area near Austin High to launch himself as Miguel Guerra and Sammy Petersen look on.

The view of Austin from the Pfluger Pedestrian Bridge is choice. So local artist Brian Keeper grabbed the opportunity.

On a recent afternoon, Keeper sat in paint-splattered pants and a sombrero — highly useful for creating a circle of shade — as he sketched out the trees below the impotent Seaholm Power Plant.

From the pink and peach of the bridge to the view of Austin's skyline — post-industrial art deco tinged by high-tech exuberance with green space in the middle — the pedestrian bridge is also an ideal place to take bored visiting family members and dates.

Keeper preferred theoretical terms to aesthetics. "I think painting in public makes art more democratic," he said. "It takes art off a pedestal and makes it something people feel comfortable interacting with daily."

As he worked, adding plumes of false exhaust from the power plant and fictitious streaks in the sunny sky, joggers slowed and others stopped to contemplate the painting.

"Plus," Keeper said, as he swirled his brush in a cup of clean water, "I like people."

In the shade of the corkscrew ramp on the northern end of the bridge (provided so bicyclists can access the bridge without getting off their bikes) another artist oftentimes sets up his work for sale.

And so, once again, we find that art in all its forms seems to bubble up from the water table of Austin — even through the cracks of the still fairly new pedestrian bridge. (Map locator: 3)
— *William Pate*

Segs in the city

What's the hottest way to travel this fall? Walking is so overrated. Riding a bike is totally last year. So what's a fashion-forward person in motion supposed to do? Glide. The hottest trend in travel is the Segway — a two-wheeled, self-balancing, electric-powered transporter. You, too, can look fashion-savvy this season by taking a tour around Town Lake with SegCity Austin.

This innovative tour guide company ushers customers around Austin's hot spots on upright Segways. After all, why put all that effort into walking when you can glide with style? Tour leaders, also known as Chief Glide Guides, direct groups twice a day around Town Lake and other local attractions. SegCity Austin claims visitors from as far as Canada and San Diego have experienced the Lone Star State in transportation style.

Don't commit a fashion faux pas this season by getting around town the out-of-date way; instead glide with pride on the transportation couture of the future. (Map locator: 6)
— *Sarah Fletcher*

What's in your water bottle?

A nice elderly lady in a wide-brimmed purple gardening hat stopped to tie her shoe. She asked if I was writing a story for my yearbook. I told her no, that I was just observing the scene.

"That's great," she replies. "Observing is a wonderful exercise for a young lady."

With this, I felt somehow absolved in exercising my right to observe.

Things picked up when I caught the tail end of a conversation between two designer-spandex-sporting power walkers that sounded like it was jerked from an episode of "The O.C."

"So you've had a white wine spritzer in that water bottle every time we've walked together?" questions the first walker.



Aubrey Edwards for AA-S

Could kayakers and scullers who row on Town Lake have darker motives such as stealing an unattended USB drive on the shore? Probably not.

"Absolutely," replies the second. "Why do you think I love working out so much?"

I would pay money to see this lady on a bike.

I saw a few couples meet up for a post-work run, but one couple in particular seemed to live by the motto "The couple that plays together, stays together." The pair was wearing matching Texas flag running shorts and traded love taps on the behind every few strides. The only thing lacking from this creepy scene was "Mr. and Mrs. Town Lake" sashes.

These two, I would hate to see on bikes. (Map locator: 18)
— *Collie B. Farley*

Luxury in the thick of it

The trees get thicker, the path turns dark and a sense of decay fills the park. Even with the few walkers passing by, the area seems forgotten, as though everyone is passing through to someplace better. The abandoned grounds of picnic tables, a ramshackle shelter of the dispossessed and something that could have been a type of playground equipment lie on an eroded shelf on the river, falling below the path as it ascends an embankment. There is no longer an easy way down, as it is clouded by brush and fallen branches. It is a no man's land, overlooked by an odd turret of rotten trunks bound by cable, covered in leaves, bereft of grass and left to be reclaimed by nature and the slow erosion of Town Lake.

But, not everything is so dismal. Standing back from the path is the concrete skeleton of the new Milagro residences, bustling with activity and a slight shine from the sun. I go to bother a construction worker on break. "Luxury condominiums conveniently priced starting at the \$160s," he said. I read the same phrase on a nearby sign.

Soon, this stretch of the park will be someplace better, and people will head here, forgetting some other part of the path. (Map locator: 7)
— *Nicholas K. von Mueller*

Barking up the right tree

"There is a never-ending wonderment in sharing in the lives of dogs as they grow and interact," says Paul Addington, a founder of Friends of the Norwood Estates Dog Park. The organization was founded in July 2004 to raise awareness and improve the park's conditions at Interstate 35 and Riverside Drive. So far, it has provided access to drinking water and rehabilitated the once-eroding grounds of Norwood Estates. Recently, the park was approved for a city grant that will go toward building tree wells (to protect the trunks of the park's pecans) and planting the bare areas with Bermuda grass sod, as well terracing the slopes and runoff areas with landscape timbers.

"My main interest is to have a beautiful, healthy place for the dogs to socialize and enjoy themselves," Addington says. The group is well on its way to making the canine heaven dogs possible. For instance, the open area gives dogs freedom to romp around and play as they learn to interact with each other and become better acquainted with other dogs of various ages and sizes. (The organization participates in the Pet Food Bank Charity Garage Sale in November to raise additional funds for the park.) (Map locator: 13)
— *Alexandra Almaguer*

Swan lake

On the west side of the Longhorn Dam, I reclined against a lounge-shaped rock and watched a swan fly over my head. The gentle breeze that playfully whispered into my ears also carried the swan effortlessly as it glided above the water. This secluded sanctuary of the Town Lake hike-and-bike trail is hidden in the East Cesar Chavez and Pleasant Valley neighborhoods, a place that to many Austinites appears desolate and uninviting.

From the Pleasant Valley Bridge I saw a small piece of land extending out into Town Lake, shaded by overhanging trees with bushels of elephant ears around the edge. The only way to reach it was to cross a very narrow bridge. In between the cypress trees gently kissing the water and the elephant ears lapping against the shore, I could see where Town Lake extends out past the Longhorn Dam and flows into the Colorado River. Below, the unleashed Colorado winds back and forth, lined with brushy trees and sandy shores until it disappears into the horizon. The only person I encountered out there was an old man fishing.



Aubrey Edwards for AA-S

Don't have a bike? Don't like to jog? No worries on the Town Lake trail.

The dirty, calloused shell of an oyster holds a pearl in its womb. The best place to find diamonds is in a coal mine. And the most relaxing and scenic views of Town Lake are hidden, guarded and nurtured at the farthest eastern reaches of trail. (Map locator: 10)
— *Carson Barker*

A tip of the hat

It's a perfect 80 degrees at Lamar and Riverside. My head is back, the sun is shining down on my face, and I begin to forget the assignment that brought me here. Then, I hear a commotion over my left shoulder.

I look up only to find two waifish, mop-headed adolescents skateboarding toward me. As they breeze by I hear an inkling of their conversation: "No, dude, she's waaaaaay hotter, I mean that girl from 'Alias' kicks (expletive)."

As I chuckle to myself at the urgency of the kid's argument, I look down to the water and catch a glimpse of a canoe inching past. I see a weathered old man sitting proudly as captain of the vessel and I also notice two fishing poles and what appears to be about a 24-pack worth of empty beer cans. He's clearly had a good day. As if to prove it, he looks up, smiles and tips his hat in that way that only a man of a certain age can do.

It was a lazy day, and although I would have never guessed it, that spot on the corner, in the middle of all the craziness and traffic of the city, was, for one afternoon, my little Zen. (Map locator: 17)
— *Kimberly Fitzgerald*

Duck day afternoon

Ducks have lent their images to cartoon characters, mascots, door stops, mailboxes and bath-time friends for years, not to mention their contributions to cuisine and taxidermy. Yet ducks make wonderful company, too. After I stumbled onto a deserted dock by the lake behind Chicon Street, a curious duck appeared from beneath the brush. I found out later that my companion was one of four Muscovy ducks that make their home on the lake. With an unusually obtrusive caruncle (the red, wrinkled protrusion that envelops the neck and head around a drake's bill) and an impressive array of silver speckles, his beauty hardly matched the serenity of our niche.

The water's tranquil flow and a gentle whirling in the trees urged us — me and the ducks — to ignore the litter and the power plant across the way. Here, east of Interstate 35, the metropolitan roar of Austin's downtown district fades and allows the softer elements to take over, their beauty dissipating the tensions of daily life. (An extensive report on Town Lake's waterfowl inhabitants can be found at www.duckpolice.org.) (Map locator: 12)
— *Corrina Kalish*

Out of my league

The grounds of the Greater East Austin Youth League were almost devoid of human activity when I arrived. Later, maybe 15 kids frolicked toward the edge of the facilities, and Rigo, a coach for the league, was grooming one of the softball fields. He approached me, which made my job easy, and told me all about the league.

I don't have enough room to relate all the wonderful things he told me, but I will say that it sounds like a tremendous program, and it's on the scenic shores of Town Lake. I couldn't — and still can't get over — how different this side of the hike-and-bike trail is from its western reaches, where I attended Austin High School. I'd lived in Austin my entire life, and it never occurred to me that this part of the trail and the path west of Interstate 35 were connected.

This part of the trail is my favorite by far, mostly because it's less urban. The fact that the east trail doesn't evoke memories of debacles from my very limited high school athletic career, well, that's just an added bonus. (Map locator: 9)
— *Macy Hurwitz*

One wheel rolling by the river

Across the street from the YMCA on the hike-and-bike trail, a unicycle lurches past my field of vision. At the risk of injuring both of us, I chase down the one-wheeled man. Steve the Unicyclist, who withholds his real name to protect his mild-mannered alter ego, deftly dismounts and agrees to tell me more about his hobby. He haphazardly sweeps the black shaggy hair sticking out from under his helmet out of his eyes. "Without handle bars to steady yourself, you



Aubrey Edwards for AA-S

Ducks can be great trailside companions, as Amy Hornaday and her son Petey, 2, can attest. You can learn more about the lake's feathered denizens at www.duckpolice.org.

have to use your stomach and back muscles to stay balanced, so it's a great workout," Steve explains. (Let the record show that his lime green bike suit reveals an impressive six-pack.)

Steve's unicycle is no flimsy clown creation; the wheel is a 26-inch mountain bike tire made exclusively for off-roading. He promises me it's not dangerous, since you only move as fast as you can pedal, whereas bicycles can coast at high speeds.

Still, I share my concerns about the bumpier parts of the trail, so Steve demonstrates how he avoids obstacles. He jumps onto the cycle and begins pedaling toward a big rock. As I'm trying to remember the location of the nearest emergency call box, he grabs the seat with both hands and turns the cycle into a pogo stick, hopping easily over the rock. As my jaw wags in the breeze, Steve the Unicyclist turns back and waves as he heads back off on the trail. (Map locator: 2)

— Sarah Wark

Wise man of the waterhole

There was no drinking water. The water fountain by the pull-up bars was as dry as a Dust Bowl well, and the big orange water jugs grouped on a table in the shade had apparently not been filled. Dogs paddled happily in the cool waters of Town Lake while their owners looked on in parched envy. Even the statue of Stevie Ray Vaughan looked sweaty and uncomfortable in his metal poncho.

Runners breezed by the the water coolers, dressed in track shorts and sports bras to show off lean, bronzed frames. iPods dangled from their waistbands. They snorted and kicked the ground when they found the jugs empty, crushing and tearing the paper cups in contempt before shooting on down the trail.

A herd of power walkers descended upon the jugs like migrating buffalo. They pushed and shook the jugs, hitting them with their wrist weights like the orange coolers were fruit that needed to be squeezed of their juice. They seemed reluctant to leave the shade without slaking their thirst. Bikers looked on with obvious delight and satisfaction as they zoomed past, sipping water from plastic camel humps on their backs.

At last, a lone old man jogged by, his head and shoulders bowed toward the ground like he dragged some immense burden behind him. His skin was brown and leathered, and it hung on his bones like an ill-fitting suit. He hobbled over to the water coolers, and when no water came from the spout, he merely unscrewed the top and dipped his cup into the fresh ice that had not had time to melt. He chewed heartily and rubbed the ice over his face and shoulders. Then his head bowed once more under the invisible weight, and he trudged on toward Congress and the bats. (Map locator: 16)

— James Byrd

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