

Hill Country on the Horizon: Easy Day Trips from Austin

Austin sits right on the edge of the Texas Hill Country, and some of the state's most rewarding escapes are barely an hour from downtown. You don't need a full weekend or a complicated itinerary to trade city streets for spring-fed swimming holes, small-town dance halls, and scenic backroads. Here are the easiest and most satisfying day trips to put on your radar.

Swimming Holes & State Parks: Where the Water Is the Destination

Wimberley

Wimberley is the Hill Country day trip that has it all: a spring-fed swimming hole, an artsy town square, and easy access from Austin. **Blue Hole Regional Park** is the centerpiece—a scenic, cypress-lined swimming hole with clear water and hiking trails. For a more adventurous swim, **Jacob's Well** is a deep artesian spring that requires a reservation, so plan ahead if you want to experience it. When you're not in the water, browse the galleries, watch a glassblowing demonstration at Wimberley Glassworks, and time your visit for the first Saturday of the month to catch **Wimberley Market Days**, a sprawling open-air market with hundreds of vendors.

Dripping Springs

Dripping Springs is about 40 minutes west of Austin and punches well above its weight for a small town. The headline attraction is **Hamilton Pool Preserve**, a collapsed limestone grotto where a waterfall feeds a jade-green pool surrounded by ferns. Swimming availability depends on water quality and conditions, but the hike and the scenery alone justify the trip—just remember that reservations are required every day of the week and fill up fast. If you want more room to roam, **Reimers Ranch** offers hiking, climbing, and a stretch of the Pedernales River for cooling off. Dripping Springs is also a legitimately great drinking destination, with wineries, breweries, and distilleries clustered along the US-290 corridor.

Inks Lake State Park (Near Burnet)

If you want the classic state-park swimming experience without the summer crowds of some other Hill Country spots, Inks Lake is worth the roughly 75-minute drive. The park's signature feature is **Devil's Waterhole**, a pink-granite cove with deep, clear water and ledges that have made it one of the most beloved swimming holes in the state park system. The lake itself stays at a consistent level year-round, which means the shoreline is reliable even in dry years—something most Highland Lakes can't promise. Canoe and kayak rentals are available inside the park, and entry is just $6 per person. Campsites book out months in advance, but for a day trip you only need to show up.

Guadalupe River State Park

For a river day that feels a little more wild, **Guadalupe River State Park** offers four miles of spring-fed river for swimming, tubing, and paddling, plus thirteen miles of trails through limestone bluffs and bald cypress. It's a straightforward drive from Austin and a solid choice when you want the water without the resort-town energy of New Braunfels.

Small Towns with Main-Character Energy

Fredericksburg (and Luckenbach)

Fredericksburg is the Hill Country town that does it all, and it's about 90 minutes from Austin. Founded by German settlers in 1846, its Main Street is still lined with shops, biergartens, and tasting rooms. The surrounding Learn more here **US-290 Wine Trail** is one of the most concentrated wine destinations in Texas, with dozens of wineries pouring Texas-grown grapes. History buffs should not skip the **National Museum of the Pacific War**, a surprisingly world-class museum in Admiral Nimitz's hometown. And if you want the full Hill Country experience, tack on **Enchanted Rock State Natural Area**, a massive pink granite dome about 18 miles north that rewards those who climb its summit trail with 360-degree views. On your way back, swing through **Luckenbach**—barely a town, but a general store, a dance hall, and live music under old oak trees that feels genuinely magical.

Gruene (New Braunfels)

Gruene is technically a historic district within New Braunfels, but it feels like its own little world. The anchor is **Gruene Hall**, the oldest continuously operating dance hall in Texas, built in 1878 and still hosting live music daily—most shows are free. Beyond the dance hall, the district is packed with antique shops, specialty stores in 19th-century brick storefronts, and the Gristmill restaurant perched on a bluff above the Guadalupe River. If you're visiting in summer, you can pair Gruene with river tubing on the Comal or Guadalupe, or a visit to **Schlitterbahn**, the famous spring-fed waterpark.

Johnson City

Johnson City flies slightly under the radar, which is part of its appeal. It's the home base for **Lyndon B. Johnson National Historical Park**, where you can tour the 36th president's boyhood home and the LBJ Ranch. Outdoor lovers should head to **Pedernales Falls State Park**, where hiking and biking trails lead to twin waterfalls over layered limestone. And yes, there's wine: **Carter Creek Winery Resort & Spa** and **Lost Draw Cellars** both offer elevated tasting experiences, while **Garrison Brothers Distillery** pours sweet mash straight from the stills at Texas's oldest whiskey distillery.

For the Eat & Drink Crowd

Driftwood

Driftwood is a tiny community that happens to be one of the best food-and-drink day trips in the Hill Country. **The Salt Lick BBQ** is the original famous Texas barbecue location, and next door at **Salt Lick Cellars** you can sample wines without leaving the property. Beyond barbecue, the **Driftwood Wine Trail** links six scenic wineries, and **Desert Door Distillery** makes sotol, an earthy Texas spirit worth trying. It's an easy 35–45 minute drive southwest of Austin, making it one of the closest true Hill Country escapes on this list.

Lockhart

Lockhart is technically just outside the Hill Country proper, but it belongs in any Austin day-trip conversation. It is the **Barbecue Capital of Texas**, with legendary pits like **Kreuz Market** (established in 1901), **Black's Barbecue** (family-run since 1932), and **Smitty's** all within a few blocks of each other. New-school spot **Barbs B Q** earned a Michelin Bib Gourmand in 2024, so there's a contemporary counterpoint to the old guard. It's about 40 minutes from downtown Austin—close enough for a spontaneous afternoon.

Practical Notes for Planning

- **Book ahead for the big draws.** Hamilton Pool requires reservations every day and fills up quickly. Jacob's Well swim reservations are also required. Enchanted Rock day passes can sell out on weekends.
- **Go early for swimming.** Texas heat is no joke, and the most popular swimming holes—Blue Hole, Devil's Waterhole, Hamilton Pool—are best experienced before the afternoon rush. Most day-trippers within 50 minutes can fit a half-day outing, while destinations past 90 minutes warrant an early start.
- **Pair a town with a swim.** The easiest Hill Country days combine one small-town wander with one outdoor stop. Wimberley + Blue Hole, Dripping Springs + Hamilton Pool, Gruene + river tubing, Fredericksburg + Enchanted Rock—these pairings give you a full day without overpacking the itinerary.
- **Check water conditions before you commit.** Some swimming holes close after heavy rain or when water quality testing flags concerns. A quick check of park websites or social media before you leave Austin saves a wasted drive.

The Hill Country is Austin's backyard, and it rewards even a half-day's curiosity. Pick one town, one swimming hole, or one barbecue pit, and you'll understand why locals treat the drive west as a ritual rather than a chore.