The New York Times
nytimes.com

PRINTER-FRIENDLY FORMAT SPONSORED BY SUNDANCE FESTIVAL

April 18, 2008

HAVENS | BANDERA, TEX.

A Not-Too-Wild-West Cowboy Town

By ROBERT STRAUSS

RUSTY REED loves living in Anchorage — the wide-open spaces, the wildlife, the he-man feel. But after 40 years of the deep north deep-freeze, he gets a little tired of the cold. So, in winter, he heads to another place that has similar features.

“When I go from Alaska to Bandera, I say I am going from God’s Country to Paradise,” said Mr. Reed, who likes to hunt and whose wife rides horses. So last year, Mr. Reed, who owns a construction management firm and leads hunting expeditions in Alaska, and his wife, Barbara Hillin, bought a house in Bandera, Tex.

Bandera, about 40 miles northwest of San Antonio, calls itself the Cowboy Capital of the World, mainly because of the dude ranches that started springing up there in the 1920s. And sometimes the town does seem to have a dude ranch or a honky-tonk for each one of its 1,200 or so permanent residents.

Because it’s in the heart of Texas Hill Country — once upon a time it was the start of the cattle run to Kansas — Bandera draws a somewhat eclectic range of second-home owners and weekenders. Some of them are real cowboys, others are cowboy wannabes.

Then there are the hunters, like Mr. Reed. Motorcyclists savor the curvy roads through the rocky hills, and Europeans come to avoid cold winters and pretend to be Texans for a while.

Gay Guilott, who owns Guilott Realty in Bandera, says her husband, Finn Rasmussen, grew up in Denmark smitten with westerns, which lured him to Texas five years ago.

“But he went to Dallas and Houston, and even San Antonio, and couldn’t find cowboys,” she said. “Finally, someone told him about Bandera, where there were rodeos and people who tied up their horses at the Dairy Queen, and he came and never left.”

Ms. Guilott arrived from a different exotic locale, the Louisiana flatlands.

“My parents used to come to the Hill Country for vacations when we were kids in the 1970s just for the clean air and the hills and golfing,” she said. “I came back later because, well, you don’t get hills like this in Louisiana, and you don’t get skies like this in Louisiana. And even people. You don’t get people who want to invite you to a party every day, even in Louisiana.”

The Scene

Not everything is cowboys and honky-tonks. There is also the Medina River, which threads through town and

into the back country. Gary and Cindy Hightower bought their second home on the banks of the Medina last year. The two-bedroom house sits on more than an acre and cost $137,000.

“We can put a tube or a kayak in there right in our backyard, and the river winds around, so we can go for a ways to the city park and just walk home,” said Ms. Hightower, an elementary school counselor in Baytown, near Houston. “My husband can just sit and watch the deer come feed all day. We’re not honky-tonkers, but there is plenty restful for us to do.”

For those who are, indeed, honky-tonkers, there’s plenty that’s not so restful. Brian Black, brother of the country music star Clint Black, owns the Longhorn Saloon and Medina River Country kayaking outfitters. Weekend nights at the Longhorn there’s no shortage of raucous country music.

A couple of blocks away, the 11th Street Cowboy Bar is a bit less crowded, and on Wednesday nights, it has Steak Night, where patrons bring their own steaks to cook on the outdoor grill.

“It sounds like a cliché, but it is the type of place where you sit outside at the picnic table in a place like the 11th Street, and the first time there, you aren’t a stranger,” said Carolyn Sprouse, who works for a builder in Houston.

She first visited 15 years ago, going to one of the dude ranches. She finally bought a house last year, for $133,000 — a hundred-year-old three-bedroom house not far from the 11th Street bar.

Ms. Sprouse is also taken by all the festivals that Patricia Moore, executive director of the Bandera Convention and Visitors Bureau, dreams up. “We have the Cowboy Mardi Gras and the Wild Hog Explosion,” Ms. Moore said, “and Spring Fling and Celebrate Bandera in September, and all sorts of other big weekends, at least one a month.”

The festivals are a mellower outgrowth of the town’s old Stompede celebration, during which cowboys, and everyone else, drank, sang and caroused.

“Basically, Bandera has always been a party town,” Ms. Guilott said, “but the Stompede was a wild and woolly drunken thing, which a sheriff had to stop in the 1970s or so.”

Pros

By coastal or general resort standards, Bandera is inexpensive. Prime ranch land is about $10,000 an acre, and $130,000 will buy a trim three-bedroom home downtown. The weather is warm in winter, hot and dry in summer.

Cons

Bandera is at once remote and too close. There are few places to buy groceries, but the outer edge of the San Antonio suburbs is creeping near. People come to be away from it all, but fear that in a decade, “all” will be coming to Bandera.

The Real Estate Market

Homes range from tidy cottages on the river to sprawling ranches. Those in town tend to be small, and most three-bedroom houses in good shape still cost less than $180,000.

Outside town, ranch land tends to go for about $10,000 an acre, but that is deceiving, since ordinances meant to limit development and water usage require new properties to be on at least five acres and to put in proper well and sewer lines.

Back in 2000, Kat Ryan, looking ahead to retirement from Southwest Airlines, was ready to escape the citified life of Dallas and Houston. So she bought a 150-acre ranch just outside Bandera for $300,000. Now that ranch with a three-bedroom house and 50 head of beef cattle on it "would probably be four to five times that much," she said.

Ms. Ryan took her retirement after 9/11 and decided to get into business for herself. She now sells real estate for Stagecoach Realty. Mr. Reed and Ms. Hillin, who had known her from their vacation visits to Bandera, sought her out when they decided to buy a home last year. Ms. Hillin saw a property she liked — a stone three-bedroom house with big oak trees in the half-acre yard. It was $105,000, take it or leave it.

"I don't like to mess around, so when the sellers gave us just eight hours to accept their price, I saw what we were getting was a steal," said Mr. Reed, who said he will now spend the winters in Bandera, leading hunting trips there as he does in Alaska. "I stay active, and Bandera lets me do it. You sit and watch TV and drink beer, and you will die quickly."

LAY OF THE LAND

POPULATION 1,222, according to a 2006 Census Bureau estimate.

SIZE 1.2 square miles.

WHERE Bandera is about 40 miles northwest of San Antonio.

WHO'S BUYING Mostly Texans seeking the Hill Country's cowboy feel. And there is a smattering of Europeans and Northerners, called "Winter Texans."

WHILE YOU'RE LOOKING The Bandera Lodge (700 Route 16 south, 830-796-3093; www.texashillcountrymall.com/banderalodge) sits on the main drag. It includes a pool and has Internet access in all the rooms, which range from $60 to $110 a night.

Copyright 2008 The New York Times Company

Privacy Policy | Search | Corrections | XML | Help | Contact Us | Work for Us | Site Map