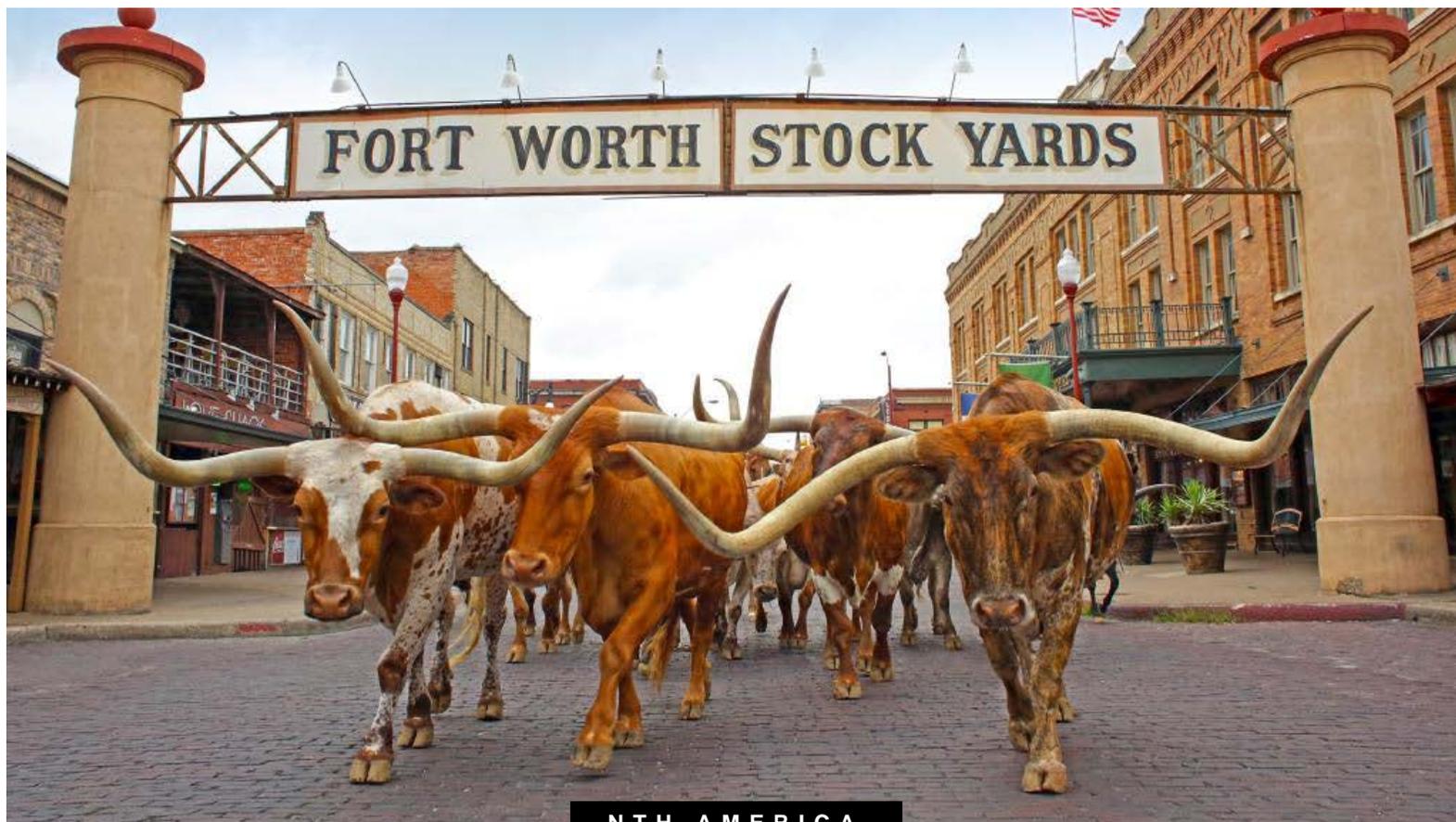


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NTH AMERICA

FORT WORTH LETS YOU GRAB TEXAS BY THE HORNS

KRISTIE KELLAHAN, ESCAPE

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It's safe to say I'm not a natural horsewoman. Tensed in a state of high anxiety astride gentle mare Buttercup, I am altogether too far off the ground and too far out of my comfort

zone. Still, I've come to Fort Worth, Texas, to experience cowboy and cowgirl culture, and fully experience it I will.

"You're doing great, ma'am," says Levi, the 18-year-old horse whisperer who is doing his best to reassure the awkward Aussie in the saddle. "All the little kids love riding Buttercup, she's as sweet as they come."

[WILD WEST: Wanna be a cowboy? Check into this place](#)

[THE BACHELORS: Fort Worth is full of cowboys looking for love](#)

No offence intended, Buttercup. Your butterscotch-hued mane is as beautiful as your nature, by all accounts, but this ma'am is counting the minutes until she can rest her boots in the dust.

Billed alternately as "the Texas you want" and "where the West begins", Fort Worth is officially the City of Cowboys and Culture. Other Texan cities could be seamlessly transplanted to Colorado, California or Arizona, such is their modern, big-city, homogenous North American appeal. Not Fort Worth. Here, in the city's Stockyards National Historic District, the Texan heritage of cowboys, cowgirls, outlaws, big cattle and big hats is alive and proudly on display.



me Cowgirl at rodeo in Fort Worth, Texas. Picture: Fort Worth Convention and Visitors Bureau

A twice-daily cattle drive parades down the main street, bucking bulls take on their fearless riders at the weekly championship rodeo, cowboy church convenes on Sunday and stores are crammed with Western boots, hats, jeans and statement buckles.

At Fincher's White Front Western Wear, the original home of White Front Western Store (established 1902), I overhear some local fashion advice. "If you can do your jeans up, you need the next size down," the Wrangler-clad salesman says with a laugh.

Later that night, I see gaggles of tighter-than-tight Daisy Duke jean-shorts, hot pink boots, big blonde hair and gingham galore at Billy Bob's Texas. Known in these parts as the world's largest honky-tonk, Billy Bob's is a cavernous 127,000 square foot Western wonderland of country music performances, line-dancing lessons, bull-riding demonstrations, whiskey shots and fun for a 6,000-person capacity crowd. Forget mirrorballs: at Billy Bob's, a glittering saddle once belonging to Dolly Parton twirls high above the dance floor, which is packed with couples deftly showing off their Texas two-step moves.



mc Cattle drive down the city streets in Fort Worth, Texas. Picture: iStock

Nearby, the Stockyards Championship Rodeo at Cowtown Coliseum is in full swing. Built in 1908 as the site of the world's first indoor rodeo, the tradition continues every Friday and Saturday night, when brave men and women show off their roping and riding skills for big cash prizes. Fans of all ages cram the stadium seating, cheering for bull riders who manage to stay on for eight seconds of glory. Legendary riders are honoured at the adjacent Texas Cowboy Hall of Fame.

The next day I took a cab to Fort Worth Cultural District, about five kilometres west of the stockyards area. From a choice of five museums, I headed first to the National Cowgirl Museum and Hall of Fame. A celebration of the pioneering spirit of women of the American West, this museum is a must-visit for parents who want to share the “girl power” message with their kids.



me National Cowgirl Museum and Hall of Fame. Picture: Fort Worth Convention and Visitors Bureau

Sharpshooter Annie Oakley comes alive through memorabilia and hologram technology to tell her story, while an interactive bronc ride puts visitors in the saddle of a bucking bull. Through photos, film footage, vintage cowgirl clothing and accessories and moving first-person testimonials, a vivid picture is painted of strong, wild women who bucked the norms of society long before that was common, or even advisable. Hats off to y'all.

Museum-hopping sure can work up an appetite. They say everything's bigger in Texas, and that might include your waistline after a few days of indulging in the delicious, local fare. Fried is not a four-letter word, it's a cure-all, a taste-enhancer, a way of life. Chicken-fried steak is a menu staple (I'd describe it as similar to a beef steak schnitzel, with batter in place of a crumbed coating), as is fried corn, fried cheese, fried pickles ... you get the idea.

Cowboy fare has been elevated to a new level at chef Tim Love's Lonesome Dove Western Bistro. Love, regularly featured on US television and in the press, has been a long-time advocate for Texan

cuisine. His Food Network documentary “Cowboys on the Trail” was nominated for a James Beard Foundation award. His presence in Fort Worth is hard to miss: in addition to Lonesome Dove, he is also chef/owner of several other popular bars and restaurants.



me Risky's Steakhouse in the Fort Worth Stockyards historic district. Picture: iStock

The meal I enjoyed at Lonesome Dove was one of the best I had all year, anywhere in the US. First course options ranged from elk sausage sliders with seared foie gras to blue corn lobster hush puppies (similar to a breaded croquette) and seared diver scallops with duck confit. The restaurant encourages and rewards indecision, offering a mix'n'match option with small tastes from each dish.

Meat reigned supreme for main course, with hand-cut steaks — buffalo ribeye, beef tenderloin, wagyu ribeye — competing with home-style meat loaf, elk loin, chicken-fried steak and more. Save room for after-dinner drinks and dessert; the options were mouth-watering, the Texas Jewel cocktail a standout.

The writer travelled as a guest of Fort Worth Convention & Visitors Bureau



me Cowgirl herds longhorn cattle at Fort Worth Stockyards. Texas. Picture: iStock

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GETTING THERE

Qantas flies direct from Sydney to Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport, which is equidistant from Dallas and Fort Worth. See qantas.com.au.

From the airport, it's a 30-minute drive or taxi ride to Fort Worth Stockyards. Public transport light rail and commuter rail connections are also available.

STAYING THERE

Stockyards Hotel is the star of the Stockyards National Historic District in Fort Worth, with authentic cowboy decor and a long list of famous outlaw past guests. Bonnie and Clyde stayed there in 1933; Bonnie's .38 revolver is on display in the suite they occupied, as well as a poem written by Bonnie for Clyde. See stockyardshotel.com.

GETTING AROUND

Uber car service is popular, fast and competitively affordable throughout Fort Worth. See uber.com.



☞ Cattle drive of Texas Longhorn in the historic national stockyards district. Picture: iStock

EATING THERE

The Lonesome Dove Western Bistro is highly recommended for fine dining and standout cocktails. See lonesomedovefortworth.com.

For a tasty lunch or dinner with down-home atmosphere and red-checkered tablecloths, try Risky's Barbeque (riskys.com).

SEEING THERE

The Stockyards Adventure Pass bundles together the best of the Stockyards attractions, to be enjoyed at your own pace. Priced from US\$28 for adults (US\$22 for kids), the pass covers entry to the Stockyards Museum, the Texas Cowboy Hall of Fame, Billy Bob's Texas, a guided walking tour and more.

Don't miss the Fort Worth Cultural District (a short cab ride from the Historic District), where five top-notch museums are presented in a landscaped park setting. The National Cowgirl Museum and Hall of Fame is particularly engaging, with sharpshooter Annie Oakley brought to vivid life through hologram technology.

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