



Llano, Guadalupe River, Blanco, Perdenales Falls, and Enchanted Rock State Parks, all within a short drive of San Antonio. In the Austin area, you can explore a cave at Longhorn Cavern or enjoy the waters of Colorado Bend and Inks Lake State Parks. Farther west, Devil's Sinkhole and Kickapoo Cavern provide cave exploration and the chance to view thousands of Mexican Free-tailed bats emerging at dusk. Check out the Texas State Park Website at www.tpwd.state.tx.us and ask for a free copy of the Texas State Park Guide when you get to the gate. The Texas State Parks Annual Pass is only \$60.00, and I have found that it pays for itself very quickly.

In addition to the many Texas State Parks, The City of San Antonio has some beautiful Hill Country trails, some of which are wheelchair accessible. To learn more about them, go to www.sanaturalareas.org. The Cibolo Nature Center, www.cibolo.org in Boerne is another great spot for watching the deer ghost through the trees while the creek passes through the roots of giant cypress trees. I have spent many happy hours walking or running through the trails of Friedrich Wilderness Park, or Crownridge Canyon Natural Area. Once while training for the San Antonio Marathon, I ran right into a flock of wild turkey prompting a thunderous gobble that nearly scared me out of my shoes! The gobblers and I all had a good laugh afterwards. Both of these city parks are great places to see the rare golden-cheeked warblers and black-capped vireos, as well as the more common chickadees, wrens, and painted buntings. The point is that you do not have to go far to find a great place to hike in the Texas Hill Country.

There are many books available to help you learn about hiking and camping. One of my favorites is the DK Eyewitness Companion on Backpacking and Hiking by Karen Berger. It gives the reader a great overview of topics such as trip planning, equipment, first aid, and other skills for those who want to do a little more than take a casual walk in the great outdoors. The truth is, one of the great things about the landscape around us is all you really have to do is make the choice and go. I will take the view from the top of Enchanted Rock any day over watching another sit-com rerun.

In his classic book entitled Desert Solitaire, writer Edward Abbey wrote, "Every man, every woman, carries in heart and mind the image of the ideal place, the one true home, known or unknown, actual or visionary. There is no limit to the human capacity for the home sentiment." As I walk along the back trail around the great granite dome of Enchanted Rock and feel the grinding of the stone in my treads, and look out to the African-like landscape of twisted trees, I know that I am home. Whenever that which society calls living presses upon me until I cannot breath, I know I can come home and be whole once more. I tell you my dear readers; we have a magical homeland in these hills. If you only see it from the highway, you will never grow to truly love it. And, if you never grow to love it, you will fail to help us save it. So, the next time you feel the need to breathe, just put on a good pair of walking shoes, and go to the trailhead of your choosing, and leave your cell phone in the car.....and walk. steve@hillcountryexplore.com X

HILL COUNTRY OUTDOORS

HIKING/CAMPING

By Steve Ramirez

I was sitting on the edge of the cliff when I was struck with the feeling that I was being watched. Instinctively I knew that it was behind me, staring straight down the back of my neck. As I began to turn my head, I felt like a character in one of those movies where everyone in the theater yells, "Don't go in there!" I turned my head, and all I could see was the swaying grass and brush of the cliff-top. Still, I knew he was there, watching me. I stood up and saw a beautiful mouflon ram standing in the tall grass, looking at me as I looked at him. After seconds that seemed like hours, he turned and trotted over the edge of the cliff-face, vanishing except in my memories. It was a magical moment. It was a moment that makes you realize how wonderful it is to be alive. As I have spent many years hiking many miles of my Texas Hill Country homeland, I have found those uncommon moments often waiting at each new turn.

I am a very fortunate man. I have hiked over mountains, deserts, savannas, and shorelines from Africa to Europe, from Florida to Montana. I have found myself way too close to lions in the long grass of Kenya, and stranded on the beach of Namibia's Skeleton Coast. It does not matter if I was dodging grizzlies at Glacier Park or brown bears in Abruzzo, it has all been a beautiful adventure. With all that different dirt in my treads, I can still honestly say that no place on earth that I have seen is more beautiful than our Texas Hill Country. Our Hill Country has a subtle beauty that demands that we pay attention.

The encounter with the old ram was at Lost Maples, my favorite Hill Country State Park. The drive out to Lost Maples is an adventure in of itself. Along the way you can see bison and taste barbeque as you cross under pecan groves along the Medina River and over limestone "mountains" that let you see forever. Many folks love to go to Lost Maples to peep at the fall foliage. I prefer the times of the year when fewer people are on the trails. Solitude can be the best company when you are walking toward yourself. It does not matter how hectic your "life" might be, a hike in the Hill Country can cure what ails you. Just remember to be there, when you get there. If all you do is walk along the trail staring at the ground and thinking of your in-basket....stay home. Instead, I suggest you practice being silent. Feel your feet walking, your lungs breathing, and your eyes actually looking at what is around you. Be good to yourself and feel what it is to be alive! That is what a dose of our landscape can do for you, if you let it.

The great thing about hiking is that it only requires that you show up, and then that you walk through some of the most uniquely beautiful landscape on earth. It can be a time of reflection or a shared memory with family and friends. Hiking in our parks is an inexpensive way to remind yourself that there is much more to life than shopping malls and traffic jams. There are so many different parks to choose from, each with its own pleasures, and each with its own season.

I said that Lost Maples is my favorite Hill Country State Park but that might not be accurate. The opportunities for hiking and camping in South Central Texas are staggering. We have Government Canyon, Lost Maples, Hill Country, Garner, South

