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Haute Home on the Range

BY ANDREW MARTON

WITH A MIX OF SPA LUXURIES, GOURMET DINING AND TRADITIONAL RANCH AND RESORT EXPERIENCES, THE INN AT DOS BRISAS HELPS YOU DISCOVER YOUR INNER, PAMPERED TEXAN.



Guests who aren't so equestrian-minded can sample Western culture with a carriage ride.

In the springtime, wildflowers dot the landscape with vivid colors and textures.

My target isn't some critter scurrying in the woods. It's a projectile the size of a hockey puck, the color of a Fanta orange soda. Under the watchful eye of my helpful wrangler, I brandish my first 20-gauge shotgun.

After scrunching two plugs into my ears, my guide loads two shells into the gun's chamber. "PULL! ... please ...," I yell, unable to utter the command without an attempt at politeness. A clay pigeon is sent soaring 50 feet above me.

I aim. I shoot. I miss.

My score after the first 20 minutes is not one for the records. Clay pigeons: 19, Andrew: 0.

Undeterred, my gun whisperer shares three bits of advice: Keep a light left hand cradling the barrel. Follow the anticipated flight of the pigeon. And finally, she says, inhale and exhale as you fire.



The living room of a hacienda features cathedral ceilings and French oak floors.

Renovations in 2018 included enclosed porches and patios.



Her words sink in. With try No. 20, I score a "dusting" — clay pigeon-speak for a shot that glances off the defenseless object. Over the course of the next 15 shots, I actually score two more hits and feel that I am finding my inner Texan.

Not that Texas is new to me. While I made the mistake of being born somewhere else, Texas has been my home for a good chunk of my adult years. But I'm here in the foothills of the Hill Country at The Inn at Dos Brisas, a 10-year-old luxury resort that seems to wrap up all the flavor of the Lone Star State at its best, and I'm lapping up its many luxuries.

With activities that range from horseback rides and tennis to classes in organic farming and yoga, plus luxury accommodations and an astonishing emphasis on gourmet experiences, this one-ranch-fits-all is equal parts old-school ranch vacation and total Zen bliss-out.

The only difficult moment for a guest may be deciding what to do next.

When I arrived at Dos Brisas — following a long and winding road past vegetable gardens and scarecrows — I was greeted with a welcome glass of prosecco. I decided to take a stroll through the grounds. Once a touted Arabian horse farm, the inn has a healthy land mass, spreading out across 33 acres.

For those seeking a let-me-forget-my-real-life getaway, the quieter, pastoral elements of a Dos Brisas stay are pure tonic. One of the main post-dinner activities, for example, is stargazing through the inn's high-powered binoculars. And, the rambling meadows are perfectly tailored for long, lazy walks and, yes, even genteel bird watching.

Low-slung Adirondack chairs, hugging the property's numerous ponds, all but ask to be used for subdued contemplation of the property's butterscotch-colored horses, gambling in a nearby pasture.

As I stroll around Dos Brisas, my ears focus. I hear my own breathing and the breeze rustling the stately live oaks. I realize that the soundtrack of Dos Brisas is one of near silence. Cars are banished to nearby parking lots. Instead, you might hear the quiet hum of a golf cart, or the old-fashioned rumbles of a horse-drawn carriage.

Dos Brisas is, of course, Spanish for "two breezes,"

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The Dos Brisas restaurant serves classic French cuisine fused with Texas ingredients and Asian sensibilities.

a perfect moniker for the inn's aura of genteel ease.

The inn was purchased by a couple in 2000 and, in 2004, converted from a family retreat into an inn — with the addition of nine guest dwellings, including four casitas (each measuring around 750 square feet) and five larger haciendas. My 3,000-square-foot hacienda is more home than hotel room.

The living area features French oak flooring under a massive cathedral ceiling. A fully stocked wet bar holds everything from snackable Paul Newman's Speltz pretzels to a fridge full of Pierre Peters Grand Cru champagne and Dublin Botling Works' pure-cane colas and root beers.

Through French doors, the living room opens to a screened porch marked by a great, hanging sofa-hammock. And just to the side is my own private splash pool, kept at a toasty, muscle-relaxing 80 to 103 degrees.

The master bath is, to be completely honest, about the size of my first studio apartment in 1980s New York City. Composed of elegant expanses of marble, it features twin terry-cloth



Dishes such as this seasonal fern use fresh herbs from the organic garden.

robes and a basket stacked with a half-dozen Frette towels. The shower is high enough to suspend a second shower head that ups the ante by sending a brisk cascade of water as if from a tropical falls.

It would be easy to spend hours whiling away the time in this haute hacienda. But duty calls: in the form of a reservation for dinner.

Twenty-five of Dos Brisas' acres are reserved for organic farming. The chefs' gardens provide the kitchen with about 95 percent of the vegetables served in the restaurant, from pea shoots, fava beans and micro-greens, to lettuce, three types of kale, asparagus, zucchini and herbs.

Earlier in the day, I'd taken one of the many farm tours the inn offers its guests. We'd learned that frequently, in the middle of dinner service, one of the chefs, realizing he is short on lettuce or some other ingredient, will scurry to the garden to pluck what he needs. This seems like the ultimate in

farm-to-table experiences.

I'd also partaken of one of the wine tasting sessions offered with the inn's top sommelier, Thomas Perez. Here I discovered that Dos Brisas could never have earned its coveted Relais & Chateaux and *Forbes Travel Guide* Five-Star awards without a first-rate restaurant and an equally ambitious wine program, anchored by a 7,000-bottle cellar.

Our class started with champagne. Perez had me sampling it in a wide-mouthed, burgundy wineglass because, he said, drinking champagne from a fluted glass actually detracts from its special flavors. Duly noted. Perez also said that champagne is rather underestimated in serious wine-appreciation circles simply because it has been stereotyped as a frivolous party drink. With the help of his finely honed skills, I learned to identify the drink's lemony, fresh, creamy, yeasty and custardy flavors.

As I settle into my table at the restaurant, I survey the Spanish country manor decor. It's impressive: Think a 40-foot ceiling and a fire-place massive enough for an average man to stand in.

The food, under the direction of 32-year-old executive chef Zachary Ladwig, blends French cuisine with Texas ingredients and an infusion of Asian sensibilities. And as dinner progresses, I find the combination both delicious and provocative.

King crab is brought to the table in a large preserving jar. It is part of a crab-flavored dashi — a Japanese-style broth that is simultaneously flanlike and gossamer light and festooned with earthy black truffles.

Buttery lamb tenderloin is mixed with early peas, the season's first fava beans, plus some cannellini beans, all tied together with a light potato puree. The sauce is notable for its stunning mix of julienned olives and shallots laced with sherry vinegar and harissa jus.

Chef Ladwig loves his fish, and so it is with great anticipation that I tuck into a slow-roasted pink grouper. It floats in a pea-based broth, drizzled with a judicious amount of olive oil.

A diver scallop soon arrives, perfectly grilled

Executive chef Zachary Ladwig picks produce from the on-site greenhouse.



and paired with house-made chorizo and a Bianca di Maggio onion and a green tomato for color and textural contrast. The dish appears like a Japanese silk-screen piece of art, with the sweet scallop hugged by cubes of the green tomato.

These dishes demand an equally worthy dessert, and I find it in the Valrhona single-estate chocolate cremeux, alongside a light-as-a-cloud chocolate ice cream with a shower of feathery, brittle caramel powder.

I could have brought my horse. If I had one.

When the ranch first became an inn, the owners added a show barn, along with a dozen top-drawer riding horses.

The barn is the second-largest privately owned indoor horse arena in all of Texas. Guests who don't bring their own four-legged ride can take lessons or set out for trail rides (ask the restaurant to pack you a picnic and make a day of it).

For those who equate relaxation with outdoor exercise, the inn has myriad options. Borrow one of the fishing poles and head for a pond, or take one of the mountain bikes out on a ride. Take a swim in the infinity pool, get some sets in on the tennis court (rackets provided) or ask the concierge to get you a tee time at one of the local private courses. If clay shooting inspires you to bigger game, the inn's staff will even set you up on a local hunting expedition.

For those who crave activities under a roof, try a cooking or mixology class, or a lesson in organic gardening.

On my last day at Dos Brisas, I decide to do something I'd never done before. I take myself



Private yoga sessions can take place in the corner of a hacienda.

and all my anxieties to a yoga class. With her soothing voice, Dos Brisas' in-house yogi guides me through poses from the mountain and jack-knife to my personal favorite, the happy baby.

For 60 solid minutes, my mid-50s body is painlessly pretzeled into surprisingly relaxed positions. I gradually feel all my quotidian concerns melting away.

And that's when I truly feel like I get in touch with my inner Texan, deep in the heart of said Lone Star State. Sure, I could shoot clay targets till the cows come home, but the quiet peace of a Hill Country morning at Dos Brisas turns out to be exactly what I need. Let those breezes blow.

Andrew Marton is a transplanted East Coaster who enjoys his 15-year-old fledgling Texas roots.

The Inn at Dos Brisas

10000 Champion Drive
Washington
979-277-7750; www.dosbrisas.com

Located about three hours, 20 minutes south of Fort Worth, just past College Station.

The following prices include all taxes and fees. Casitas: \$52 per night (weekday price), \$672 (Fridays), \$806 (Saturdays). Hacienda: \$,024 (weekday price), \$,408 (Fridays), \$,728 (Saturdays).

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