

TRAVEL

SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 6, 2016 :: LATIMES.COM/TRAVEL

TEXAS

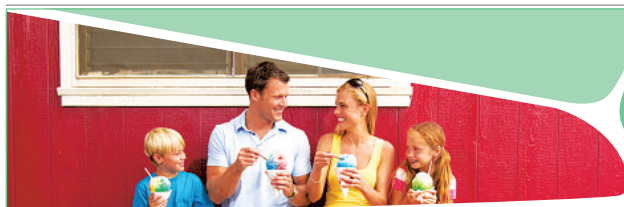


PIPES in Pearl Brewing Co.'s old brew house lend a steampunk vibe to current residents Hotel Emma and its Sternwirth bar in San Antonio, Texas', Pearl District. RAY WHITEHOUSE FOR THE TIMES

Change is brewing

Remade into the Pearl District, an old beer works becomes the toast of San Antonio

By ALICE SHORT >>> SAN ANTONIO, Texas — Hear the words “San Antonio” and you might flash on an image of the Alamo, the city’s best known building. Or you might recall conversations with friends who have visited the area and indulged in fajitas and margaritas along the River Walk. ¶ You might even think, “Oh, yeah, San Antonio, the homey, hospitable first cousin, once removed, to hotter, hipper Austin.” ¶ If you haven’t been to San Antonio in a while — or ever — you probably aren’t envisioning Frette linens, Champagne ketchup and coffee shops that rival high-end L.A. purveyors Intelligentsia or G&B. ¶ A visit to the Pearl in San Antonio should change all that. The small neighborhood, north of downtown, is a tribute to smart design and good taste. ¶ I had heard about the Pearl, so when I made arrangements for a business meeting in Austin, I added a stop in San Antonio, about 80 miles southwest of the Texas capital. [See **San Antonio**, L4]



Aston A-List

Sign up and book direct with us to receive exclusive deals and special perks on your next stay in Hawaii.

Toll-free: 855-945-4077 | astonhotels.com

JOIN OUR **A-LIST** AND RECEIVE:

- Discount off best available rate
- Special welcome amenity
- Free room upgrade*
- Dedicated Member Services line to our Hawaii call center

*Based on availability

Aston
HOTELS & RESORTS
welcome home

TEXAS



NICK SAMONETTE

THE TEMPTATIONS of San Antonio, Texas', Pearl District include the eye-catching handiwork of Bakery Lorraine.

Shiny new Texas Pearl

[San Antonio, from L4]

I arrived in August, which meant temperatures topped 100 degrees, but the heat couldn't stifle the charm offensive that designers, hoteliers and restaurateurs had conjured.

Focal point

The Alamo, where Davy Crockett and 200 other rebels died in 1836 fighting the Mexican army for Texan sovereignty, is the focal point of the city's \$18-billion-a-year tourism economy, attracting more than 1 million visitors a year.

It's also the center of a debate among local officials about how best to promote the city. Should they spend their marketing dollars on traditional attractions such as the Alamo or push the "new San Antonio," with its hot restaurants and shops in the hopes of attracting more national and international visitors?

The Pearl District is a highlight of the new San Antonio. It gets its name from a brewery that introduced Pearl Beer in the 1980s and eventually was rechristened the Pearl Brewing Co.

The facility was closed in 2001, paving the way for the eventual development of the 22-acre property into an adult playground.

The Hotel Emma, which was Pearl's brew house, opened last year and is at the center of it all with 146 rooms (including 11 suites) and a series of tempting shops and dining areas.

The lobby, complete with an early 20th-century compressor that once pumped cool air into the brewery, is furnished with antiques, leather couches and big coffee tables, the better to hold morning pour-over coffee or drinks in the evening.

The hotel site includes new construction, but every guest room, every shop, indeed every space, looks all of a piece, thanks in large part to Roman & Williams, a design firm behind New York's buzz-worthy Viceroy, Ace and High Line hotels.

After I checked in, a bellman suggested I visit the hotel library to sample a complimentary margarita. Then, in the elevator, he launched into a short history lesson: The hotel, he said, was named in honor of Emma Koehler, who ran the brewery after her husband (and Pearl president), Otto, died in 1914.

She was, the hotel website says, an "ingenious CEO who kept the brewery going during Prohibition by converting operations to dry cleaning and auto repair, and making near beer, ice cream and soda."

I would soon learn that there was more to her story than good business sense.

Meanwhile, there was a hotel room to inspect. The furnishings included a queen-size bed with a striking black headboard and bedposts; a Western-motif rug on the concrete floor; a small table with two chairs; and a handsome armchair that held a safe and a refrigerator stocked with local beer and "farmers market provisions."

The bathroom was equally noteworthy, with handmade Spanish porcelain tiles and Mahon + Goetz toiletries.

Nothing, it seemed, was left to chance, including the offerings in the Sternwerth bar, where I waited for friends to arrive and sipped a cocktail called the Three Emmas (gin, Gran Classico, absinthe and apricot liqueur) and learned more about Emma Koehler.

Most of the narratives, official and otherwise, include the following "facts": When she was injured in an accident in 1890, her husband hired a young, attractive nurse named Emma to help at home. Otto and the younger Emma had an affair, and if that weren't confusing enough, he also took up with a friend of the younger Emma, also named... Emma.

On Nov. 12, 1914, the third Emma shot and killed Otto and later spiked town. (She eventually returned, was tried and found not guilty.)

After my friends arrived, we toasted the original Emma several times before walking



RAY WHITEHOUSE FOR THE TIMES

SAN ANTONIO'S lively Pearl District is chockablock with shops, restaurants and the occasional mariachi band.



SCOTT MARTIN

ARTISANAL offerings abound at Cured in San Antonio's Pearl District.

across the street to NAO Latin Gastro Bar for dinner.

The Pearl is home to an impressive array of restaurants, no doubt attracted by the master planning and a campus of the Culinary Institute of America, one of country's most prominent hospitality and food-service schools.

Students at CIA San Antonio can specialize in Latin American food. Many of them end up working at NAO, just a few steps from the school.

At 9 p.m. on a Tuesday, only a few tables were taken, which contributed to the relaxed atmosphere. The wait staff was friendly and attentive; empty dishes disappeared and Pisco sours arrived as if by magic.

We ordered heirloom tomatoes, roasted seasonal vegetables and steak that was cooked to a bougainvillea pink, and consumed everything in sight.

Relaxed atmosphere

Everyone has to stop eating, if only briefly, and the grounds of the Hotel Emma, which abuts the San Antonio River, are a good place for solitude and contemplation of handsome landscaping.

The location is also a short walk from the Museum Reach section of the River Walk and the San Antonio Museum of Art. If you need wheels, the hotel offers loaner bikes to guests.

Many of the streets near the Emma are lined with restaurants known for their local and artisanal offerings. Bakery Lorraine's includes a savory bread pudding; barley, farro and toasted almond porridge; and bostock, something akin to French toast.

The menu at Cured, which emphasizes "handcrafted" and cured foods, includes a charcuterie plate with an impressive list of choices: lamb terrine, goat negus, apple jalapeño pork rilletes and smoked duck ham among them.

Southerleigh Fine Food & Brewery serves "Texas coastal comfort food" with an adventurous selection of beer and ale.

Consumers in need of a caffeine jolt can stop at Local Coffee, home to baristas who approach an order with something akin to reverence.

Boutiques in the Pearl sell an array of goods — hand-made bath salts, a crocodile iPad case, a side table topped with a slice of agate, vintage silver cuffs, a jalapeño griller shaped like the state of Texas and hand-made guayaberas.

After a morning of shopping, I stopped asking, "Do I need it?" and instead asked, "How much will fit in my suitcase?"

Is that an indication that San Antonio is approaching Austin-like status? It looks as though the first cousin, once removed, is about to emerge as an original.

travel@latimes.com



LOU SPIRITO Los Angeles Times

If you go

THE BEST WAY TO SAN ANTONIO, TEXAS

From LAX, Southwest, Delta, United and American offer both nonstop and connecting service (change of planes) to San Antonio. Restricted round-trip fares from \$306, including taxes and fees.

WHERE TO STAY

Hotel Emma, 136 E. Grayson St., San Antonio; (210) 448-8300, www.thehotellorraine.com. Doubles from \$325 a night. Steam-punk-meets-luxury-vibe in what was once a 19th-century brew house.

WHERE TO EAT

NAO Latin Gastro Bar, 312 Pearl Parkway, San Antonio; (210) 554-6484, www.naorestaurant.com. Latin cuisine, with dishes such as empanadas, duck carnitas and charred octopus. Main dishes from \$18-\$68.

Cured, No. 101 306 Pearl Parkway, San Antonio; (210) 314-3929, curedatpearl.com. Regional ingredients and "lovingly hand-crafted cured foods," so don't be surprised if you find yourself ordering pork belly. Main dishes \$24-\$42.

Southerleigh Fine Food & Brewery, 136 E. Grayson St., No. 120, San Antonio; (210) 455-5701, www.southerleigh.com. Modern Texas meets modern South, with cracker-crusted Gulf redfish and cheddar, bacon and chive biscuits. Main dishes \$20-\$35.

TO LEARN MORE

Visit San Antonio, visitsanantonio.com