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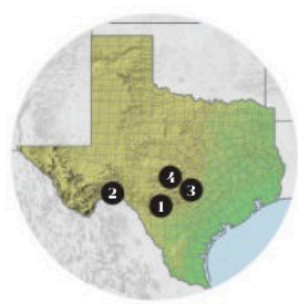
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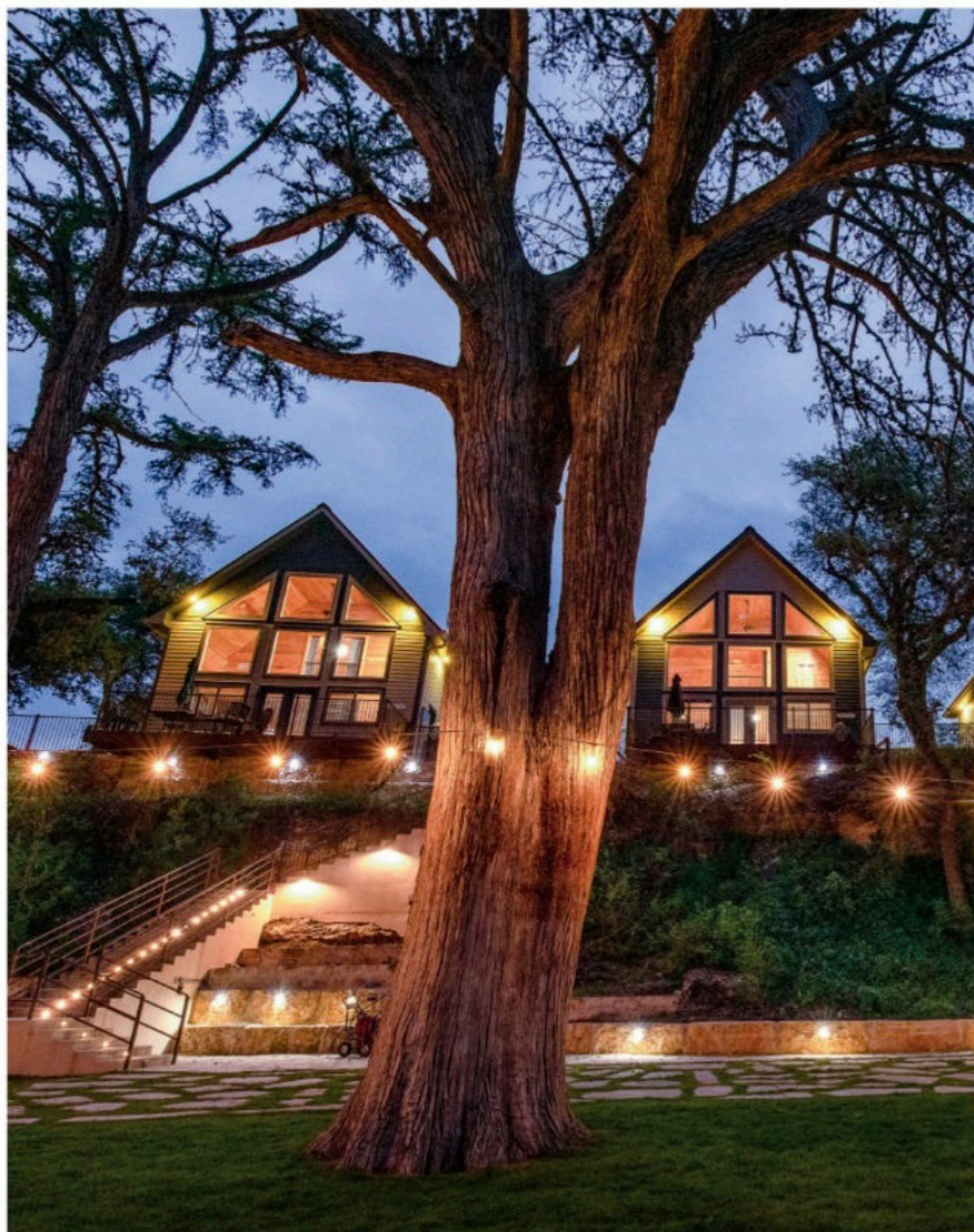
Ebbs and Flows

Beat the summer heat at river retreats

By Scott DuBois

Three major rivers define the shape of Texas: the Red, the Sabine, and the Rio Grande. But our state has a dozen other major rivers that flow into the Gulf of Mexico, and in the heat of summer, there is nothing finer than a plunge into your favorite swimming hole.

But these rivers offer more than relief. They are a place of personal pilgrimage, with many families returning to the same streams year after year to spend time together in the great outdoors. Here are four retreats on four rivers to consider visiting. Whether you prefer kayaking in the misty dawn or are more apt to rope swing off a limestone bluff, it's time to start making memories on the river.



1

Rio Bella Resort

RIO FRIO

True to its name, the Frio River erupts cold and clean from the steep limestone hills of the western Hill Country upstream of Leakey. The owners of Rio Bella Resort, Rob Petrovics and his sister AnaLisa Glass, grew up in the area and had always dreamed of having a place of their own. In 2014, that dream came true when they and Rob's wife, Carole, purchased a narrow strip of land, including a bluff overlooking the Frio.

Rio Bella's dozen cabins are named after Texas rivers and are steps from the water. Each two- or three-bedroom unit has picture windows, a balcony, and a kitchen. The office serves as the general store, selling essentials like snacks, T-shirts, and sunscreen and renting tubes and kayaks. Kids are invited to run free on the property, so lawn games and crafts are set up during the high season. "We want our guests to feel what it was to 'grow up Frio' and to cherish this river and nature as we always have," Glass says. *Rooms start at \$195/night. 3088 RR 1120, Rio Frio. 830-232-4781; riobella.com*

2

Chandler Ranch

DRYDEN

The Pecos River is just a trickle as it crosses under Interstate 10 near Iraan, but downstream, the waters of the spring-fed Independence Creek swell it into a respectable flowing river. The confluence is an oasis of biodiversity and is completely secluded, with the nearest major town hours away. The 1,500-acre Chandler Ranch, featuring seven cozy 1940s-era cabins and a pool house game room, is an exclusive getaway in this remote part of West Texas. There's a communal dining hall where host Richard Jasso treats guests to top-notch ranch food, including biscuits and gravy and steak and potatoes.

Cell phone reception is limited among the mesas, so you'll have an excuse to completely unwind and slow down. While away days riding all-terrain vehicles while looking for javelinas and long-horns, fly-fishing the Pecos, or floating in the spring-fed swimming pool. If you want more adventure, the ranch will take you on a three-day, two-night paddle down the river to Pandale. *Rooms start at \$500/night (includes meals and activities). 535 Independence Creek Road, Dryden. 713-703-6615; chandlerranch.com*



3

7A Ranch

WIMBERLEY

The Blanco River is a maze of emerald pools and limestone furrows carved by water, but just upstream from downtown Wimberley, there's a deeper area of the river. It's not only perfect for kayaking and swimming, it's also the home of 7A Ranch, a delightful river getaway for the whole family. The ranch served as a resort from the 1940s until 2015, when it was destroyed in the Memorial Day flood. It now has 23 contemporary cabins. Each restored unit features stylish brass fixtures, shiplap walls, and a sizeable kitchenette—though most of your cooking will likely happen on your private outdoor grill. If you don't feel like cooking, the ranch is just over a mile from local restaurants like the Leaning Pear and Community Pizza and Beer Garden.

The most unique element of 7A Ranch is the full-fledged Pioneer Town. Kids will love the cowboy museum, ice cream parlor, arcade, and working locomotive. Guests can also rent kayaks and stock up on river supplies at Blanco River Outfitters, the property headquarters. After all that activity, drift off with a book in a sun lounge next to the riverfront pool. *Rooms start at \$195/night, with a three night minimum stay. 333 Wayside Drive, Wimberley. 512-847-2517; 7aranch.co*



El Castell on the Llano River

CASTELL

The Llano River flows over pink granite boulders, creating shallow pools that roil the water all the way to Lake LBJ. At the Castell low water crossing between Mason and Llano, you'll often find anglers fly-casting for bass and rainbow trout stocked by the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department. "It's one of the clearest and purest rivers in the state, which makes the waters ideal for swimming, fishing, and kayaking," says Cuatro Tolson, owner of El Castell on the Llano.

The camp's four cabins are comfortable and decorated with canoeing and fishing paraphernalia. A large fire pit,

an outdoor grill, a hot tub, and a sauna overlook the water. The units are available individually or as a full buyout for groups of friends and family.

El Castell is an ideal base to explore local attractions like Enchanted Rock, but it's also a destination unto itself. The quirky Castell General Store across the street is known for its excellent hamburgers and suggestive T-shirts. Still, the best things around here are the sound of water outside your cabin and the sight of the Milky Way floating overhead at night. *Rooms start at \$190/night. 102 Rockin River Road, Castell. castellcabins.com*