

Texas and the Western Caribbean

Description

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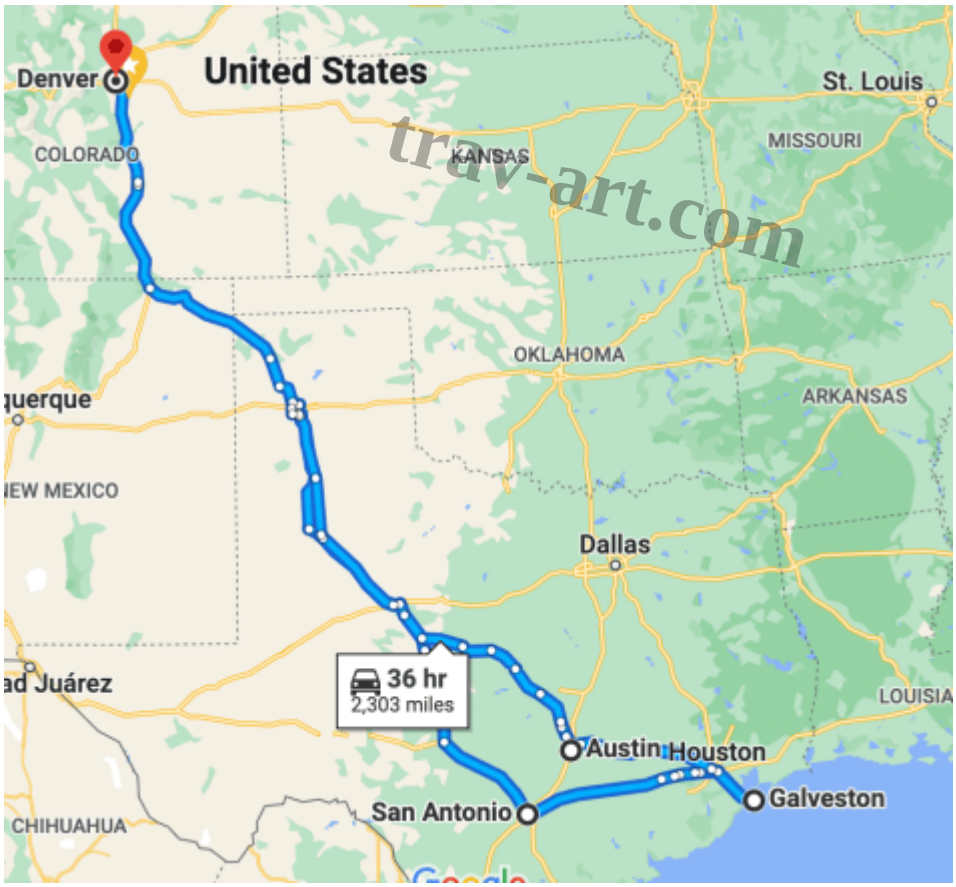
In October of 2018 we drove from our home in Colorado through Texas to board a Royal Caribbean cruise ship in Galveston. Our itinerary made stops in Roatan, the Yucatan, and Cozumel. Hereâ??s the story with reviews and recommendations, including of the Liberty of the Seas cruise ship and shore excursions.

- **Highlights**
  - Finally seeing the Alamo
  - Hilton San Antonio Hill Country
  - Aft balcony stateroom and activities on Lido Deck on RC Liberty of the Seas
  - Tabyana Beach Snorkeling, Roatan, Honduras
  - Chacchoben Archaeological Site, Yucatan, Mexico
  - Chankanaab Dolphinarium, Cozumel Mexico
  - County Line on the Hill Restaurant, Austin, TX
- **Lowlights**
  - Dropping phone in San Antonio Riverwalk
  - Extended Stay America, Amarillo, TX
  - Trying not to get seasick in hurricane seas

1. Day 1: Onward to Texas
    1. Extended Stay America, West Amarillo, TX
2. Day 2: Drive to San Antonio
    1. San Antonio
        1. The Alamo
        2. The Riverwalk
            1. Iron Cactus Mexican Grill
        3. Hilton San Antonio Hill Country
3. Day 3: Boarding the Liberty of the Seas
    1. Aft Balcony Cabin 1402
4. Day 4: Hurricane Seas

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5. Day 5: Roatan
    1. West Bay/Tabyana Beach
6. Day 6: Chacchoben and the Yucatan
    1. Chacchoben Archaeological Site
7. Day 7: Cozumel
    1. Chankanaab National Park
        1. Dolphinarium
        2. Beach Snorkeling
        3. Beach Park
8. Day 8: Ship Day
9. Day 8: Return to port and a stop in Austin, TX
    1. County Line on the Hill



Day 1: Onward to Texas

We left in the afternoon from our home in Colorado and made it by nightfall to New Mexico. We were bound for Amarillo, Texas for the night. The drive was generally uneventful until we entered Texas.

The most incredible lightning began to fill the night sky and we began to worry about the possibly of hail or even a tornado. The rains began to fall and we continued on cautiously watching the weather radar on our phones. Fortunately, we never saw the worst of the storm as it passed north of Amarillo shortly after we arrived.

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Extended Stay America, West Amarillo, TX

Absolutely one of the most spartan hotels Iâ??ve ever stayed in. If you want just the basics and nothing more this hotel is fine. Clean, semi-comfortable. The beds were listed online as queen size and instead were doubles. The hotel website indicated that the hotel would have a morning breakfast, but this turned out to be a simple coffee bar. Since we were just sleeping there overnight it wasnâ??t a big deal, but I wouldnâ??t stay there again.

Day 2: Drive to San Antonio

I had only been to Texas one time before and that was for an interview in the Dallas area. The rest of my family had never been to Texas and the drive to Galvestonâ??s cruise port would give us a great opportunity to see the state from north to south.

With daylight we could see that the Amarillo area was terrestrially like most of the great plains area. Lots of flat open land in every direction. What lay further south was a bit of an unknown whether it be rugged hills or desert landscapes. I knew that by the time we arrived in San Antonio it would be a whole lot more humid and was certainly looking forward to that since we live in a very dry state.

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We bought a quick fast-food breakfast and hit the road, wanting to be in San Antonio in time to see the Alamo and have dinner on the Riverwalk. We had a 500 mile drive ahead of us and it went by relatively quickly. The scenery was to us surprisingly green and the scenery grew steadily more interesting the further south we went.

As we entered passed Sweetwater, TX the landscape grew more rugged and forested. I donâ??t know the exact boundaries of Hill country, but this certainly seemed to be part of it. When we stopped off at a gas station to merge onto the I-10 north of San Antonio in the early afternoon I could feel the humidity in the air, another assurance that we were indeed entering a different climatic zone.

Since I was a little kid I have been fascinated by the story of the Alamo. I read books about it, watched movies about it, and studied the surrounding history. For me, not going to the Alamo was totally and completely unfathomable. We were going to the Alamo.

The only problem was that it closed at 5:30 PM. We were pulling into San Antonio at 4:30 PM so there would be no checking into the hotel until after we were done for the day. Straight away to downtown we must go.

San Antonio

We found a place to park a couple blocks away from the Alamo at 5:00 PM. I could not wait for my 5-year-old Evan to walk the distance on his own so I picked him up and we ran to the Alamo. It was hot, humid, and I had carried a 50 pound kid a half mile so I was a bit sweaty but relieved to be at the place I hadnâ??t wanted to see most of my life.

The Alamo

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The Alamo

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I am discussing the Alamo site as we saw it on our visit in 2018. Millions of dollars of improvements to the museum and new artifacts (including from singer Phil Collins) have arrived to improve the experience so Iâ??ll need to return again.
Walking inside is a cool experience but also a tad disappointing. I had heard forever that there was not much there and it was entirely true. The entire visit could be completed in a matter if minutes without missing much.
We also walked around the surrounding barracks and the courtyard. I posed with my sons in front of the mission (Iâ??ll get into why there is no photo here shortly). This is where Travis, and Crocket, and Bowie fought til the end. No matter how little was there to tell the story, I knew it and could tell it to my kids as we walked through the mission and the courtyard. I took photos with both my EOS SLR and my cell phone.

Feeling relieved to have arrived in time and accomplished for finally visiting the Alamo we were ready to have dinner. It had been a long day and The Riverwalk was always our planned destination for the nightâ??s dinner. Plenty of good restaurants to choose from.

The Riverwalk

The Riverwalk is the second major attraction in San Antonio. Waterways crisscross through the city center with pathways and bridges connecting dozens of restaurants and bars throughout. We settled on a Mexican restaurant and I mapped our walking route on my phone to follow.

Halfway to the restaurant a couple tourists stopped me and asked if I would take their photo with their phone. Iâ??ve done this dozens of times and always I am happy to do so. But in the moment of taking hold of their phone I lost control of my phone. It fell not on the pavement, but into the river.

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The Riverwalk isnâ??t deep, only about 4 feet and I could see my phone at the bottom. Still on. Screen still glowing. I frantically decided how I was going to retrieve it. Eventually, a waiter at a nearby restaurant saw our predicament and brought out a grabbing tool (maybe this happens often enough to require these) and I was able to reach in and grab it. After pulling it to the surface it appeared for a moment to still work.

I should have turned it off immediately but didnâ??t. It went off and never came back on within minutes. My phone was gone and so were my photos from the Alamo. Google Photos typically backed every photo up within 20 minutes, but too little time had passed.

Feeling distraught after the loss of my phone we arrived at the restaurant for dinner.

Iron Cactus Mexican Grill

I really wanted to drown my sorrows in margaritas and we did have a couple good ones. The food, however, wasnâ??t quite as good as I had hoped. The prices were higher because of its location on the Riverwalk, but the food certainly was not equal to the prices. I was feeling pretty bad at that moment but I donâ??t think Iâ??d choose this restaurant again over all the other options.

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We had a big day planned for tomorrow (when do we not?) and headed off for hotel. Fortunately it was a good one.

Hilton San Antonio Hill Country

We really liked this hotel. The beds are comfortable and they have nice bathrooms, Nice common areas inside and outside. We could park right outside our room which made luggage handling really easy. Would be at the top or our list in a return to San Antonio.

Day 3: Boarding the Liberty of the Seas

300 miles separate San Antonio and Galveston and we wanted to be at the cruise port with plenty of time to go through the whole onboarding process. We found parking about a mile away from the cruise port in a garage (reasonably priced).

We walked down to the port with the luggage (a lot of bags, but weâ??re pretty strong and active) and after about an hour got onboard the ship.

Royal Caribbeanâ??s Liberty of the Seas sails primarily from Galveston to the Western Caribbean. You can get complete deck plans at the Royal Caribbean site but Iâ??ll go into specifics for us.

Aft Balcony Cabin 1402

We paid for a guaranteed balcony pretty early on and we lucked out when they gave us an aft balcony

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just below the Lido deck. There are a lot of great things about this cabin.

- **Extended balcony**: The balcony was huge and extended about 15 feet from the sliding glass door. We had both shade and sun available to us and a sufficient level of privacy.
- **It is kid safe**: You canâ??t be a parent and not get a little paranoid about the idea of your kid somehow falling over the side. The aft balconies are staggered so the one below extends past the one above, so your kid at worst would fall to the balcony below.
- **Plenty of storage and sleeping space**: The room came with a big king bed and a pullout sofa bed. We could take everything out of the luggage and hang it up or put it in drawers. The suitcases could go in closets. We werenâ??t stumbling over ourselves like we would in a smaller room.
- **Itâ??s quiet**: Even though an eating area was right above us we never heard anything. Nobody but the guests staying in the back of the ship go there so you never hear foot traffic and noise passing your door.
- **You are close to the fun stuff**: The pools and fun stuff are just upstairs.



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Scenes from our cabin

As you can see we not only got the nice cabin but daily towel animals. Our cabin steward was pretty talented at making them and was a nice guy too. He offered to give us a custom tour of Egypt someday.

After we checked into our room and went through the mandatory initiation for how to get survive a sinking ship, we had our first meal in the ship at the pizza restaurant. If I have one big complaint about the RC Liberty of the Seas it is that there werenâ??t many options for dining that werenâ??t the expensive sit-down, need-a-reservation places or pizza or the dining hall or the cafeteria on Lido Deck.

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So to the major complaint of ours on the cruise was food options. if you pay for a good sit-down dinner, youâ??ll get the best food options. If not, itâ??s pretty meh.

Day 4: Hurricane Seas

While heading south from Galveston across the Gulf of Mexico, a major hurricane was moving north a few hundred miles to the east. While the ship was carefully steered away from and around the storm, we had a day of rough swells that would rock the boat harshly from side to side. The hurricane would later hit and devastate Panama City, FL as a category 4 storm.

Much of the ship was closed for safetyâ??s sake. The pool water lapped over the sides. Deck furniture slid. The gym, the ice rink, the rock wall, the waterslidesâ?¦anything that involved movement was closed. Even just walking down the halls was dizzying. The ship wisely deployed bags for seasickness.

If you could tolerate the rocking and the winds, it was interesting to see the concentric swells as they repeatedly hit the ship every 15 seconds or so. The ocean rose and dropped with each swell and the ship with it. Far beyond the horizon a powerful hurricane was churning the ocean and though it was out of sight, its effects were impressive.

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Since much of the ship was unusable we really had to just hunker down in our cabin and try not to get dizzy and sick. We arenâ??t particularly used to doing nothing, even on a cruise ship, but on Day 2, we really had no choice. Thatâ??s ok though. Our covered balcony was protected by the wind and a good place to read a book. And we could watch movies too.

Late in the evening the ship had passed south of Cuba and the Yucatan and the ocean was once more calm enough to allow the entire ship to reopen. Tomorrow would be a fun day and feel much more like a cruise vacation.

Day 5: Roatan

Honduras is country with a lot of problems right now (particularly with crime), but the Bay Islands are a world unto themselves. Whatever problems exist on the mainland are far removed from the daily life of the on the islands.

Of all the Bay Islands, Roatan gets the most visitors and is the largest island. The island is on a portion of the second largest barrier reef on earth, the Mesoamerican Reef, along with the rest of the Bay Islands. Consequently the snorkeling off shore is top notch and there are a ton of great beaches.

Because we had a five-year-old and even our 12-year-old wasnâ??t yet a strong swimmer I felt that open ocean snorkeling would be too hard. However Roatan has a great beach with snorkeling right offshore, and that is West Bay, or Tabyana Beach.

West Bay/Tabyana Beach

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At Tabyana Beach

This is one of the best beaches Iâ??ve ever been to in terms of scenic value, sand, swimability, and the proximity to a reef full of fish. You can certainly snorkel in better areas offshore, but for our needs this was perfect.
One possibly annoying issue with this beach is the presence of an endless number of people trying to sell you things: trinkets, massages, hair braids, etc. They accept no for an answer and are polite, but it is something to know about. Royal Caribbean provided guests with a private area off the beach where your possessions are guarded and lunch is served with a cruise tour.

Tabyana Beach Snorkeling

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After swimming and snorkeling for many hours we bought some locally made souvenirs and returned to the ship. The ship departed in the evening bound for the Mayan Yucatan of Mexico.

Day 6: Chacchoben and the Yucatan

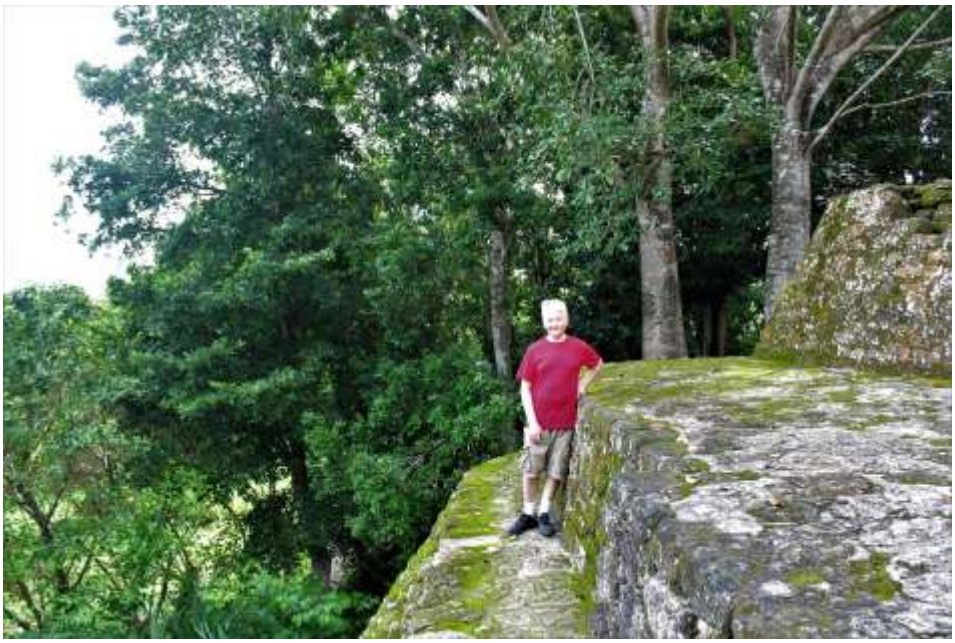
Much like the Bay Islands are cutoff from the problems of the mainland of Honduras, the Yucatan has been largely spared from the cartel violence that affects much of Mexico, especially along the US border (the same is true for much of the Baja Peninsula).

Consequently itâ??s still safe and easy to travel to the Mayan homeland and enjoy the archaeological sites without much concern. With that in mind we took the comfortable , air-conditioned bus to the Chacchoben ruins an hour from the cruise port that was provided by RC. You can pay for tours like this from independent vendors, just be careful that they get you back to the ship on time.

Chacchoben Archaeological Site

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Iâ??ve been to two other Mayan archaeological sites: Tikal and Tulum. Tikal in Guatemala is the most impressive. Tulum is great not only for the structures but its location on the coast. Chacchoben is impressive too and probably the best way to spend your time on the Costa Maya cruise stop.



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Chacchobben is set in the Yucatan rain forest and they provide a guided tour which helps explain a lot about what you are seeing and the history of the site. They also give you time to explore on your own. Itâ??s cool to just walk among the pyramids and structures and to enjoy the rain forest. You might get lucky and see monkeys but more likely youâ??ll see brown basilisks, turtles, and frogs.

The Costa Maya port is less interesting. There are a number of shops and vendors but nothing that can compare with the archaeological site. I highly advise that you not stay at the port at this location and take the Chacchoben tour.

Day 7: Cozumel

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In 2004 Shell and I had a cruise stop at Cozumel but we immediately boarded a ship to go to the Yucatan mainland to see Tulum. This time we decided to stay on Cozumel and visit the Chankanaab Adventure Park.

Chankanaab National Park

Other countries have different ideas on what a national park is and how it should be managed. In the US national parks are all about preservation in a natural state with fewer human sources of entertainment. In the US, Chankanaab would not be called a national park, but more of an amusement park like Sea World at the beach.

Dolphinarium

I donâ??t have photos because they didnâ??t allow photos not taken by them and they were outrageously expensive. That said, the Dolphin Encounter is quite good and the dolphins are well taken care of in an enclosure that is open to the sea (unfortunately, Iâ??ve been to a number of places where dolphins and other animals are not cared for and are more exploited for tourist dollars). The staff here also really cares about the dolphins and the breed them successfully which is a challenge in captivity. We had fun using sign language to signal a dolphin and shake hands with and hug it.

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Beach Snorkeling

Snorkeling is pretty good, but not quite as good as Roatan. I was able to photograph a number of fish in the semi-turbid, semi-chilly water. I went looking for a submerged Jesus statue but couldnâ??t find it. Overall Iâ??d find other places to snorkel at Cozumel, but if you only have time to do it here, you likely wonâ??t be disappointed. I actually git bit by a fish while photographing another fish (not sure why but maybe it was offended it didnâ??t get its picture taken).

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Snorkeling at Chankanaab Park

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Beach Park

The beach park is just a nice place to lounge on the beach and have drinks provided to you. There are some indoor areas to rest in the AC and have drinks, etc.



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Cozumel beach park

Overall, I would definitely go here for the Dolphinarium, but for snorkeling and to have a more interesting beach (unless you really just want drink service) I would go elsewhere in Cozumel.

Day 8: Ship Day

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Since we had a ship day on Day 8, Iâ??ll talk more about the ship.
Lido Deck: On the Lido deck there were several pools and hot tubs that we enjoyed. There were a couple waterslides that would have been good if they had enough water running through them. We honestly slid to a stop.
There was a wave runner that I tried along with Daniel (12) and Shelley, and a rock wall that I climbed along with Daniel. My 5-year-old Evan and I played mini-golf a couple times (he loves mini-golf). Finally there is a running track that I tried a couple times in the early morning and Evan and I walked for dad and son time.
We also ate at the Johnny Rockets and watched our five-year-old dance with the staff.
Deck 5: Deck five is the main concourse deck and includes the Pizzeria and another pub that we didnâ??t try. This was also the place to see characters like Shrek. Also there is the Sabor restaurant that was by far the best meal we ate on the ship.



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Deck 4: Deck four has the Schooner Bar where we played trivia several times, and the theater show that was so forgettable I forgot what it was about. There is also the casino here.
Deck 3: Deck three has the theater and the main dining areas. The dining room was overall nice and we had good service. The food was overall pretty underwhelming compared to our first cruise which was a Princess cruise in 2004.
We did order cocktails every day because that is what you do on a cruise and there are plenty of bars to serve them up all over the ship.

Overall we had fun on this cruise ship. It doesnâ??t have the most of anything but it had enough to keep us entertained and enough for the kids to enjoy. I didnâ??t feel as crowded on this ship as I did on the Carnival Cruise we took in 2011, much of that because of our great aft balcony cabin.

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Day 8: Return to port and a stop in Austin, TX

After returning to port we disembarked and started on our way toward Austin, Texas. We had two objectives in going there: 1) Visit Annaâ??s Toy Depot 2) Eat at a great BBQ restaurant.

So why Annaâ??s Toy Depot. Well, Evan is a fan of toy trains and watched a show on Youtube called â??Izzyâ??s Toy Timeâ?•. The show is about little wooden trains and the people who make the show regularly go to Annaâ??s Toy Depot to buy trains. So my son really, really wanted to go there and since we could go there, we did.

Annaâ??s is a place to buy primarily used wooden trains and other toys. If you are a five-year-old, this probably sounds like heaven. But for adults, well, whatever you can do to make your kids happy.

Afterward it was time for some good barbeque. Austin has tons of barbeque restaurants to choose from, but the description of County Line on the Hill with its views of the Hill Country had me going there.

County Line on the Hill

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County Line on the Hill

I donâ??t understand the two-headed longhorn on the roof but the food was great here. I had the pulled pork plate with cole slaw, etc. I only wish I could have downed some beers but we had a long drive ahead of us.

Finally we had nothing left to do but drive back north through Texas. We had no idea where we would stop for the night and sadly, after getting used to warm, balmy weather, it was back to chilly weather and regular life. The first snows of the year had already hit our home state of Colorado and 30 degree weather was ready to welcome us home.

Category

1. Travel

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