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# CROWN JEWEL OF THE BALCONES

A brand-new Austin retreat delivers a world-class spa experience with a distinct Hill Country vibe.

WRITTEN BY SUSAN L. EBERT  
PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF MIRAVEL



**M**y Lake Travis love affair began in the early '80s, when a handful of us *Texas Monthly* staffers would celebrate meeting our press deadline by picking up a couple six-packs at the Whip In and heading out to Hippie Hollow on Travis' wild north shore to sip suds and skinny-dip under starry skies.

My, how times have changed.

Somewhere along the way, Michael Dell began tinkering with building computers in his college dorm room, and the "Dellionaires" and techies started to outnumber us cosmic cowboys, rebels, hippie chicks, and other assorted outlaws. Austin's population tripled. Skyscrapers towered over the Texas State Capitol. Lake Travis' north shore changed, too; Private mansions sprung up like mushrooms after a rain and Hippie Hollow became a gummint-owned county park (still clothing optional; this *is* Austin, after all).

Thankfully, some other forward-thinking government agencies such as the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the City of Austin, and the Lower Colorado River Authority linked hands with Travis County and a coalition of private landowners and nonprofit conservation agencies such as the Nature Conservancy of Texas and the Travis Audubon Society in conserving wild habitat along Lake Travis' north shore—so much so, that when you fly into Austin at night, the area looks like a big black hole in the midst of a seething city-light sea.

It's the Balcones Canyonlands Preserve, and at 30,000-plus acres, it's one of the nation's largest urban preserves. Wrapped in its embrace is a state-of-the-art wellness resort that's destined to become a jewel in the Balcones' crown: Miraval Austin.

Even as you ease your way along Farm-to-Market Road 2769, the stresses of daily life begin to melt away as your destination appears. High on a hilltop overlooking the Cypress Creek finger of Lake Travis, the 220-acre Miraval Austin rises over the Balcones Canyonlands Preserve's rolling hills—rewarding you with spectacular vistas in every direction.

That vast ring of protected Balcones Canyonlands Preserve—with rare and endangered plant and animal species found nowhere else on earth—serves as a buffer zone between the hectic pace of modern life and the Miraval Austin, which opened just this year.

The resort—formerly the Travaasa Austin—was purchased by Hyatt, Miraval's parent company, in late 2017 and then reimagined with the ethos of its flagship Miraval location, Miraval Arizona in Tucson. Billed as an "inclusive wellness retreat," the property has been upgraded and conceptualized to complement and integrate Austin's unique culture and the natural splendor of the Hill Country.



THIS PAGE CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: THE SOLIDAGO, A MEDITATIVE SPACE, REFLECTS THE HILL COUNTRY ETHOS; THE PROPERTY'S CYPRESS CREEK FARM; A HERB-AND-FLOREAL FACIAL; A BONE-BROTH CLASS IN THE LIFE IN BALANCE CULINARY KITCHEN.

OPPOSITE PAGE: ENJOY A FARM-TO-TABLE SUPPER ON MIRAVAL AUSTIN'S OWN CYPRESS CREEK FARM.



Pause to admire the breathtaking hilltop views as you enter the Arrival Center before settling into your room in one of the 13 separate lodge buildings that are connected by meandering stone pathways. Sleekly modern in natural woods, slate, and muted hues of purple, blue, and gray, the rooms' color palette echoes the hazy hilltop vistas through their many windows.

Offering 117 beautifully appointed guestrooms and suites, a serene Life in Balance Spa, a 10-acre farm and ranch and a state-of-the-art Life in Balance Culinary Kitchen, Miraval Austin strives to inspire total mindfulness as you experience groundbreaking new treatments, wellness programs, and bespoke experiences—ranging from the Quantum Leap, a climb up a 25-foot pole that culminates in stepping off into the air (suspended from a harness, natch) to a leisurely guided hike through its 220-acre nature preserve.

It's easy to get overwhelmed by the plethora of offerings: The Miraval Austin guest book is a whopping 38 pages, and lists all of the resort's experiential offerings in dizzying detail. You might find it more helpful to work from the daily schedule posted on the website to determine which activities to select for the days of your upcoming visit; make sure to check out the special offers and packages, as well.

Each day's calendar offers an array of activities—some free, some fee-based—from which to choose, with enough variety and depth to pique even the most jaded guest's interests. Hilltop Crossings Kitchen, the main dining room, is augmented by Discovery Café, its poolside restaurant, and the Nest, which morphs from smoothie-bar-by-day into wine-and-cocktail-lounge-by-night. At all three, Executive Chef Ben Baker's handcrafted menus offer Texas-inspired cuisine, created from ingredients from Miraval's own Cypress Creek Farm in concert with Kim Chalfant, the farm manager with whom he's developed the seasonal farm-to-table offerings. In addition, the Life in Balance Culinary Kitchen, a partnership with Williams-Sonoma, offers culinary classes—often based on produce from its farm.

After breakfast, head outdoors, where water activities abound. In addition to languishing in one of the two infinity-edge pools overlooking the Balcones Canyonlands, you can fly fish in the spring-fed creeks, paddle a

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: ENJOY A RANGE OF EQUINE ADVENTURES; LUXE ROOMS IN MUTED NATURAL TONES OVERLOOK PRISTINE VISTAS; THE AIRY ARRIVAL CENTER SETS THE STAGE FOR YOUR HILL COUNTRY EXPERIENCE.



ONE OF MIRAVAL AUSTIN'S TWO INFINITY-EDGE POOLS OVERLOOKING LAKE TRAVIS AND THE BALCONES CANYONLAND PRESERVE.

kayak on a three-hour tour of Lake Travis, or strengthen your core with a stand-up paddle boarding class.

Then, head over to the Yoga Barn, where even the yoga classes sport a distinct Austin vibe: Tex Zen Yoga takes its inspiration from Willie Nelson's Zenlike persona, accompanying your instructor-led yoga sequences with a Texas songster soundtrack.

Learn about beekeeping and sustainable gardening at Miraval's Cypress Creek Farm, where you can help gather eggs, taste crops fresh from the field, and take beekeeping classes such as Hive Mind and Beekeeper for a Day or gardening classes such as Chicken Keeping and Minding Mushrooms.

And, of course, cowgirls will be trotting over to the Cypress Creek Ranch to indulge in either private lessons or group activities. Conjure up your inner wild spirit and creativity by painting your story on a horse in the Unforgettable Canvas experience or take a two-hour trail ride over juniper-and-oak-canopied Hill Country trails with an occasional splash through a spring-fed stream. You can also opt for pen work, better learning to direct a horse's movements in the pen without relying either on touch or voice. A unique offering is the trademarked Miraval Equine Experience, in which you practice ground skills with a specially selected horse while a trained observer helps identify the personal patterns that hold you back in

this exercise—and may be holding you back in life, as well.

Afterwards, ease your mind and body with a treatment at the 20,000-square-foot Life in Balance Spa, with 30 treatment rooms, a spa pool, relaxation rooms, salon, sauna, steam room, and spa retail boutique. Life in Balance offers more than 75 different skin and body treatments, spanning from Ayurveda treatments to peels, scrubs, wraps, and massages—try the Austin Apothecary Massage, in which native Texas Hill Country herbs, flowers, and leaves are selected to offer specific benefits and aromatherapy during your healing treatment. In addition, popular facials include the Spiritual Warrior Facial, which combines plant and gemstone essences; the Nature's Bounty, with cacao, organic chia seeds, pineapple, and raw honey to restore and nourish your skin; and Miraval Austin's Signature Petal Pecan Facial, a farm-to-spa facial based on ingredients harvested on the property.

Change can be good. Miraval Austin offers a supportive environment to help you overcome fears, try new skills, learn about nature, and to just rest and recharge for a while as life's rapid pace swirls by in an ever-increasing torrent.

As for me, I cherish my memories of old Austin, but embrace the changed Austin, with all its vibrancy: I loved Hippie Hollow, back in the day, but Miraval Austin is pretty darned sublime.

Miraval Austin Resort & Spa: (877) 262-7792; [miravalaustin.com](http://miravalaustin.com)