

SAVVY TRAVELER

Mexican perros are 'totally chill'

El Sargento, BCS, Mexico — The "Dog Whisperer" of National Geographic Channel fame, Cesar Millan, makes a big deal in the beginning of his book "Cesars Way" about how dogs he grew up with in his native Mexico are better socialized and psychologically healthier than dogs in the United States.

As a part-time Mexico traveler and the owner of two slightly maladjusted American mutts, I've seen plenty lately to convince me that Millan was spot-on.

KATHLEEN STEBBINS

Mexico, at least Baja California Sur, is home to a prodigious number of feral dogs. Even those dogs who fit the loose definition of "pet" seem to be only casually hooking up with their "owners."

The perros here enjoy an extraordinary amount of geographical freedom. I have yet to see one on a leash. They wear collars sometimes; I suppose they visit the casa now and then to check in, get a belly full of table scraps.

My daughter, Charlotte, who was here over the holidays, nailed it. Upon seeing sundry perros lounging belly-up in the sand, chasing free-range cows or sauntering freely down dirt roads to attend apparently important business, exclaimed, "Oh my God, Mexican perros are so totally chill! I want a chill Mexican perro."

You see them along the beach a lot, usually in pairs or groups of three, and what's striking is not their presence but the absence of visceral fear they induce. You are not lifting your toddler onto your shoulders in case of a ferocious charge. You are not tensing your shoulders or clenching your jaw in dread. The dog are barely aware of your presence, and somehow you know this instinctively.

Why? I suppose it's because Mexican dogs, much like the people here, are scarcely coddled and so learn to be self-sufficient and interdependent with family members. Because the perros depend so little on anyone outside the pack for sustenance or shelter, their relationship with people is tangential at best. (I have been told, too, that the very occasional problem perro — one that attacks humans or otherwise behaves unsocially — is killed.)

On Tuesday, a couple of mutts — one some variation on a yellow Lab theme with some shepherd thrown in, and the other a scrappy Australian sheepdog, wandered into our yard. They both wore collars, so I went to check for tags in case they'd wandered away from home.

The Lab mix responded to "perro, aqui" ("dog, here"); the sheepdog opted to watch from a distance. And although he lacked tags, the Lab displayed gleaming white teeth, a healthy coat and no evidence of malnutrition.

We hung together (chilled, I suppose) for 15 or 20 minutes. He sniffed my hand, leaned against my legs and wagged his tail when petted. When I walked about, he followed me closely at heel (something, which after years of training, coaxing and positive reinforcement, my American black Lab still won't do with any notable consistency).

He did not beg for food or commit any otherwise annoying behavior, appearing more concerned about his lady friend, the sheepdog mix, awaiting him on the bluff. Convinced he was something less than lost, I walked him to the gate and sent him on his way.

There were no histrionics, no jumping or pleading, just a quick glance back and a tail wag, and off he went. I can't help thinking that in the U.S., such an interaction would inevitably have led to said mutt lobbying for a spot at the foot of my bed.

I won't argue that we in the U.S. should go back to letting canines run roughshod over neighborhoods, but I think there's a lesson here that applies to dogs and people alike. Situations and individuals often respond poorly to being overcontrolled (think of your last high-stakes, gotta-be-perfect vacation itinerary).

"Chilling," meanwhile, is more often than not a healthy state, and one we might all benefit from practicing more regularly.

top 10 reasons to visit SAN ANTONIO

BY LAURA LONGERO
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Patsy Cline, in the song "San Antonio Rose" sings, "Deep within my heart lies a melody, a song of old San Antonio, where in dreams I live with a memory, beneath the stars all alone."

San Antonio, the city that inspired quintessential country singer Patsy Cline in "San Antonio Rose," is a treasure trove of cultural experiences. Families flock to this central Texas city to see the Riverwalk and visit amusement parks like Six Flags Fiesta Texas and SeaWorld San Antonio. The city's multicultural atmosphere, mainly influenced by the city's Hispanic population, lends the city a distinctive and somewhat Old-World feel.

Old San Antonio also is one of the Tex-Mex capitals of, well, Texas. Offering standard classics like taquerias and higher-end establishments, even fast-food Mexican joints appeal to the masses in San Antonio: Taco Cabana and Chacho's, especially.

Sometimes overlooked in favor of sister cities Houston and Dallas/Fort Worth that are more cosmopolitan and Austin with its unique flair, San Antonio should be a stop on anyone's Texas travel agenda.

The following is a list of famous landmarks to visit, as well as a few that might not make the guidebooks.

1. The Alamo: The Alamo was built in the 18th century by the Spanish as a mission to house American Indians who had converted to Christianity. It later became a fortress for Texans during the historic Battle of the Alamo, which the Texans lost to Mexico but still was a crucial battle in the Texans' fight to gain their independence from Mexico. The battle cry, "Remember the Alamo" became a rousing rally for the Texans in later fights against Mexico, reminding them of their comrades that were lost at the Alamo.

Now a museum featuring exhibits about Texas history and the revolution, the Alamo is a must-see spot for tourists. Its forboding white stone walls give visitors a glimpse of the style of Spanish architecture when building on the mission began in 1724. The Alamo is one of the greatest places in the state to learn about the independence and spirit of the early Texas settlers.

Thanks to the Daughters of the Republic of Texas who run the museum, admission is free. The Alamo is at 300 Alamo Plaza.

2. The Riverwalk: The Riverwalk, or Paseo del Rio, is a 2 1/2-mile stretch of walkways bordered by bars, restaurants and shops that meanders along the San Antonio River. Boats carry tourists along the river's waters and it is home to a few of the city's great restaurants, including Biga on the Banks and Boudro's. The Riverwalk is the epitome of San Antonio culture: It is colorful and embodies the Tex-Mex flavor of the city. Brightly colored umbrellas dot the riverbanks, and tourists and locals stroll along the river. It always is stunning, no matter how many times you see it.

A word of advice about the Riverwalk: It's a tourist trap, and, as any good tourist trap, it has some restaurants that serve overpriced bad food. It also is a veritable labyrinth, and having a map is quite handy. Residents who have lived in the city for years have been known to still get lost downtown.

The Riverwalk also is home to Rivercenter mall, which has more than 75 stores.

Parking can be difficult. It's easiest to park at a garage, but it can be costly. The Rivercenter Mall Parking Garage on Commerce Street is a good bet.

Just walk west on Commerce Street after parking, and you'll run into the Riverwalk.

3. The Alamo: Former



PUBLICITY PHOTOS

The Schlitterbahn Waterpark Resort boasts the Master Blaster on Blastenhoff Beach. The Travel Channel has dubbed Schlitterbahn the No. 1 Water park in the U.S.

home of the San Antonio Spurs, NBA champions in 1999, 2003, 2005 and 2007, the Alamodome is a giant structure in downtown San Antonio that looks vaguely reminiscent of a bug turned over with its legs in the air. Football games can be played inside, and it is the site of the annual Alamodome Bowl.

The Alamodome also serves as a convention center, and its downtown location is handy to tourists.

It is at 100 Montana St.

4. San Antonio Missions National Historic Park:

San José, Concepción, San Juan and Espada were Spanish missions founded in the 18th century. They flourished during the late 1700s, but hostility from Apaches and Comanches in the area, a decline of military support and disease eventually led to the demise of the missions. Now, the missions are run by the National Park Service. The Mission Trail links the missions, and the four mission churches hold regular Catholic services. Plan to spend a few hours at the park — free guided tours and demonstrations are scheduled at various times during the week.

The visitor center is at 2202 Roosevelt Ave.

Mission Espada is at 10040 Espada Road; Mission San Juan is at 9101 Graf Road; Mission San José is at 6701 San José Drive; and Mission Concepción is at 807 Mission Road.

5. La Fogata: Tex-Mex is not Mexican food. It is not trying to be Mexican food. It is purely Texan, and San Antonio is one of the best places in the state to eat it. La Fogata is a culinary establishment in San Antonio. The menu offers standouts such as ceviche, tortilla soup, fresh guacamole, quesadillas, enchiladas, chile rellenos, carne guisada, soft tacos, flan, dulce de leche cheesecake and empanadas. Whatever you do, don't order tacos with crispy shells. Texans hate that.

La Fogata is at 2427 Vance Jackson.

6. San Antonio Zoo: Zoos can be a dime a dozen, but the San Antonio Zoo is worth the visit. It is in picturesque Brackenridge Park, and the San Antonio Zoo Eagle is a choo-choo train your kids will be sure to want to ride. More than 850,000 guests visit the San Antonio Zoo each year.

The zoo, which has more than 3,500 animals, has a unique butterfly exhibit, and Africa

Live, an exhibit dedicated to African animals is slated to open by the end of the year.

The zoo is at 3903 N. St. Mary's St.

7. Tower of the Americas at HemisFair Park:

The 750-foot-tall tower has a revolving observation deck and restaurant with a 360-degree view of downtown San Antonio. Grab a cup of coffee at the base of the tower, or, if you are in funds, book a table at Chart House, the tallest restaurant in the city with panoramic views. The restaurant features seafood and steak entrees. The best option is to just pay to ride to the top of the tower. The ticket price includes admission to the Flags Over Texas Observation Deck and the Skies Over Texas 4-D theater ride, which takes visitors on a 4-D theater trip across Texas. A walk around HemisFair Park also is lovely. It was built for the World Fair in 1968 and has paths along water fountains.

The tower is at 600 HemisFair Plaza Way; the park is at 200 S. Alamo.

8. University of Texas Institute of Texan Cultures: The institute bills itself as "San Antonio's

cultural experience museum."

The museum features exhibits about the ethnic and cultural makeup of Texas. Guests can interact with character performers and hands-on exhibits. The Back 40 is the museum's outdoor area that houses 19th-century buildings. For children, there are 10-minute long puppet shows. Call 210-458-2282 for details.

It is at 801 S. Bowie St.

9. Schlitterbahn Waterpark Resort:

Located in New Braunfels, which is about 15 miles north of the San Antonio city limits, this water park cannot be missed. One of the first water parks in the country, Schlitterbahn has been a pioneer in the industry since its inception in 1979. The Travel Channel calls Schlitterbahn the No. 1 water park in the U.S. The resort has more than three miles of tubing rides, seven water playgrounds for children, 17 water slides and three uphill water coasters. Don't miss the Master Blaster or the Raging River.

Parents can send the kids off to the rides and mosey up to one of the swim-up bars for a cocktail.

It is at 305 W. Austin St., New Braunfels.

10. Rudy's Country Store and Bar-B-Q: Various regions in the country think their barbecue is best: Kansas City, Texas and the South.

Texans, believing their state is the best in the Union, feel the same way about their barbecue. Rudy's barbecue is a San Antonio tradition. Founded in 1929 in the little town of Leon Springs a few miles north of San Antonio, Rudy's has been dishing out spicy sausages, smoked chicken, turkey breast and pork loin, and, my personal favorite, beef brisket. The meats are spice-rubbed and Rudy's Bar-B-Q "Sause" is smoky and peppery, but, those who are faint of palate can order the "Sissy Sause" instead.

Rudy's has several locations. The flagship store is at 24152 W. Interstate 10.



The Alamo, 300 Alamo Plaza, is a museum with exhibits about Texas history and the revolution.

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