



Charlie Sexton playing Antone's

MINI-ME

Alpine, Texas

At 4,481 feet, Alpine (pop. 4,800) avoids the smoldering heat of the West Texas lowlands and, partly thanks to the presence of Sul Ross State University, is home to a vibrant, thriving main street (think a kindergarten version of Austin's 6th Street). Davis Mountains State Park (30 minutes away) offers year-round camping and cycling, while Big Bend National Park, 90 miles southeast, offers some of the most rugged back-country hiking and mountain biking in the country.

4) Austin

Yes, the originator of the **KEEP** [your city's name here] **WEIRD** bumper sticker is still plenty kooky, but it's also young and remarkably active. With Barton Greenbelt—800 acres of wilderness—in the heart of downtown, a lunchtime bike, kayak, or swim is standard practice for the techies, hippies, cowboys, and students (the University of Texas is here) who call Austin home. While the music scene

KEY STATS

1.6 million: Population (metro)
\$182,000: Median home price
B-: Multisport grade
92: Number of annual music festivals held in town

really does live up to the hype, the running and biking communities are just as lively. Not only does local running shop RunTex lead training groups around

Lady Bird Lake every week-night; it operates free water stations for anyone—runners, bikers,

walkers, even pooches—who needs a cool drink. Bikers can get a tune-up at Lance Armstrong's gleaming new 18,000-square-foot skinny-tire emporium, Mellow Johnny's,

before riding to bike-in movies at Café Mundi or tackling the city's impressive array of lanes and paths, which will expand to an astounding 900 miles by 2020. The economy is just as robust: Austin has proven to be, if not recession-immune, at least recession-resistant, thanks to big names like Dell and Whole Foods and a booming software industry. But what makes Austin stand out is



Lady Bird Lake



El Chillito, a popular taco joint in East Austin

its affordability: Bars like Ginny's Little Longhorn still serve \$2 Lone Stars, taco vendors hand out three for a dollar, and the bus routes around the center of

town still cost 50 cents. Which means that for the price of a Manhattan power lunch, you can practically eat and drink all month. —CAITLIN MEREDITH

Houston, We Have a Problem

Yes, thanks to the robust oil-and-gas industry, your economy is holding steady, and you've got low unemployment (6.3 percent) and affordable homes (average median price, \$145,050). Plus we applaud you for turning all those crappy parking lots into Discovery Green, a 12-acre park bustling with concerts, festivals, and farmers' markets. And you've got really awesome bars, like Etta's and Valhalla, and surprisingly good barbecue and soul food. But here's the thing: You're congested, sprawly, hot, and flat, and you scored miserably on our multisport factor (grade: D). What can we say? If we could more readily do some of the things we love to do outside, we'd, like, totally be BFFs. Until then, we're sticking with Austin.