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VINTAGE TRAILS A TEXAN TRIUMPH

WHEN QANTAS launched its first direct flights from Sydney and Brisbane to Dallas in May last year, no one could have predicted the huge popularity of the service. One of the world's longest, single flight legs at 17 hours or thereabouts, sitting still for that length of time has done nothing to dim the enthusiasm of Australians keen to visit Texas and enjoy better access to the US east coast. In January, the national carrier upped the frequency of its Dallas/Fort Worth flights from four to six a week and from July will operate a daily service.

There's plenty to see, of course, in the largest state on the American mainland, from Houston, San Antonio and Dallas, three of the top 10 most populous cities in the US. One of the most memorable trips I have ever enjoyed in the Lone Star state was light years away from the travel brochure and movie clichés - a wine tour of Texas. It comes as a shock to many visitors to discover that Texas

allowed European vineyards to re-plant after the devastating phylloxera outbreak in the mid-19th century.

Prohibition dealt a body blow to this promising start and it wasn't until the 1970s that wineries such as Llano Estacado and Fall Creek spring boarded the modern wine business. Boutique was the way to go and today Texas is one of the fastest-growing wine tourism destinations in the US, pulling in close to five million visitors a year.

There are nine official wine trails in Texas, but if you only have limited time, a meander of the Texas Hill Country is the number one choice. From Dallas it's a 400km drive or a short plane hop to San Antonio, the closest major city to this lushly beautiful region. Nominated as one of National Geographic's Ultimate Road Trips, a leisurely drive around the region's 30 wineries takes you through some of the most breathtaking scenery in the southern US. Many tourists time their

Becker, which are in full bloom in May and June. Maybe it was fuzzy memories of an old John Ford western, but I couldn't ignore the lure of the Chisholm Trail Winery. Yep, you can sit back in the corral and watch longhorn cattle and quarter-horses roam nearby. But there's nothing homespun about the wines even though many have Old West monikers like Belle Starr, High Noon, The Outlaw and Silver Spur. The wine that sells like hot cakes, though, is Smart Ass Blush - a pink wine that's "recommended as a gift for your favourite smart ass".

Like our own popular wine regions, the Hill Country is packed with quaint but luxurious B&Bs such as The Place To Be B&B and The Back Forty of Fredericksburg B&B Ranch and Retreat with its own private lake for fishing and canoeing. For a full rundown of wineries and accommodation in the region, go to www.texaswinetrail.com.

The Munson Trail lies north of Dallas and tapers off at Red River. One of the main magnets of the drive, apart from paying homage to Munson at the 13 wineries, is the experience of sipping wines in Paris. The famous Paris, Texas, of course, which lies on the eastern border of the Munson Trail. The oldest, continuously operating winery in the area is the Homestead Winery at Denison and one of the highlights of a visit is the Homestead Denison double gold cream sherry. Although the two protagonists in the movie *Sideways* would also have appreciated the merlot. Another must is the Triple "R" Ranch, a small winery that produces big reds in the centre of a game ranch stocked with over 200 deer. Visit www.munsontrail.com. Adelaide has been making much of its select band of wineries within the city limits over the past few years and so has Dallas. For only \$US45 you can join a six-hour tour of the city's quartet of downtown wineries - Calais Winery, FUQUA Winery, Inwood Estates and Times Ten Cellars. Not for wine snobs but a lot of fun and the wines are surprisingly good for the outlay. Go to www.dallaswinetrail.com.

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is the third largest wine-producing state in the US and the industry turns over \$US1.7 billion a year. And in typical Texan fashion there's no holding back when it comes to catchy slogans for the state's home-grown tipples, either - Go Texan or Go Thirsty and Toast A Rising Star.

With a climate and terroir similar to many parts of Australia, the names of the most-planted Texan grapes sound very familiar - cabernet sauvignon, chardonnay, chenin blanc, merlot, sauvignon blanc, riesling, sangiovese, shiraz and viognier. Winemaking commenced in the 1650s when Spanish monks planted vines for sacramental wines. And in one of those crazy twists-of-fate, Thomas Volney Munson, a Texas viticulturalist, saved the French wine industry by developing a locally-grown resistant rootstock, which

wine touring according to the seasons to enjoy the wildflowers of spring, when the landscape is awash with Indian paintbrush and bluebonnet blooms, or the flaming foliage of autumn, which gives New England a run for its money. While others choose summer to incorporate swimming and water sports, and fishing in the clear-as rivers.

If it wasn't for the "Howdy, y'all" greetings, you could be forgiven for thinking that you were still in Australia. The same plush, architect-designed stone and wood buildings you find in all upmarket New World wine regions are very much in evidence in Texas. Standout stops include Becker Vineyards, which hosts regular wine dinners in its Hill Top Restaurant. Another reason to make a detour here are the adjoining lavender fields, a by-product of a trip to Provence by owners Richard and Bunny