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Offbeat Austin? Rock On.

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By Roy Furchgott

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It may be time for Austin to dispense with its unofficial motto, "Keep Austin Weird." How much encouragement is needed when it seems no one would want it any other way?

In just one weekend there, I was photographed with El Vez, the Mexican Elvis; had drinks next to a guy with an ostentatious mustache and the garb of a 1920s movie cowboy; was overcharged at not one but two fine establishments; and was befriended by people who cheerfully claimed to have done jail time.

Weird, right? But also, maybe, the best weekend trip ever.

What drew me to Austin was a chance Internet search that showed a number of bands I liked playing there the same weekend. Not surprising, considering that Austin's motto -- this one officially trademarked -- is "The Live Music Capital of the World."

The town's music reputation may hinge on South by Southwest, the city-clogging music and film festival held in March, and the Austin City Limits music fest in September, but there is no lack of music on any day of the year.

Austin's nexus of weirdness and music is an area called South Congress, or SoCo. It's an artsy-funky part of town, on South Congress Avenue, easy walking distance from the Ann W. Richards Congress Avenue Bridge, where tourists gather at dusk to see the world's largest urban bat colony take flight.

SoCo is lined with restaurants, stores and the occasional bar-slash-venue. Chief among the last group is the Continental Club, founded in 1947 and now an official historic landmark. The place is an underwhelming open space with a long bar, but you never know what musical finds are to be had there. I stepped in for a free happy-hour performance by Redd Volkaert, best known, if at all, as a guitarist for Merle Haggard. A bartender warned that Volkaert looked like a red-haired Junior Samples, "but I wouldn't want to follow him on stage." She was right. The man could make a Telecaster do anything short of mixing a drink.

After an evening of rock or blues, you can head just down the sidewalk and upstairs to the Continental Club Gallery, a smaller space with live jazz and cocktails.

It's worth a walk across the bridge to Antone's, a club founded on blues. It's a large stage in a room that has all the character of a warehouse, but with such upcoming bills as Marc Broussard (Oct. 24) and Maceo Parker (Oct. 29), you'll hardly be surveying the architecture. (If it's architecture you want, head over to the Paramount Theatre, for classic movies and live music amid opulent paint and plasterwork.)

I checked in for the weekend right across from the Continental Club, in the Hotel San Jose, a charmingly spare hotel, with a courtyard where people gather for happy hour and the signature drink, a Michelada: beer spiced with lime juice, Worcestershire sauce, soy sauce and Tabasco. The San Jose is appropriately funky-chic, with concrete floors, platform beds and music posters for decor; also, the staff push-pins the occasional poem to the wall. You can rent a bicycle, iPod, CDs and DVDs or, if struck with a creative impulse, a typewriter.

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The Magnolia Cafe offers neon humor along with huge breakfasts and bison burgers. (By Roy Furchgott)

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You might want to pack earplugs, in case you have a neighbor who likes to rock out with the windows open (I did) or need to counter a cloud of grackles rending the evening air (ditto).

One sour note: I was charged a half-day penalty for leaving early, even though I had pointed out the booking error in my reservation when I arrived.

If your taste is for shabby-chic, just down the street is the Austin Motel, opened in 1938 and, yes, with a motto of its own: "So Close Yet So Far Out." Each of the rooms is decorated in a one-of-a-kind motif.

You won't starve in SoCo. The area is a hotbed of hot stoves. Jo's Coffee, next to Hotel San Jose, serves a strong brew and a selection of sandwiches and snacks with sidewalk seating. Occasionally Jo's has free music and pet events; regular events include Thursday-evening movies "under the stars" and the Sinner's Brunch (served with beer) on Sundays.

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