



May 12, 2006

36 Hours

# Abilene, Tex.

By KATE MURPHY

LOCATED in north central [Texas](#), Abilene (population 115,000) is perched in what would seem the middle of nowhere. As you stand on the edge of town, there's nothing between you and the sunburned horizon. It's cowboy country where boots and hats are de rigueur and residents don't bother to take the keys out of the ignition when they park their pickup trucks. The spirit of the Old West is pervasive in this town where the buffalo once roamed and the oil pumps go up and down all day.

## Friday

4 p.m.

### 1) Frontier Phantasms

Go to Frontier Texas! (625 North First Street, 325-437-2800; [www.frontiertexas.com](http://www.frontiertexas.com); \$8, \$4 ages 3 to 12) to learn about the region's history, exclamation point and all. It's kind of like a little Disney World, only with cowboys and Indians. Holographic "spirit guides" take you through the indoor exhibit, which includes a life-size diorama of a buffalo fighting off wolves and a circular multimedia theater that recreates Indian attacks and a saloon shootout.

6:30 p.m.

### 2) Dinner Downtown

Walk four blocks to Cypress Street Station (158 Cypress Street, 325-676-3463), a popular downtown restaurant with an exposed brick interior and a guitarist softly strumming on Friday nights. Best bets are the baked Brie with toast points (\$8) and the center-cut pork chop with apple demi-glaze (\$16). You might attract attention if you walk there, though, because pedestrians are so rare. Abilenians say they always drive, even if they are only going to the corner.

8 p.m.

### 3) Last Picture Show

The Historic Paramount Theater (352 Cypress Street, 325-676-9620; [www.paramount-abilene.org](http://www.paramount-abilene.org)) is a

restored 1930's theater on the National Register of Historic Places. Gilded and plush, it has a grand staircase and curved ceiling that is backlit with soft blue neon so it looks as if stars are twinkling through the plaster when the house lights dim. The tracer light marquee advertising the night's classic film or live theater production is hard to miss in Abilene's small downtown. Tickets for movies are \$5, \$4 for children. Prices for other events vary.

10:30 p.m.

#### 4) Drag Strip Rumble

Watch cars of all kinds, from old clunkers to souped-up monster trucks, race at the Abilene Dragstrip (5601 West Stamford Street, 325-673-7223; [www.abilenedragstrip.com](http://www.abilenedragstrip.com); \$10, ages 12 and under free with paid adult admission). Anyone in any kind of vehicle can race — even out-of-towners in rental cars. Check your rental agreement first.

### Saturday

8 a.m.

#### 5) Cattle Call

Drive 30 minutes northeast of town on Highway 351 to Stasney's Cook Ranch (888-762-2999, [www.stasneyscookranch.com](http://www.stasneyscookranch.com)), a 25,000-acre spread that sprawls as far as the eye can see, surrounded by massive bluffs and dotted with cedar trees and prickly pear cactus. You can easily imagine the buffalo herds and Comanche Indians that once thrived on this land. Today, the ranch has herds of longhorn, Brangus and Charolais cattle along with abundant wildlife including white-tailed deer, wild turkeys, wild boar and iridescent songbirds. You can take a two-hour guided nature tour for \$60 (which covers up to six people).

10 a.m.

#### 6) Big House Chow Down

Sit on the porch of the main lodge at Stasney's Cook Ranch and survey the landscape while enjoying a full cowboy breakfast of omelets, thick slices of bacon, smoked sausage, fruit, yogurt, biscuits and gravy, muffins and pistachios. It's laid out on long banquet tables for you and the camo-clad hunters returning from one of the expeditions the ranch also offers. The cost of a guided hunt is \$50 to \$4,000, depending on the duration of the outing and type of prey (deer, boar, turkey, dove, chukar partridge or quail).

Noon

#### 7) They Were Framed

On your way back to Abilene, visit the Old Jail Art Center (201 South Second Street, 325-762-2269; [www.theoldjailartcenter.org](http://www.theoldjailartcenter.org); free) in quaint Albany, Tex. Housed in an 1877 limestone jailhouse, the

little museum is an unexpected gem. The permanent collection includes works by Modigliani, Klee, Picasso, Braque, Miró and Calder. There is an impressive array of Asian art, particularly tomb figures from the Han Dynasty. Contemporary Texas artists are also well represented.

2 p.m.

#### 8) South of the Border Snack

Grab a snack at La Popular Bakery & Cafe (1533 Pine Street, 325-672-2670) a hole-in-the-wall Mexican restaurant in Abilene. Order a burrito (\$1.65) or a crispy taco (75 cents) for a snack. On weekends they also make a mean menudo, the traditional spicy soup made from tripe (\$4.50 for a small bowl). If you've got a sweet tooth, try some of the heavily iced and custard-filled pastries or maybe a marronito, which is a thick, pig-shaped gingerbread cookie.

4 p.m.

#### 9) Horsing Around

Watch an equestrian event at the Taylor County Expo Center (1700 Highway 36, 325-677-4376; [www.taylorcountyexpocenter.com](http://www.taylorcountyexpocenter.com); most events are free). There's something going on most weekends, like team roping and barrel racing. The Friday after Labor Day is the start of the weeklong West Texas Fair and Rodeo, which has not only horseback riding competitions but also bull riding, calf scrambles, a livestock show and a carnival midway. If you want to ride a horse yourself, amble over to Al Corral (753 County Road 318, 325-439-1719), where you can go for an hourlong trail ride for \$30. There are pony rides for children younger than 7.

7 p.m.

#### 10) Texas Barbecue

They don't take reservations and you'll probably have to wait for a table, but you can't go to Abilene and not go to Joe Allen's (301 South 11th Street, 325-672-6082). This classic barbecue barn is almost always packed with good ol' guys and gals from town and the nearby ranches and oil fields. You can order mesquite-grilled steak (\$10.95), chicken (\$9.95) or trout (\$8.95), which come with a baked potato and steamed vegetables, but you can't go wrong with the combo rib, brisket and sausage plate (\$8.99), which includes coleslaw, potato salad, new potatoes, red beans and homemade cornbread.

9:30 p.m.

#### 11) Two-Step Program

Aid your digestion by two-stepping at the Guitars and Cadillacs country and western dance hall (3881 Vine Street, 325-692-8077; cover \$10 to \$20 depending on the band). The hall features local acts and a great D.J. between the live shows. But some of the best performers are the locals out on the floor.

## Sunday

9:30 a.m.

12) I Stop for Armadillos

Traipse the trails in 529-acre Abilene State Park about 15 miles outside of the city (Farm Road 89, Buffalo Gap; 325-572-3204; \$4). You're likely to see buffalo taking a morning wallow in Elm Creek. Yield to darting roadrunners, waddling armadillos and hopping horned toads. They have the right of way.

11:30 a.m.

13) A Mimosa in a Dry County

Have Sunday brunch (\$11.95) out on the patio at Perini Ranch Steakhouse (3002 Farm Road 89, Buffalo Gap; 325-572-3339). You have to join the club if you want a mimosa or Bloody Mary (\$3 for a three-day membership or \$20 for a lifetime membership). Perini's is in a dry county where only clubs can serve alcohol to dues-paying members. The classic country buffet includes fried chicken, smoked ham, chicken fried steak, green chile hominy, green beans and cowboy potatoes (skin-on with butter and garlic) with watermelon, whiskey bread pudding and pecan pie for dessert.

2 p.m.

14) Let's Go, Buffalo Chips

If you aren't too stuffed, walk back in time at Buffalo Gap Historic Village (133 North William Street, Buffalo Gap; 325-572-3365; [www.buffalogap.com](http://www.buffalogap.com); \$5, \$2 kindergarten through 12th grade). The site is divided into three eras: 1883, 1904 and 1925. There are restored buildings from each period including an old telegraph office, train depot and blacksmith shop. If you're lucky, the Buffalo Chips, a vintage baseball team, will be playing a game 1880's style.

## The Basics

American Airlines has flights to Abilene Regional Airport, connecting through [Dallas](#), and Continental Airlines offers service through [Houston](#). Public transport is nonexistent, so you'll need to rent a car.

Many major hotel chains have locations in Abilene, but they are on the highway or on the outskirts of the city. The Vintage House Bed & Breakfast (1541 North Fourth Street, 325-677-8386; [www.thevintagehouse.com](http://www.thevintagehouse.com)) is in a 1927 home in a quiet neighborhood within walking distance of downtown. The couple who own it serve a hot breakfast each morning. There's a computer and fax machine on the upstairs landing for guests to use, and you'll find a Hershey's Kiss on your pillow each night. Rooms are \$75 to \$105.

The MCM Eleganté Suites (4250 Ridgemont Drive, 888-897-9644; [www.mcmelegantesuites.com](http://www.mcmelegantesuites.com)) is bigger, a full-service hotel with a large atrium restaurant. Accommodations, from \$119 to \$149 a night,

are two-room suites with wireless high-speed Internet access, refrigerators, microwaves and coffee makers. Prices includes a full cooked-to-order breakfast.

[Home](#)

- [World](#)
  - [U.S.](#)
- [N.Y. / Region](#)
  - [Business](#)
  - [Technology](#)
  - [Science](#)
  - [Health](#)
  - [Sports](#)
  - [Opinion](#)
    - [Arts](#)
    - [Style](#)
    - [Travel](#)
    - [Jobs](#)
- [Real Estate](#)
  - [Autos](#)
- [Back to Top](#)

[Copyright 2006 The New York Times Company](#)

- [Privacy Policy](#)
  - [Search](#)
- [Corrections](#)
  - [XML](#)
  - [Help](#)
- [Contact Us](#)
- [Work for Us](#)
- [Site Map](#)