

Walking Waco

Happy trails with surprising views and detours.

By **ROBIN TIERNEY**



The whole family will enjoy spending a whole day in beautiful Cameron Park.

MIDWAY BETWEEN AUSTIN AND DALLAS LIES the type of amusement park that Fido can enjoy as much as you do. This playland's happy trails run along rivers, around limestone cliffs, even atop a massive dam. They pass unique cultural attractions, from a Texas Ranger museum to a site preserving mammoth fossils from the Ice Age. Come spring, surrounding fields explode into seas of brilliant wildflowers.

No wonder Waco is one of Texas's most popular destinations.

Waco's name comes from its original inhabitants, the Huaco. In 1849, the first streets were planned. By 1870, a grand 475-foot suspension bridge—designed by John Roebling of Brooklyn Bridge fame—spanned the Brazos River, making Waco a trade center.

Cowboys drove cattle north on the Chisholm Trail, crossing the Brazos here. These days, hikers enjoy new trails studded with natural and man-made scenery. Downtown, one trail crosses the iconic bridge, now romantically illuminated after dark. Bronze sculptures of longhorns tower along Waco's Riverwalk. With its recent extension, this lighted concrete path runs seven miles through parkland on both banks.

Reaching east, the trail heads downtown. Cultural detours include the Texas Ranger Hall of Fame and Museum, which brings Wild West lore to life through archival photographs, badges, rifles, even Lone Ranger film clips. Get your human companions to cool their heels with Fido in the museum's tranquil field so you explore inside.

A few blocks away, Baylor University beckons with museums such as the free-admission Armstrong Browning Library, which displays Robert and Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Victorian treasures, literary mementos and storytelling stained-glass windows. The winding campus trails are perfect for walks with Fido.

A leisurely stroll west along the tree-lined Riverwalk leads to century-old Cameron Park, where 15 miles of trails traverse 416 acres of natural beauty. Meander up tall bluffs like Circle Point to take in the fresh air and horizon-kissing views of the Bosque and Brazos rivers, which converge by the park. The dramatic cliffs resulted from the Balcones Fault. Millions of years ago, faulting caused this landscape to drop 200 feet into a shallow sea. Receding waters left vast limestone deposits that formed the terrain.

Keep ambling past natural springs, hand-built bridges, the 88 steep steps up Jacob's Ladder, wheelchair-accessible paths and the blooms and fountains of Miss Nellie's Pretty Place. If you and Fido want to canoe, hit the scenic paddling trails on the Bosque and Brazos.

Just beyond downtown, spring wildflowers such as bluebonnets and yellow-orange Indian blanket flowers carpet fields as far as the eye can see. Flanking one vast meadow, Waco Mammoth

Site holds the remains of Columbian mammoths from 68,000 years ago. Leashed dogs can stroll on the site's trail and parkland.

Two-legged family members can tour the research site while someone takes Fido to still-looks-like-new HOT Dog Park, the town's off-leash social hub. On Saturday mornings, furry socialites also mingle at Waco Downtown Farmers Market amid fresh produce, local crafts and fresh-baked dog biscuits. Local bands add music and energy to this festive market, which is located by the town's historic fire tower.

A short drive west at Lake Waco Dam, another happy trail runs nearly three miles across the top of the dam. I pass smiling locals walking dogs of all breeds. One senior pit bull rests in a red wagon being pulled by his adoptive mom. On one side of the trail, the lake stretches out like a massive sheet of glass; on the river side, hulking gates manage water flow. From the dam trail, you can detour to Bosque Park, where paths weave around mesquite and prairie flora.

Back downtown, historic warehouses now house bustling restaurants and shops. The Dr Pepper Museum commands a block near the drink's birthplace; stop in if someone can dog-watch.

But spring's the time to play outside, especially since Waco has many lush green spaces to cool your heels, and paws, by the river. 🐾



◀ **ROBIN TIERNEY**, award-winning *East Coast* writer-photographer, seeks out intriguing places on foot, preferably with dogs by her side.

PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY WACO CVB



HOTEL INDIGO

Rooms from \$106 per night. \$150 refundable deposit; \$75 cleaning fee; maximum 70 pounds. 211 Clay Avenue, Waco, TX; (254) 754-7000; hotelindigo.com/waco-baylor.

HILTON WACO

Rooms from \$102 per night. \$50 nonrefundable per-stay fee; maximum 75 pounds. 113 S. University Parks Drive, Waco, TX; (254) 754-8484, hilton.com/search/hi/us/tx/waco.

DOGTOPIA DAYCARE

Award-winning open play environment, boarding and spa. 5301 Bosque Boulevard, Waco, TX; (254) 776-3647, dogdaycare.com/waco.

CAMERON PARK

Open sunrise until midnight. (254) 750-5980, cameronparkwaco.com.

LAKE WACO DAM

Open sunrise to sunset; park at Airport Park Beach (dogs allowed). wacoheartoftexas.com/sports/hiking-biking.

HOT DOG PARK

Off-leash park open sunrise to sunset. Free. 4900 Steinbeck Bend Rd., Waco, TX; hotdogparkwaco.org.

DOWNTOWN FARMERS MARKET

Saturday mornings. 400 S. University Parks Drive, Waco, TX; wacodowntownfarmersmarket.com.

1424 BISTRO

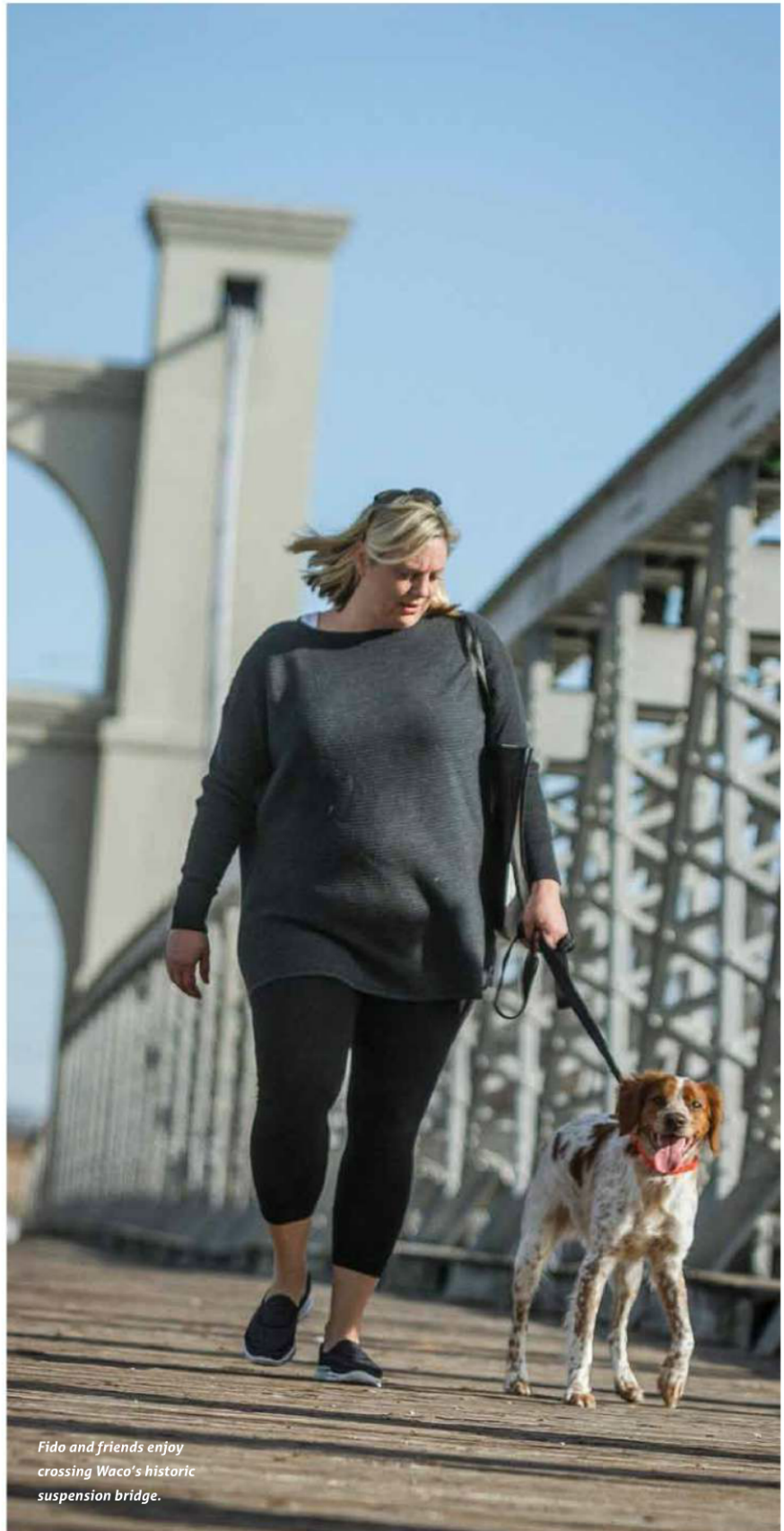
Mediterranean cuisine; dogs allowed on patio. 1424 Washington Avenue, Waco, TX; (254) 752-7512, 1424bistro.com.

LULA JANE'S

Down-home cooking and sweets; dogs allowed on patio. 406 Elm Street, Waco, TX; (254) 366-0862, lulajanes.com.

VISITOR INFO

(800) 922-6386; wacoheartoftexas.com.



Fido and friends enjoy crossing Waco's historic suspension bridge.