

# TOWN & COUNTRY

## Inside the Easygoing Texas Spa Where Even Butter Is on the Menu

A visit to Lake Austin Spa.



by **JAMIE ROSEN** OCT 24, 2017

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here are two ways to approach **Lake Austin Spa** from the airport: a 45-minute car ride, or a shorter drive followed by a speedboat ride down (or up?) the Colorado River, which in this part of town is also known as Lake Austin, or Lady Bird Lake.

The latter mode of transport is by far the quickest way to get a sense of why this spa remains a destination worth traveling to from around the country: After splashing through a narrow stretch of water dotted by giant lake houses on one side, and little boat- and jet ski-filled sheds on the other (Lance Armstrong is building a home here, and Michael Dell has a 100-acre spread that includes a 9-hole golf course), it seems unlikely that you'll come upon a commercial property. But then you see it: a collection of low-slung, horizontal buildings, hammocks stretched under magnolia trees, and a dock with 20 or so paddleboards ready for the taking. It's more Southern family compound than it is gargantuan resort. And it's clearly all about the lake.



**PADDLEBOARDING ON LAKE AUSTIN**  
COURTESY

Lake Austin Spa opened 20 years ago, and while it recently renovated many of its rooms and its 25,000-square-foot spa, it retains the charm (and antiques-filled decorating style) of an independently-owned hotel.

There is no set agenda for guests: yoga classes, daily hikes, and meals are included in the price, and spa treatments are booked separately. While there is the usual menu of massages and facials, I had an energy-balancing treatment that was done entirely using "healing touch," and a two-hour acupuncture, cupping, and moxibustion tune-up performed by a practitioner who was able to discern quite a lot about me just by taking my pulse.

But by far the most transcendent experience I had while at Lake Austin Spa was on the water. At 7:30 am, I met fitness and activities director Cindy Present at the dock for paddleboard yoga. It was my first time getting on a paddleboard, let alone doing downward dog on top of one, but the boards themselves were surprisingly heavy and easy to balance on (There were about eight of us on the lake, and not a single person went overboard.).

It felt like an experience that is not easily attainable elsewhere, which is really what I want when I travel. It was equal parts restoring and invigorating, something about the sunshine and the mist and the calm water made it all feel like I was more expert than novice, and before I hopped off I began fantasizing about when I could get on a board again.

Joining us in the group was ocean advocate Wallace J. Nichols, author of *The Blue Mind*, a book about the science backing up what I was feeling on the lake: that water really can be therapeutic. It is far from a new idea—it's the premise of ancient Roman and Greek spas, and pretty much every one that has followed since—but he is using research to help those who otherwise may not regularly be in or near the water—children with autism, veterans, survivors of abuse—to reap its benefits.

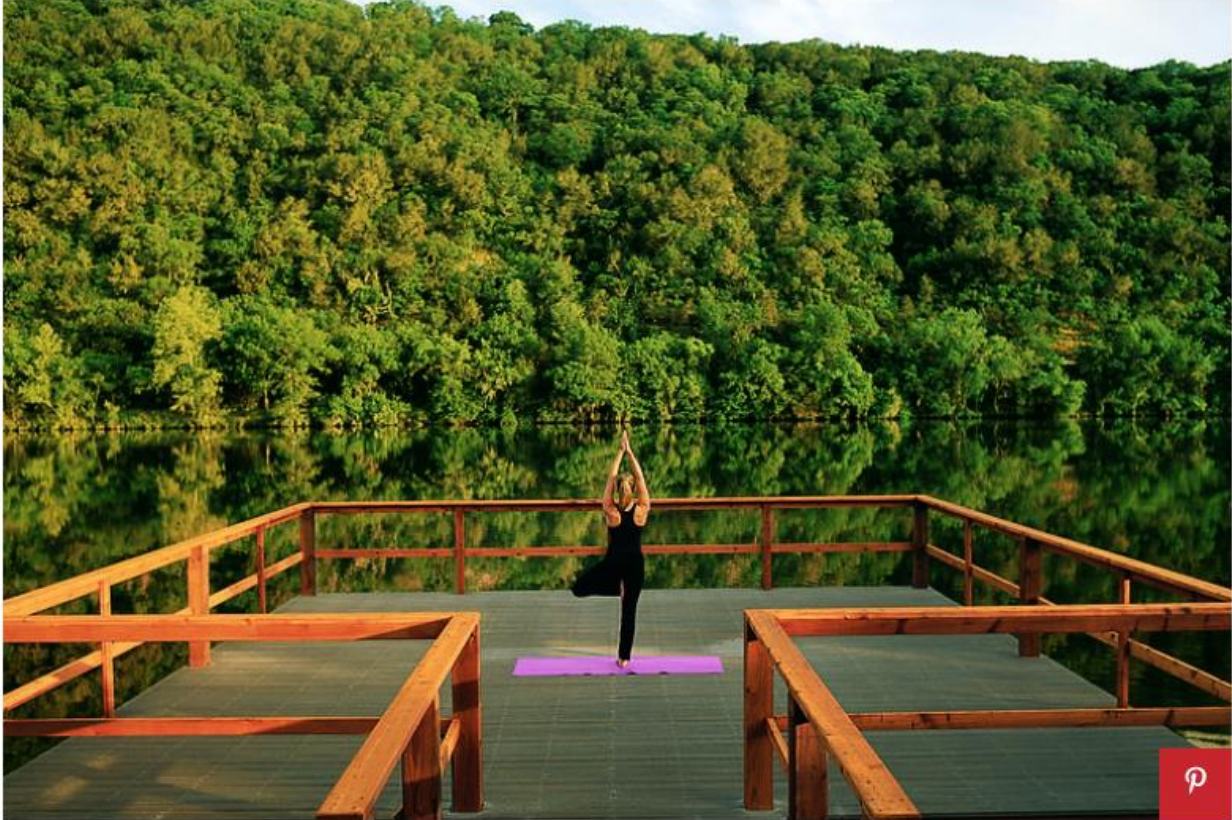


**THE ORGANIC GARDEN AT LAKE AUSTIN SPA**  
COURTESY

One other major aspect of any spa trip is the food; and Lake Austin Spa's philosophy about it is admirable: nothing—not wine, cheese, meat, or dairy—is off limits; and many of its herbs and greens come from an onsite garden. The dishes nod to of-the-moment items like avocado toast and hemp pancakes, and the food tastes delicious first, healthy second.

Upon arrival, chef Stéphane Beaucamp prepared the best thing I ate while there: a watermelon and tomato salad with pistachios and a vinaigrette made by boiling and pureeing an entire meyer lemon. He later shared that his French upbringing and experience working for celebrities in Los Angeles prepared him to consistently evolve the menu and adjust to any dietary need.

While the portions are majorly scaled down from restaurant-size (I could've used more vegetables at most meals, since even they are served in small amounts), there is an unmarked doorbell outside of the kitchen that can be rung at any time of day for a little Dixie cup of frozen yogurt.



**YOGA ON THE DOCK**  
COURTESY

And despite its Texas location, there is not much barbecue in sight. At dinner one night, the new general manager Janis Clapoff, who spent 10 years at San Ysidro Ranch in Montecito, told me that she would happily arrange for guests to go into Austin and hear live music or walk around town (as I'm told several times during my stay, Austin is the live music capital of the country), but that no one ever wants to leave. In a nod to its city's claim, however, I did attend a Yin Yoga class in the spa's treehouse that was accompanied by live guitar. And I can see why nobody wants to leave.

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