

golf getaway

MILL CREEK GOLF RESORT

Step off life's expressway in historic Salado

If you only know of Salado as the halfway point on I35 between Waco and Austin, it's time to take a vacation from life's express lane and sample the historic village's country charm. Schedule a stay at the Stagecoach Inn, built on the site of an old Tankawa Indian village, where storied figures such as Sam Houston, General George Custer and Robert E. Lee, son of General Lee, have stayed. Take a stroll along picturesque Main Street—you'll be surprised to find that Salado is home to over 100 shops, including antique stores, art galleries and gift shops, as well as fine restaurants. It is also home to Mill Creek Golf Club, a 27-hole, Robert Trent Jones, Jr. design that uses the tree-lined Salado Creek to create an enchanting test of golf.



Less than an hour's drive north of Austin, Salado is a fun day trip, but if you have more time, plan an overnight stay or weekend to fully sample the town's charm.

Originally a stop along the Chisholm trail for cattle drives, the Overland Stage and the Pony Express, Salado is built around spring-fed Salado Creek, which flows through the center of town. In fact, wagon wheel ruts are still visible at some points along the bottom of the creek bed, where westward bound settlers, cattlemen and Civil War soldiers made their crossings. The infamous James brothers and the outlaw Sam Bass are rumored to have also spent time here.

Less than an hour's drive north of Austin, Salado is a fun day trip, but if you have more time, plan an overnight stay or weekend to fully sample the town's charm. We drove to Salado early on a Saturday morning, and headed directly to the Mill Creek Golf Club. Our plan was to play 18 holes, then spend the afternoon in town shopping, and return for the other 9 holes the following morning. Mill Creek offers accommodations on-site, which include townhouses, condos and suites, as well as conference facilities, perfect for corporate retreats and business meetings. The golf club is set back in a residential area, accessible through a series of winding roads. Signs clearly point the way to the club all the way from the highway. The final approach to the clubhouse is over a low, single lane bridge that just clears the rushing Salado Creek. The clubhouse is small and informal, we were quickly checked in upon arrival and on our way to the first tee.

A traditional test of golf

Mill Creek's 27 holes provide golfers with a satisfying variety of layouts and terrain to suit the abilities of any golfer. The first nine-hole layout, Creek #1, is a tight, 2,736 yard track with narrow fairways that wind through the trees and crisscross the creek. It is a traditional test of golf with several dogleg holes, strategically placed hazards and small, fast greens. Patience, accuracy and good course management are the keys to scoring well on this track.

The test starts on the first hole, a 368 yard par 5. From the blue and white sets of tees, it's a forced carry, but the forward tees take that water out of play. Aim to land the ball just out by the 150 pole. After that, the fairway runs steeply uphill, with two very large bunkers on the right side of the



Stroll across the bridge that spans Salado Creek, and see the wheel ruts where early settlers made their crossing.

green coming in. It's a narrow approach, with trees on the left and a forced carry over a ditch that crosses the fairway just in front of the hill leading up to the green. There is room to miss behind the green, as long as you carry the ditch and the bunkers in front, you'll be safe.

Increasing the challenges on this course are the rather long par-3 holes. The combination of distance and small, firm greens makes it critical to be able to hit the ball high and land it softly. It's a tough challenge, as many women prefer to hit woods at these distances. For example, the second hole is a 136 yard shot across a ditch just in front of the green. The terrain slopes downhill off the tee box to the ditch, then back uphill to the raised green. Two bunkers guard the front of the green, so anything short will land in trouble. There is plenty of room to miss behind the green, but it slopes from back to front, so depending on pin placement, you might face a tough chip or putt back to the hole.

In recognition of the course's challenging layout, several of the holes are rated differently, depending on which tees you



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play from. For example, the 372 yard fourth hole is a par 4 for the men, and a par 5 for the women. It's designed as a dogleg right and crosses the creek twice. The narrow fairway makes a hard right at the corner, and the creek runs about 100-120 yards in front of the tee box, so you can't hit too short or too long without finding trouble. On the second shot, you'll want to lay up in front of the creek that crosses in front of the green. The creek is wide at this point, and trees guard the approach on the right side of the fairway. There is a slope up behind the green, however, so you can hit it long to carry the creek and let the ball bounce off the slope, back down onto the putting surface.

Coming back to the clubhouse, the ninth is a par 5 from all sets of tees. The first shot is straight off the tee and not much trouble, but be careful where you place your second shot. The fairway doglegs right across the creek at an angle, and it's a long shot from the first fairway to the second across that creek. If you're too far right, you can end up behind the trees on that side of the fairway, too far left and you face a long carry across the creek.

Find relief on Creek #2

The second nine on the Creek #2 course isn't as tight, and has fewer forced carries. The course starts with number 10 according to the tee signs, although it's marked as numbers 1-10 on the score card. Either way, it's a short, straightforward par 4, and it seems a relief to actually see the green at the end of the fairway. The green is a little larger, too.

Number 13 is a long par 5 at 504 yards. The fairway takes a dogleg left, then turns back to the right and crosses the creek before you get to the green. Off the tee, it's better to aim down the right side to avoid the fairway bunker at the turn on the left side. Then, on the second shot, aim back at the left side of the fairway. There is a big oak tree in front of the creek on the right that blocks the approach from that side. Lay up in front of the creek to have a good shot in at the green.

Unlike the first nine, there are some fun, shorter par-3 holes on Creek #2. For example, the third hole presents a 110

yard carry across a ditch to the elevated green, not easy but certainly doable. On number 16, it's a much shorter, 69 yard shot across the creek to the green from the forward tees.

Main Street delights

After our round, it took only five minutes to drive back into town, where we checked in at the historic Stagecoach Inn, originally known as the "Shady Villa." The original building is now the site of the Stagecoach Inn restaurant, while the rooms are situated motel-style next door. In addition to the nearby Mill Creek Golf Club, the Inn offers its own recreational options, including a heated mineral water spa, a large swimming pool, tennis courts, shuffleboard, horseshoes, ping pong, badminton, a grass volleyball court and a playground for children. Guests can also enjoy fishing and wading in nearby Salado Creek.

Take a stroll back down Main Street and shop at the many art galleries, antique stores and retail shops.

Our room was large and comfortable, with a king-sized bed and a roomy closet, spacious bathroom, and an extra vanity with sink just outside the main bathroom. Sliding glass doors opened onto a private balcony overlooking the pool and wooded property below. While the Stagecoach is the largest motel in town, there are also plenty of bed and breakfast inns in Salado.

After checking in, we walked back through the parking lot to Main Street, then crossed the bridge over Salado Creek and up the short hill to the Salado Mansion Restaurant, a charm-

ing venue located in an historic house, with an outdoor patio that serves diners in good weather. Since it was chilly and beginning to rain, the patio was closed, so we were seated in one of several intimate dining rooms that hold only about four to five tables each. The menu features a mix of traditional Mexican fare and a few updates, such as Mexican hot wings. We started with the stuffed jalapeno appetizers, which arrived wonderfully crispy on the outside and stuffed with melted cheddar cheese on the inside. They were very spicy, and not for the faint of palate. They were also quite large—although there were six, we only finished one apiece before moving on to the entrées. We chose the *trés combination*, which in our version consisted of a pork tamale covered in chili con carne, a chicken enchilada with tomatillo sauce, and a crispy, shredded beef taco. The plates were served with the traditional rice and refried beans. The tamales were the standout, they were delicious.

Once we'd satisfied our appetites, we decided to walk off lunch with a stroll back down Main Street to check out the art galleries, antique stores and shops. Directly across the street from the Salado Mansion restaurant is Prellop Art Gallery, owned and operated by local Texas artist, Larry Prellop. The gallery features Prellop's own work, as well as a large selection of oil paintings, Western bronzes and G. Harvey reproductions.

Next door to the gallery is the Strawberry Patch, a gourmet emporium and coffee shop, where you can sample authentic Texas salsas, sauces, dressings and specialty jams from the tasting bars, before stocking up on your favorites. For more gifts, head into Accents of Salado, a seemingly endless maze of rooms where you'll find Tuscan-themed decorative accents and furnishings. There is also an outdoor deck featuring

Remember when you thought golf was a man's game?



The first time you set foot on a golf course, you probably felt this way—a **little nervous**, a lot of **questions**, and more than a little intimidated. Chances are, **a friend showed you the way** down the fairway. Now, you're inviting clients and business partners to play.

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For dessert, try the famous Stagecoach Kiss, a confection of crisp meringue topped with vanilla ice cream and strawberries.

gifts for the garden. If you're hunting for fashion finds, you'll discover unique designs at boutiques such as Alice's or Christy's, and the perfect accessories to match at Gregory's and FSG Fine Jewelry. Crossing the bridge back into town, we wandered into Bird in the Hand, a quaint gift shop where we stumbled across a large collection of StoryPeople prints. If you've never seen these whimsical creations by artist Brian Andreas, do yourself a favor and log onto www.storypeople.com. His work perfectly captures the odd musings that often play in your head, but that you never dare to say out loud. There seems to be a Story People moment for every personality, and they make perfect gifts for your friends and family.

Old West hospitality

After several hours of shopping, we headed over to the Stagecoach Inn Restaurant for dinner. On a Saturday night, the dining rooms were all packed. The original building is complemented by an open-air atrium, built around a live, 500-year-old burr oak. Newer dining rooms adjoining the original two-story, clapboard-sided building can serve more than 300 guests. The main dining room is decorated with traditional country charm, with dark green floral wall paper, wooden furniture and floral curtains. It gives the feeling that you've just wandered into an old friend's home. There are separate rooms for private parties, including one named the Sam Houston Room. Upstairs, there is a private bar for Inn guests, with a big-screen TV

in the corner. Salado is a dry town, so while you can order wine and alcoholic drinks with dinner or at the club, if you are celebrating a special event or want a bottle for your room, bringing your own wine is a good idea.

The restaurant's traditional Texas meals are built around original farm and ranch recipes adapted by Ruth Van Biber, when she and her husband, Dion, restored the abandoned Shady Villa Hotel some 40 years ago. The service is as down-home as the menu—dinner is served by friendly waitresses who recite the menu from memory. The western-themed fare includes fried chicken, sugar baked ham, fried catfish and chicken-fried steak, as well as lighter options such as filet mignon, grilled chicken breast and salmon. Steak lovers can choose from a selection of prime rib, filet mignon, ribeye and t-bone cuts. All of the entrees include a choice of shrimp cocktail or fresh fruit cocktail, salad, hushpuppies and fresh vegetable. For dessert, try the famous Stagecoach Kiss, a confection of crisp meringue topped with vanilla ice cream and strawberries. It is their signature dessert, and the perfect way to end a meal.

The final nine

The next morning, we got off to a good start with the Sunday breakfast buffet at the Inn's full-service coffee shop, featuring scrambled eggs, bacon, sausage, biscuits and gravy, pancakes and plenty of fresh fruit. We arrived at Mill Creek Golf Club fully caffeinated and ready to tackle the club's newest nine: Creek #3.



This course has more elevation changes than the other two, and like Creek #2, it is more open than Creek #1 and a bit friendlier. For example, the starting hole offers a straight look down the broad fairway, no sharp doglegs or creek crossings here. On the par-3 third hole, you have an easy, downhill shot from the elevated tee box to the green, with not a whole lot of trouble in sight.

It's not all easy-does-it, however. Another elevated tee box awaits on the par-4 fifth hole, offering a beautiful view of the fairway below. A large water hazard shimmers on the left, directly across from the fairway bunker on the right. Place your tee shot carefully just short and midway between the two for a safe landing. You have to drive back up the opposite side of the hole to get to the number 6 tee box—the two holes share a double green. Another par 3 on number eight runs 116 yards downhill to the green.



More to do

If you're in a hurry, the Mill Creek clubhouse provides the standard clubhouse fare, such as hamburgers, sandwiches and hot dogs, in a no-frills setting. But if you have more time, make the short drive back into town for one last meal at one of the many fine restaurants there, including Browning's Courtyard Café, the Ambrosia Tea Room or, for more upscale dining, the Range at the Barton House, which has been featured in *Bon Appetit*, *Texas Monthly* and *Southern Living* magazines. Take a horsedrawn carriage ride, or create your own works of art at Mud Pies Pottery. With so much to discover, you'll soon be planning your return back in time to quaint, historic Salado. 

To find out more about Salado, including a list of shops and bed and breakfast inns, visit www.salado.com.

WOMEN'S GOLF TEXAS

About Mill Creek Golf Resort

CREEK #1 COURSE

Par: 37 Length: 2,736
Slope: 123 Rating: 71.3

CREEK #2 COURSE

Par: 36 Length: 2,514
Slope: 123 Rating: 71.4

CREEK #3 COURSE

Par: 34 Length: 2,503
Slope: 116 Rating: 69.1

GUEST FEES

Mon-Thurs: \$49 + \$15 cart fee
Fri-Sun: \$59 + \$15 cart fee

HOTEL & PACKAGE GUEST FEE

Mon-Sun: \$29

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