

San Antonio First-Timer Checklist

San Antonio is friendly to first-timers. The big sights sit close together downtown, several of the best ones are free, and you can skip the rental car for most of a short trip. What catches people out are the small things: the Alamo needs a reservation even though it's free, city garages only take cards, and the heat can wreck a midday mission visit.

Here's the full checklist we'd hand a friend. Every price and rule below was checked against official sites in October 2026. Things change, so use the linked pages to confirm before you go.

Before you go

- ☐ **Pick your base.** Staying near the River Walk or Alamo Plaza puts most first-trip sights within walking distance. See where to stay.
- ☐ **Check what's happening.** Big events like Fiesta, conventions and New Year's Eve raise city parking to an event rate. Look at this weekend before you lock in dates.
- ☐ **Sketch a loose plan.** Three days is plenty for downtown, the missions and one day trip. Our 3-day itinerary has a ready-made version.
- ☐ **Download two apps:** the **SAPark** app for paying street meters by phone, and VIA's **goMobile+** app for bus fares.
- ☐ **Coming in late November?** The 2026 Ford Holiday River Parade is Friday, Nov. 27, at 6 p.m., and parts of the River Walk path close that afternoon for parade seating. Our River Walk guide has the details.
- ☐ **Set a rough daily budget** for food, attractions and getting around. Three to four days is a comfortable first visit.

Booking checklist

- ☐ **Alamo Church entry (free, reservation required).** Reserve a timed ticket on the Alamo's site or at the Welcome Center. The Alamo is open daily from 9 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. and closed December 25.
- ☐ **Optional Alamo upgrade.** The guided *Remember the Alamo* tour costs about \$48 for adults and \$38 for kids 12 and under. The self-guided audio experience costs about \$20 and \$18 (as of October 2026). Changes need one business day's notice, and no-shows aren't refunded.
- ☐ **Small-group tours and day trips.** Hill Country wine tours and van mission tours cap groups at about 10, so book these first. Compare options in our best tours roundup.
- ☐ **River cruise: no booking needed.** Go Rio tickets aren't tied to a date or time, and boats leave about every 15 minutes. Large groups should call ahead.
- ☐ **Thinking about CityPASS?** It covers four attractions over nine days, including the Alamo Exhibit and a Go Rio cruise, for about \$63 for adults and \$53 for kids 3 to 11 (as of October 2026). It's worth doing the math if you'll visit at least three of the attractions.

Packing checklist

- ☐ **Refillable water bottle.** The missions don't sell single-use plastic water bottles, but every mission site has refill stations (NPS).
- ☐ **Hat, sunglasses and sunscreen.** Most of the Alamo site is outdoors. NPS notes temperatures can rise quickly at any time of year and often go above 103°F in summer.

- ☐ **Bug spray.** The Alamo's own list suggests it.
- ☐ **Comfortable walking shoes** for the River Walk, the mission grounds and any walking tour.
- ☐ **A small umbrella** for shade or a sudden storm.
- ☐ **A credit card.** City parking garages and lots don't accept cash.
- ☐ **Clothes without offensive slogans.** The Alamo's Rules of Reverence don't allow them.
- ☐ **Light layers and a sweater.** Restaurants and museums often run cold, and evenings cool off in winter.
- ☐ **One nicer outfit** for a dinner out, and a swimsuit if your hotel has a pool.
- ☐ **A power bank and a small day bag.** You'll use your phone for maps, tickets and photos all day.

Want the full list by season? See what to pack for San Antonio.

On arrival

- ☐ **Airport to downtown by bus:** VIA Route 5 leaves from the far west end of Terminal B on the lower (arrivals) roadway and takes about 30 minutes to downtown for \$1.30 (SAT airport).
- ☐ **Buy a VIA Day Pass (\$2.75)** if you'll ride more than twice. Day Passes are sold on the bus, and transfers are free within 2.5 hours (VIA fares).
- ☐ **Driving? Don't plan to park at the Alamo.** It has no lot. Drop passengers on Houston Street at Avenue E, then use a city garage.
- ☐ **Save your hotel address and confirmations offline,** plus offline maps of downtown.
- ☐ **Find a Go Rio dock** (Rivercenter, Historia or Aztec) for a 35-minute orientation cruise on your first afternoon.

Getting around

- ☐ **Walk plus rideshare covers most first trips.** Uber and Lyft both operate in San Antonio; rent a car only if you're planning Hill Country day trips.
- ☐ **Walk downtown.** The River Walk technically never closes, though most restaurants along it close around 10 p.m.
- ☐ **Know the parking rules.** Street meters cost about \$1.80 an hour and are enforced Monday through Saturday, 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. They're free after 6 p.m. and all day Sunday. City garages and lots charge about \$2 to \$10 a day (SAPark).
- ☐ **No in-and-out parking** at city facilities, so if you leave, you pay again.
- ☐ **Missions by car, bike or tour.** Mission Concepción is about 3 miles south of downtown, and the missions are spaced 2.5 to 3 miles apart. The Mission Reach Hike & Bike Trail connects them. It's out-and-back, so plan for the return ride.

Must-dos for a first trip

- ☐ **The Alamo Church** with a reserved ticket. Leave 30 minutes to an hour for the Church and grounds. Hats come off inside, and flash photography isn't allowed.
- ☐ **Musket-firing demonstration** in Plaza de Valero at 11:30 a.m. daily. It's free and takes 15 minutes.
- ☐ **A River Walk cruise** with Go Rio (35 minutes, daily from 10 a.m. to 10 p.m. most of the year). Our River Walk guide covers the rest.
- ☐ **Mission San José,** the park's visitor center, for a free ranger program at 10 or 11 a.m.

- ☐ **One more mission**, like Concepción, which NPS calls the nation's oldest unrestored stone church.
- ☐ **A Tex-Mex or barbecue meal**. Start with our food guide.
- ☐ **One neighborhood beyond downtown**: the Pearl, Southtown or King William.
- ☐ **Leave one flexible afternoon**. Have a backup for a rainy or very hot day, like a museum or the Pearl's shops.

More history? Our Alamo & missions guide goes deeper.

Food and drink

- ☐ **Try breakfast tacos** at least once. It's how the city starts the day.
- ☐ **Pick two or three restaurants ahead of time**, and reserve one nicer dinner. Popular spots fill up on weekends.
- ☐ **Check hours before you go**. Some places close earlier on weeknights, and Mi Tierra is no longer open 24 hours.
- ☐ **Carry a little cash** for tips and small vendors, even though most places take cards.

Money-savers

- ☐ **Free**: Alamo Church entry, the Alamo film *Crossroads of History* (shown daily from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.), the River Walk itself, and San Antonio Missions National Historical Park.
- ☐ **\$5 parking at St. Mary's Garage** (205 E. Travis St.) after 5 p.m. on weeknights and all day Saturday and Sunday. The event rate is \$15 when it applies.
- ☐ **Free Sunday parking** at City Tower Garage (60 N. Flores St.) from 7 a.m. to midnight.
- ☐ **Free Thursday-night parking**: "Downtown Thursday" makes city-owned garages free from 5 p.m. to 2 a.m. every Thursday through the end of 2026, with some exclusions such as convention and Majestic Theatre show nights.
- ☐ **Take the \$1.30 bus** from the airport instead of a cab.
- ☐ **Military discounts** are offered by Go Rio for active, retired and veteran service members and their families, and the Alamo offers military and senior (65+) discounts.

Prices and rules checked against official sites in October 2026; confirm before you go. More guides at SanAntonioTravel.com. Independent resource, not affiliated with Visit San Antonio or any official tourism office.