

Roundel

MAY 2011



WON TWO!

COVER

The BMW Team RLL M3s are back on the cover in their new livery—but this time it's for winning Sebring. **JON VAN WOERDEN**

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Roundel (ISSN 0899-3225) is published monthly by the BMW Car Club of America, Inc., a not-for-profit South Carolina corporation, 640 South Main Street, Suite 201, Greenville, SC 29601.

BMW CCA national dues are \$48 per year, of which \$15 is for *Roundel*. Periodicals postage paid at Greenville, SC, and at additional mailing offices. Copyright © 2011. All rights reserved. Reproduction without permission is prohibited.

Postmaster:

Send address changes to *Roundel*, BMW CCA, Inc., 640 South Main St., Ste 201, Greenville, SC 29601.

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Michael Slatt, *Roundel* Ad Rep., 22 Woburn St., Ste 36, Reading, MA 01867; 781 944-3900; 781 944-3901 (fax); michael@131main.com

Editorial Office:

Satch Carlson, 8629 Via Mallorca Unit F, La Jolla, CA 92037-9017; satch@roundel.org

To Reach Us:

[first initial]@roundel.org

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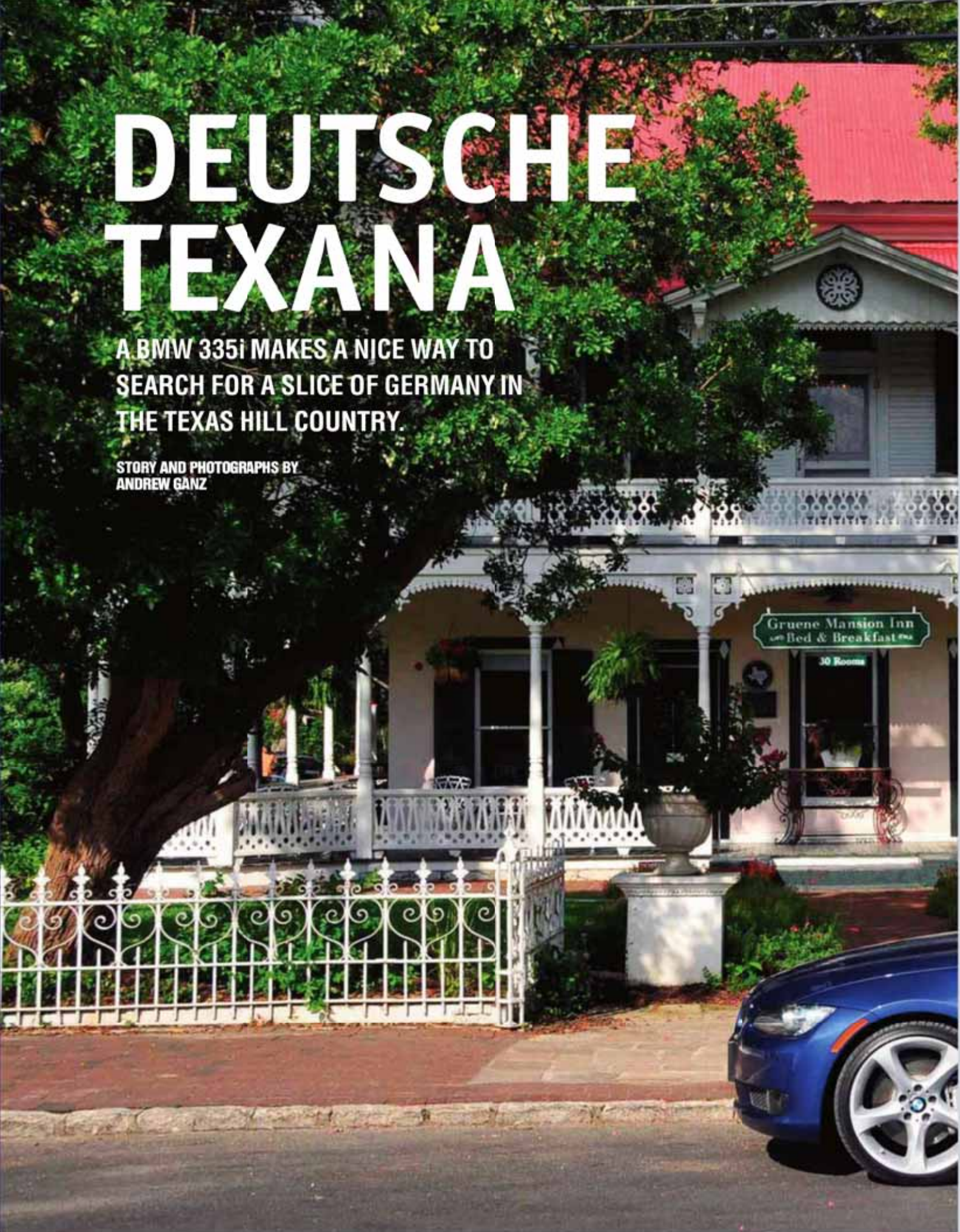


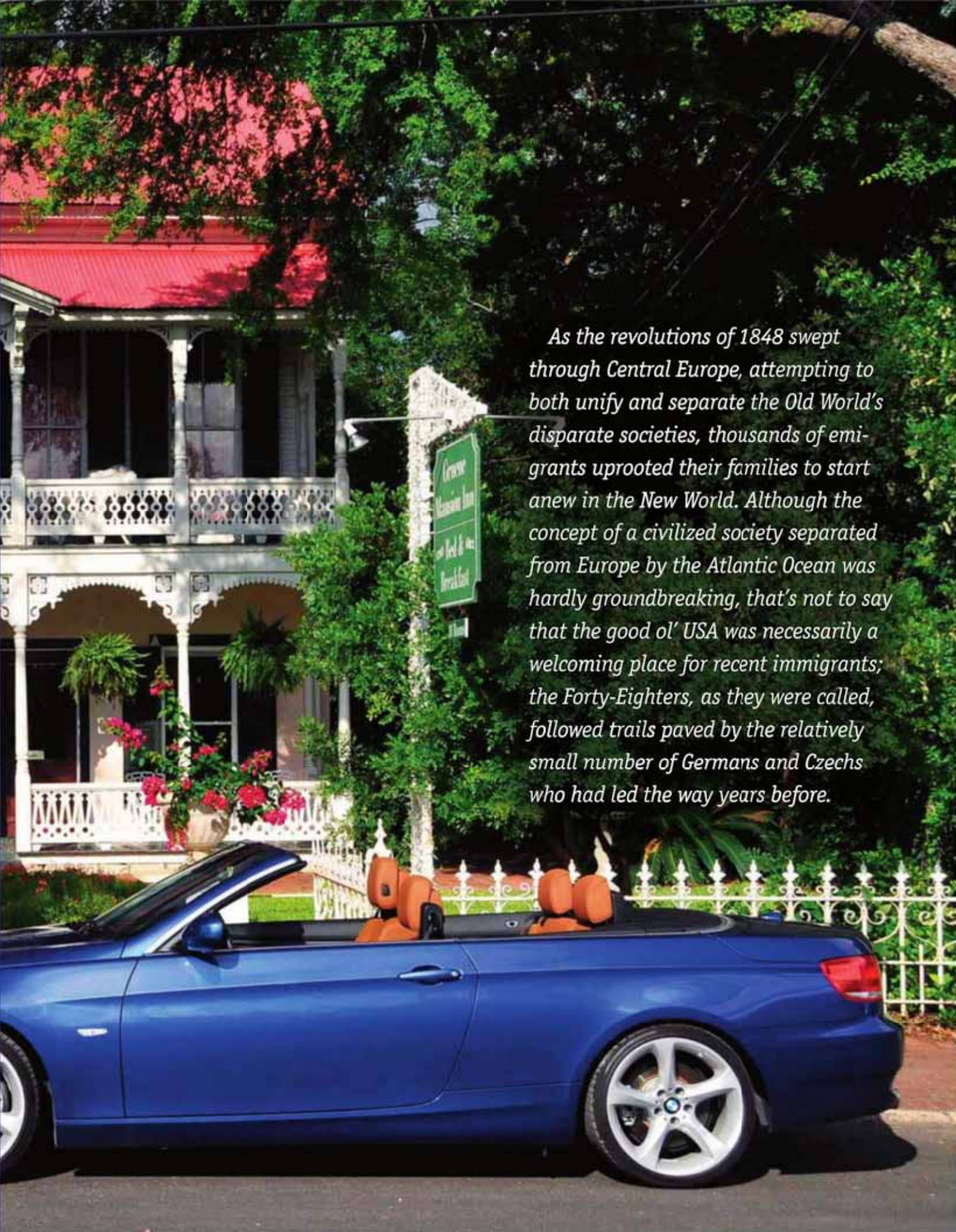
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DEUTSCHE TEXANA

A BMW 335i MAKES A NICE WAY TO
SEARCH FOR A SLICE OF GERMANY IN
THE TEXAS HILL COUNTRY.

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY
ANDREW GANZ





As the revolutions of 1848 swept through Central Europe, attempting to both unify and separate the Old World's disparate societies, thousands of emigrants uprooted their families to start anew in the New World. Although the concept of a civilized society separated from Europe by the Atlantic Ocean was hardly groundbreaking, that's not to say that the good ol' USA was necessarily a welcoming place for recent immigrants; the Forty-Eighters, as they were called, followed trails paved by the relatively small number of Germans and Czechs who had led the way years before.



While sparse—but distinctly German and Czech—settlements had popped up all over North America since early days of colonization, the rush of Forty-Eighters ballooned these villages into *bona fide* Germanic-feeling regions with a unique culture of their own—and traces of that culture still flourish, a century and a half later.

It may seem odd to discover that one flourishing center of German culture grew in the heart of the Lone Star State, but it's true. So to set out on our quest for a uniquely German culture—and a few good roads—we loaded a 2010 335i convertible for a trip to one of the best-preserved and most unique early German settlements: Gruene, Texas.

Statehood was still a novelty in Texas back in 1872, when German settlers Ernst and Antoinette Gruene (pronounced like the color: green) purchased fertile land along the Guadalupe River about halfway between the young capital of Austin and the diverse city of San Antonio. A few years later, Ernst's son, Heinrich, opened up a mercantile store, and the settlement became a relatively prosperous town, thanks to its location along a stagecoach route.

Nestled near the eastern boundary of Texas' rolling and scenic Hill Country, Gruene stands today as a restored and preserved Texas tourist destination—however, like many of the small and less tourist-oriented towns of the Hill Country, it remains distinctly German. Unlike many existing settlements, Gruene wasn't long-lived; a boll-weevil infestation killed



nearby cotton fields, and the city never recovered following the Great Depression. Its story would have ended 80 years ago, if not for the perseverance of its best-known landmark, Gruene Hall.

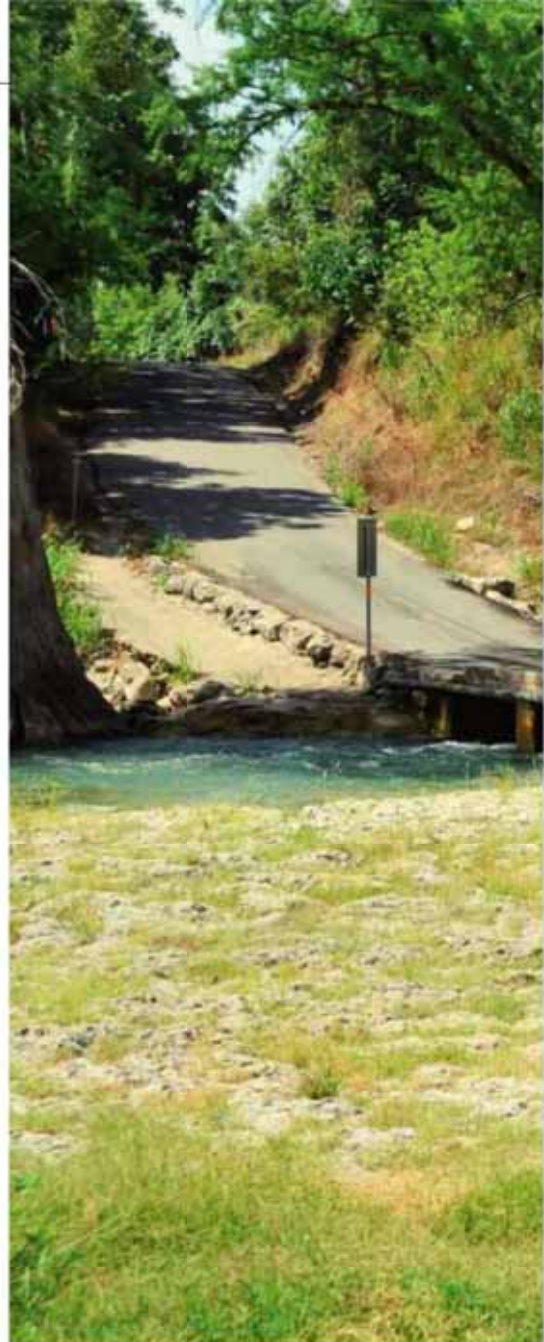
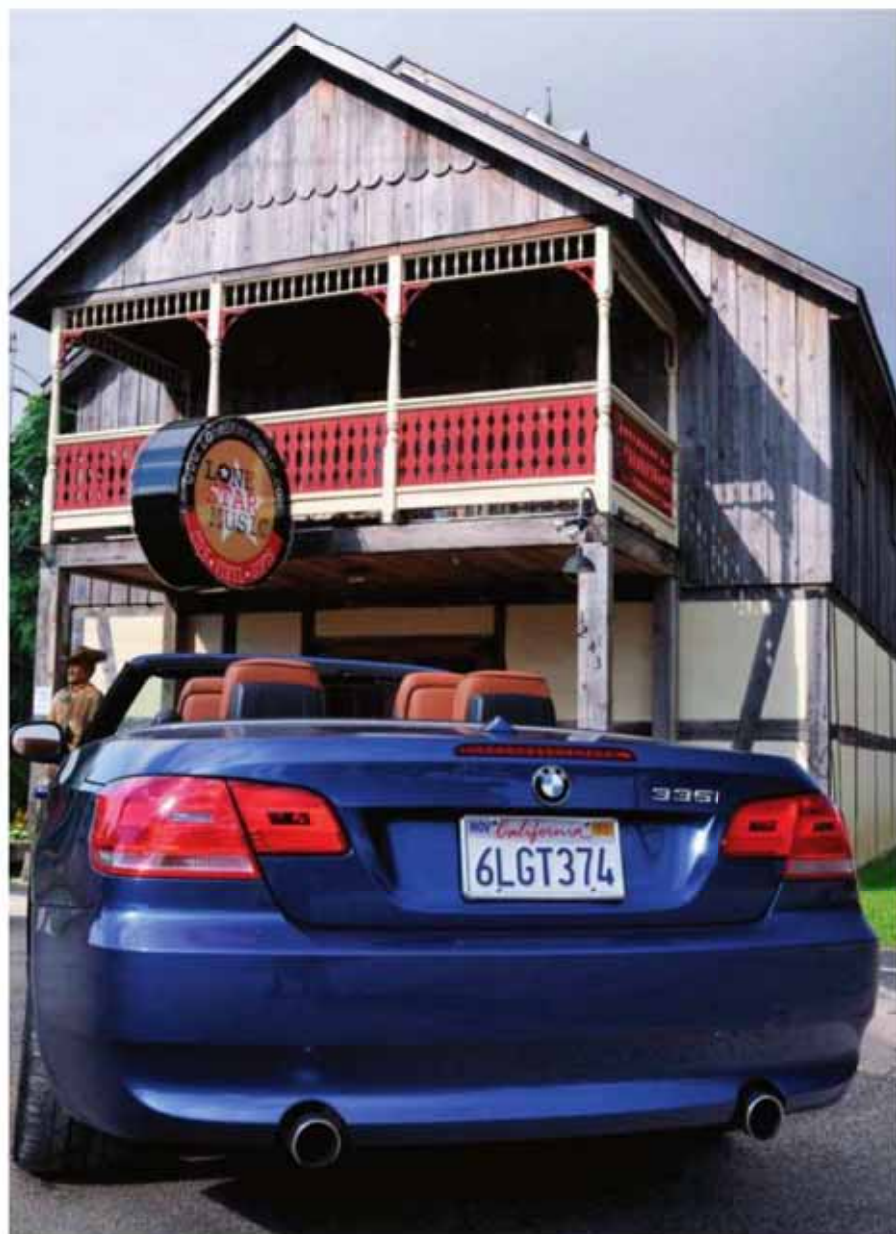
Broadly considered Texas' oldest continually operating dance hall, Gruene Hall is more than just a place to gather for some tunes. For many musicians, playing at Gruene Hall is akin to a Nashville star performing at the Grand Ole Opry. Simply put, Gruene Hall is such a big deal that award-winning artists record live performances at the venue. It offers history and intimacy in a distinctly Texan setting.

Whitewashed Gruene Hall has looked and felt mostly the same since it was built in 1878 as a place for tired ranch hands and cowboys to slick up and impress their ladies. If only the walls could talk, they would speak of as many whiskey-fueled rowdy bar fights as they would cowboys showing their soft side to the tune of a plucking guitar.

FLIRTING WITH THE OLD WORLD

With these romantic cowboy images in mind, we arrived on a steamy and unusually humid June afternoon at the historic Gruene Mansion Inn. Located within listening distance of Gruene Hall, and an easy stroll from the village's myriad antiques and arts-and-crafts shops, the bed-and-breakfast makes an ideal resting point. Once the home of Heinrich D. Gruene—better known to his contemporaries as HD—the Victorian mansion now serves duty as a luxurious, yet rustic, bed-and-breakfast inn. Our room was meticulously decorated in period antiques and offered a supreme view of the Guadalupe River that borders the town.

We parked the 335i for the evening with the anticipation of taking it out to explore some of the Hill Country's legendary roads the next morning. We didn't have the only 335i convertible in the lot, however; while our car was part of BMW's press fleet, a matching black 2009 belonged to a couple



who made the journey from Houston in similar comfort. Though their drop-top was burdened with an automatic—uh-oh!—they promised us that its sport suspension would see good use the next day.

The two 335i's were hardly the only German-inspired residents of Gruene that weekend, either. Consisting of a pair of main cross streets filled with rustic, Victorian homes converted into shops, Gruene doesn't look outwardly German, but the aura of a uniquely Texan take on Germany is there. Eschewing the tacky fake lederhosen-clad tourist interpretations of German-American culture seen elsewhere, Gruene gives visitors a taste of a real German-Texan frontier settlement. Antique and crafts stores sell locally made goods that, while hardly inexpensive, don't scream "tourist trap," either. My better half found just enough home accents to test the 335i's load-carrying capacity to the max!



As evening approached and the blistering sun made its retreat, we made our way to Gruen's historic Gristmill River restaurant. Specializing mostly in Texas favorites, the menu does offer a few German-inspired dishes. There's no air-conditioning at the Gristmill—itself what remains of a three-story brick boiler room—but any summer discomfort was alleviated by the shockingly cheap Shiner Bock longnecks that the waiter kept bringing and bringing.

Once a Texas-only product, the Spoetzel brewery's flagship bock beer has become a national sensation. Like Gruene, it takes a German tradition and adds a dose of Texana for an addictive flavor. Good thing the 335i sat at the hotel!

A few Shiners later—the libation variety, not the bar-fight-result type—we stumbled over to the famous Gruene Hall. In summer, the honky-tonk is a hot and sweaty place, but that's just how the locals like it.

On any given afternoon, you'll find Texans pulled up to the bar, throwing back Shiners and the occasional Lone Star longneck as they discuss anything important in their world. Almost every night, however, a major or up-and-coming musician headlines the place. Check schedule wisely, should you decide to repeat our journey; musicians visiting nearby Austin's well-known music scene almost always find a way to squeeze in Gruene Hall. The experience is close to nirvana, if you're the kind of person who understands that there's a lot more to country music than what Nashville cranks out on your local FM station.

THE STAGECOACH TRAIL

After a wild night—with perhaps a Shiner or two too many—we could easily have slept in. But the aroma of fresh-baked German pastries and cakes had us up early to sample the Gruene Mansion Inn's finest

wares. Ready to roll with full stomachs, we dropped the folding-metal hardtop on the 335i and slipped BMW's oh-so-glorious six-speed stick into gear and headed off to explore the area's roads.

We could easily have spent a week cruising the canyons and soft inclines that compose the Texas Hill Country, but our goal was to take in a nice morning cruise before heading back to the big city. Repeat this trip with an overnight stay in Fredericksburg if you're looking for even more Germania in Texas. Texas Highway 46 leaves New Braunfels in the direction of Bergheim, but we deviated halfway onto Rebecca Creek Road. While Rebecca Creek is a mere fifteen miles, it begs to be repeated over and over; at any given point during the day, you're likely to be the only car on this super-smooth pavement, and only the most ardent Prius driver would not find delight in the abundance of switchbacks.



Our 335i, equipped with the optional sport package—the only way BMWs should be delivered—was a happy companion. No doubt typically relegated to the big city, it enjoyed the chance to stretch its legs—and its turbo inline six, which happily spooled up with a glorious growl that echoed off of the canyon walls.

From Rebecca Creek Road, we turned east onto Ranch-to-Market Road 306 (small roads in West Texas are nearly always beautifully paved, so if you're planning a trip, we recommend traversing farm-to-market and ranch-to-market roads almost exclusively). Eventually, we stumbled onto River Road, which would conclude our trip with a slow-going, but tremendously scenic cruise back into Gruene along the Guadalupe River. A popular destination with the region's college kids—remember that the University of Texas' premier campus in Austin is a short drive away—the river is positively packed with inner-tubers when the temperatures exceed 85°F.

River Road dumps out into Gruene, but if you're interested in extending your trip, double back to Ranch-to-Market Road 1376, which winds its way through elevation changes to the tiny post office that serves Luckebach, a German settlement made famous by Waylon (Jennings), Willie (Nelson), and the gang. From Luckenbach, it's only a few minutes to Fredericksburg—but that's another road trip on its own.

For a weekend getaway, a night in Gruene was all we needed to slow our pace and step back in time to a uniquely Texan-German culture that persists to this day. ♦

