

Did you know there's a Valentine, Texas? Yup! It's the only incorporated area in Jeff Davis County (located in far West Texas, near Fort Davis). And with a population of 187, it's practically a Ghost Town. However, it's big enough to handle a slew of Valentine's that folks send to have their special someone receive a Valentine postmarked in Valentine! If you're interested, all you have to do is send the Valentine inside another envelope to Postmaster, Valentine, TX 79854. It must be addressed and stamped. They'll take care of the rest for you!

Painted Churches of Texas

Since we already published the best roads in the area for riding – the Fort Davis Loop map (August 2009), I tried to find something new. When you think of Valentine's Day, you think of love... when you think of love you think of marriage... and when you think of marriage (following me here?), you think of churches. I found a great little day ride around Central Texas, between Austin, Houston, and San Antonio, visiting the Painted Churches of Texas.

There are about 20 painted churches in Texas; 15 of which are listed on the National Register of Historic Sites. The ones on our map are the most popular concentration of seven of these beauties. They are located in and around Schulenburg, a well-known German cultural highlight in the state. Most of these churches were built by Czech immigrants around the turn of the Century (late 1800s/early 1900s).

So just what is considered a Painted Church? They look like your normal, ordinary church with arched, stained glass windows and high steeples. But inside, the wooden planks are adorned with grandeur you don't expect from the outside. Almost every wall and nook is brilliantly painted with murals, tromp l'oeil, and faux painted stone or brick. The painting takes these churches of modest means and makes them grand halls that remind the parishioners of their homeland. Many of these churches are the second or third ones built. Many of the originals were either consumed in fires or damaged beyond repair by the hurricane in 1909. If you're out on your own, many of these churches are only open during services. However, many of these churches open their doors for scheduled tours. Contact the Schulenburg Chamber of Commerce to schedule one for your group.

The paintings aren't just "pretty". Many of the images are symbolic, with much more meaning if you look closely. For example, the "all seeing eye"; this symbol is very commonly used in churches, as well as many other places (like our \$1 bill!). Generally, it a reminder that God is watching over us. Many utilize the initials IHS, referring to the name of Jesus and images of a lamb, also referring to Jesus as the Lamb of God.

1 On our map, we start in Shiner, with the Saints Cyril and Methodius Church built in 1919; painted in 1945 by unknown artists (probably members of the community). Most of the painting is in the altar area. It is of blue sky and angels that rise up over the altar, into the domed area. Up in the dome is imagery of Jesus rising to the heavens after his death. Circling the dome around the top edge is a series of stained glass windows; also a common element in these houses of worship. Columns are painted to look like marble, complete with gold leafed toppers.

2 Head out of Shiner on Highway 95 North toward Flatonia. In Flatonia, turn right (east) on Hwy 90. About three miles out of Flatonia, go right on FM 1295. This takes you into what used to be known as Praha, the Czech spelling for Prague. Saint Mary's Church of the Assumption sits atop a hill surrounded by old oak trees. Built in 1895, it is one of the oldest painted churches. Swiss-born artist, Gottfried Flury from nearby Moulton painted most of the interior. In later years, Father Netardus (pastor at the church) added his hand, as did Gene A. Mikulik, a parishioner. It is full of elaborate trompe l'oeil, tricking the eye to see what appears to be an open air



The Painted Churches appear unassuming as you approach them, but as you enter the front doors prepare to have your breath taken away by the beauty found inside.



RIDE MAP

cathedral, with elaborately carved stone decoration and faux arches. This is one of the more elaborately painted churches on our tour.

the original artist. Additionally, Gene A. Mikulik, who worked on maintaining the paintings in the area churches, assisted in restoring the paintings in this church as well.

3 Go back out to Highway 90 and continue traveling east toward Schulenburg. Just before entering the historic downtown, take a left on FM 2672. This takes you into High Hill, with Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary Catholic Church on the right. It is one of the first churches built by renowned Texas architect, Leo M.J. Dielmann (1906). The interior painting was completed by Ferdinand Stockert and Hermann Kern in 1912; both parishioners of the church. They used a different technique; they painted first on canvas, and then glued them to the wooden walls.

6 When leaving this church, go back out to FM 1383, turn left. About 3.5 miles, turn right on Highway 77 North; travel north, through La Grange. In the small town of Warda, turn left on FM 1482, which will turn into Warda Blacktop Road, the becomes County Road 214. At FM 448, go right for about 1 mile, then left on County Road 211. At about 1.5 miles, the road takes a right sweeping curve, at which, the church is on the right side of the road. St. Paul's Lutheran Church was completed in 1871, by Wendish immigrants from Hamburg, Germany and is the original church building. The Wends were descended from a group of Slavic tribes that developed a unique common language. The Texas Wendish Heritage Museum is nearby if you're interested in finding out more. Boasting the tallest pulpit in Texas (20 feet above the lower floor), this "double-decker" interior comes from the long tradition of seating women and children (on the floor) separately from the men (in the balcony). This church is one of the oldest continually operating churches in America. In January 2012, they completed renovations to the church, including touching up with wall and ceiling paintings from 1906. The ceiling is a vibrant blue and the columns are painted to look like marble.

4 Leaving the church, go right on FM 2672 and take the first right onto High Hill Road, which will become FM 615 about 1.5 miles out. Continue onto Piano Bridge Road (note: not a paved road). You will cross over the historic Piano Bridge, built in 1885, one of the few remaining iron bridges in Fayette County. On the left, as you come up to FM 1383, the second Saints Cyril and Methodius Church will be on your left. This building was designed by Leo Dielmann as well, after the original church (built 1877) was destroyed by the hurricane. From the ruins of the old church, the old iron cross, forged by freed slave and blacksmith, Tom Lee, was salvaged. This old cross was once again atop the church's steeple. There are no records of who originally painted the interior and it was lost when the interior was whitewashed in the 1950s. In the 1980s, the church was restored and the original paintings were discovered, as were some of the original stencils. The ceiling is a bright blue sky with glistening silver stars. Colorful angels adorn the arches, as to painted vines, faux marble columns, and other decorative elements.

7 Off to our last church... you continue on County Road 211 (right turn out of the church), quickly taking a right at the fork to pick up County Road 212. At FM 2239, go right for less than a mile, then left on FM 448. In Giddings, take a right on Highway 290 East. Past Ledbetter, before reaching Burton, go right on FM 2302. At FM 332, take a right to remain on 2502. The first street on the left is Wesley Church Lane. After turning left, the road Wesley Brethren Church is about half a mile back on the left. The building is a modest former schoolhouse, built in 1866. The interior was painted by Czech immigrant and pastor, Reverend Bohuslav Laciak in 1889. This church is very different from the others. Smaller, all wooden structure, and the pastor attempted trompe l'oeil to mimicking a basilica-style church with faux brick walls and columns, as well as geometric decorative patterns. Also different at this church, the painting is incomplete, as Laciak was accidentally shot in a hunting accident.

5 Head out toward FM 1383 and turn left. After a leisurely 90 degree curve, take a left on Mensik Road. On the left will be St. John the Baptist Catholic Church. Referred to as the "pink church" the entire interior is bathed in a rose-colored background with hand painted decorative elements that are relatively simple on the ceiling to very ornate on the walls. Built in 1918, third after a hurricane and fire took the first two, and painted in 1919. The identity of the painter was lost until the 1970s/1980s, when an interior design professor compared the art of various churches and determined that Fred Donecker was



4 Sts Cyril & Methodius-Dubina



5 St John the Baptist Catholic



6 St Paul Lutheran



1 Church of the Assumption



3 Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary



7 Wesley Brethren



RIDE MAP