

Go for the Alamo, stay for the Gap

Mission may be state's No. 1 tourist attraction, but mall next door gets four times the visitors

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By DAVID McLEMORE / The Dallas Morning News

SAN ANTONIO – Pop quiz: What is the most visited site in this city that thrives on tourism? The Alamo? Wrong answer.

It's a shopping center – specifically RiverCenter Mall, which lies snugly between the Alamo and the River Walk. Each year, RiverCenter records 19 million entrances and exits, and mall officials estimate the actual visitor count around 11 million, roughly the population of Greece.

The Alamo, designated nearly every year as the No. 1 tourist attraction in Texas, records about 2.5 million visitors each year. Of course, you can't get pizza or Starbucks at the Alamo.

"Everyone goes to see the Alamo – once," said Christian Oviatt, RiverCenter general manager. "But we are constantly finding ways to change the mix of offerings to attract visitors. It's a unique experience. There's a hotel, shopping and food, two movie theaters and live music at the river level. And it's all air-conditioned."

James Farrell, director of American studies at St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minn., studies malls. His book, *One Nation Under Goods: Malls and the Seduction of America*, explores the nation's fascination with malls.

"When people travel, they seek out the familiar as respite against all the new. And there's nothing more familiar in this country than a shopping mall," Dr. Farrell said. "In any state, the most visited place is a mall."

In addition to providing rest from the unfamiliar, malls also take care of our shopping addiction, he said.

"Shopping is a pleasurable experience for many people; there's actually a hormonal release that makes us feel good. For some, shopping is a vacation," Dr. Farrell said. "And the mall operators know that and spare little expense in market research to get them inside to shop."

That ranges from carefully designed lighting to the color schemes and arrangement of shops, food courts and parking.

"Everyone can take a break, eat something familiar and find something to do," Dr. Farrell said. "And I'd imagine that in the Texas heat, the air conditioning is a pretty attractive thing."

Tourism in Texas is a \$41.2 billion industry. And last year, San Antonio had five of the top 10 attractions, according to the governor's office on economic development and tourism, which maintains mountains of visitor travel data.

There were 21.3 million visitors to San Antonio in 2004, with 9.1 million of those staying one night or longer and spending an average of \$92 a day. The city's 504,200 convention attendees last year spent about \$524.5 million. At



J. MICHAEL SHORT/Special Contributor

Part of San Antonio's River Walk feeds directly into the RiverCenter Mall. The mall gets about 11 million visitors a year, compared with the Alamo's 2.5 million.

RiverCenter, visitors spent an average of \$104 in purchases at the mall.

An extension of the River Walk, the river running through San Antonio, feeds directly into a landscaped section of the food court. Folks can eat their gyros or DQ Beltbusters to the accompaniment of a man playing Andean pipes and watch tour boats make a U-turn for their return trip downriver.

"That's the kind of thing that brings people back," Mr. Oviatt said. His research shows that for every 10 visitors who go downtown, RiverCenter will get nine of them.

This year, the 17-year-old RiverCenter acquired new owners, the New York-based Ashkenazy Acquisition Corp. They are committed to a renovation plan that will expand the mall's entertainment aspects.

RiverCenter isn't the busiest mall in Texas or the biggest. The Galleria complex in Houston and NorthPark Center in Dallas each record more than 20 million visitors annually.

The alpha mall in this country is the aptly named Mall of America in Bloomington, Minn. Between 35 million and 40 million people visit the sprawling behemoth each year to shop in 520 stores, dine at 60 restaurants and be entertained at what is billed as the largest indoor family theme park in the country.

"Mall of America gets more visitors than Disney World, Grand Canyon and Graceland combined. People go to Bloomington just to see the mall," Dr. Farrell said. "It's a sad commentary that commercial outlets like malls are more popular than historic and cultural sites or places of natural beauty. But it's one thing Americans do very well: consume."

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