KERRVILLE, Tex. — THE actor Thomas Haden Church has a theory about how this city 65 miles northwest of San Antonio in the Hill Country became a hot spot for out-of-towners.

“There are a ton of summer camps in Kerrville, dating back about 100 years,” Mr. Church said by phone recently while driving from his 2,000-acre ranch outside Kerrville to Austin, roughly 130 miles away. “These camps cater to the affluent, and generation upon generation of people that have money across the state would bring their children here and pick them up two weeks later. They started thinking, ‘Wow, it’s beautiful here. Why don’t we buy a second home or a little farm or a ranch?’ ”

On the banks of the placid Guadalupe River and surrounded by grassy hills dotted with cypress and live oaks, Kerrville can feel like a Florida suburb — without the palm trees, blistering heat and...
Kerrville's two museums, the Hill Country Museum and the Museum of Western Art, merit a visit — the Hill Country Museum for its context-bestowing examination of life as lived by a well-heeled Kerrville family in the early 20th century, and the larger Museum of Western Art for its well-rounded collection of cowboy and American Indian art.

But it’s the performing arts rather than the visual ones that Kerrville tends to rally around.

Mr. Church recalled a conversation he had with Ronny Cox, an actor and singer with whom he worked on a recent film: “He said to me, ‘You live in Texas, right? Do you know where Kerrville is?’ He knew it from the folk festival. It’s amazing how many people know about the folk festival.”

The Kerrville Folk Festival takes up residence for more than two weeks in May and June at the 50-acre Quiet Valley Ranch. Each year it draws dozens of musical storytellers and some 30,000 fans.

The singer Robert Earl Keen, who recently released his 14th studio album, “The Rose Hotel” (Universal Nashville), and who lives in Kerrville with his wife and two daughters, said the festival was his launching pad. “They have a new-songwriters contest, and the first time I got up on stage there in the early ’80s, I won it,” Mr. Keen said. “It gave me a big boost.” He has lived in Kerrville for four years and also owns what he calls a shed where he writes music 10 miles away, between Kerrville and the cowboy town of Bandera. “The refrigerator there is full of beer and Big Red,” he said. “I’ll spend several days writing and eating bologna sandwiches. Every man should have a shed.”

But singer-songwriters aren’t the only kind of musicians Kerrville supports. The 834-seat Kathleen C. Cailloux City Center for the Performing Arts regularly schedules orchestral music and acts like the Yamato Drummers, from Japan.

Kerrville dates back to 1846, when Joshua Brown, a settler from Kentucky, arrived in search of giant cypress trees to supply a shingle-making operation. Later, toward the turn of the 20th century, it became home to the developer Charles A. Schreiner, Kerrville’s best-known philanthropist. (Schreiner University, a liberal arts college in town, is named for him, and the Hill Country Museum is his former home.) Many residents still claim ancestral ties to early Kerrville.

Even on concert-free days Kerrville’s historic downtown is worth exploring for its shopping and dining. Mr. Keen recommends Wolflmueller’s Books, which sells rare and used volumes, for its “abundance of Texana.” “It’s the kind of bookstore I go to when I’m on the road, because you’re always going to find something,” he added. Within a block or two of Wolflmueller’s are Hill Country Music, offering dulcimers and American Indian flutes; the Kerr Arts and Cultural Center, which hosts the annual Southwest Gourd Fine Art Show in spring and the Texas Furniture Makers Show in fall; and River’s Edge Gallery, which sells Western landscapes and still lifes.
The Charms of the Big City in the Heart of Texas Hill Country

Published: October 15, 2009

(Kerrville's best restaurants tend to feature Tex-Mex and other regional flavors. Mr. Church likes Billy Gene's. "It's the kind of place where you get real Texas Hill Country cooking — skin-on mashed potatoes, chicken-fried steak, Texas meatloaf, which has a lot of seasoning," he said. Also on his list of favorites are two taquerias: Conchita’s on Main, across the street from the courthouse, and Taqueria Jalisco.

It was Kerrville’s cultural scene and downtown that attracted Raymond and Judy Geddes, retired educators from Rathdrum, Idaho, who became part-time residents five years ago. "He likes to golf, and I like to act," said Ms. Geddes, 65, from the patio of their hilltop four-bedroom, 2,400-square-foot home recently. "We looked at all these places, but Kerrville appealed to both of us," said Ms. Geddes, who was to appear the same evening in a production of "Alone Together Again" at the nearby Point Thea...
If there is a drawback to living in Kerrville, it's felt most acutely by allergy sufferers. The abundance of cedar and oak pollen here tends to cause allergies and hay fever. But the climate is generally a plus: Kerrville's higher elevation drives off the humidity that settles across much of Texas in summer and keeps the area a few degrees cooler than Austin and San Antonio.

Kerrville is “friendly, it's convenient and it's a beautiful part of the country,” Mr. Keen said. It also has a musical pedigree that, for someone like him, is hard to ignore.

“Jimmie Rodgers died in Kerrville,” he said. “It was his last home.” Golf courses, out-of-state transplants and Starbucks aside, he added, any town that was country enough for the “father of country music” was country enough for him.