

## Conference puts city on stage as international travel destination



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An image of Padre Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla, middle, leader of the Mexican Revolution of 1810, is projected onto the exterior of San Fernando Cathedral during a screening of "San Antonio | The Saga." A screening of the video installation was one of the activities offer during the U.S. Trade Association's annual international conference, held in San Antonio for the first time this week.

Billy Calzada/San Antonio Express-News

San Antonio has been rolling out the red carpet for travel industry leaders this week, hoping to capitalize on global pent-up consumer demand after the pandemic.

The city is hosting the U.S. Travel Association's largest international conference for the first time, drawing about 5,000 meeting planners, travel agents, tour operators and travel journalists from 60 countries. The event, held annually for 50 years, kicked off Saturday and will wind down Wednesday.

The city spent more than \$5 million in its bid to host the event, including rental fees for the Henry B. Gonzalez Convention Center. The conference is expected to generate about \$614 million in economic benefits and attract 395,000 new international visitors to San Antonio over the next three years. It's the first time Texas has played host since 2000, when the gathering was held in Dallas.

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While much of the activity has centered on the convention center, local sites, including the Witte Museum, La Villita, the River Walk, The Pearl and San Antonio Missions National Historical Park, have been included in special events and sightseeing opportunities, along with a screening of "San Antonio | The Saga," a video installation projected against the facade of San Fernando Cathedral. The Alamo will be in the spotlight during tours set for Wednesday — the final day of the conference.

Park rangers, hospitality workers and more than 500 volunteers have been part of a community-wide effort to host the convention. The international delegates, from nations located in nearly every continent, have been greeted with banners and signage throughout their visit, from the time they arrived at the airport.

"For most of them, it is their first time not only in Texas but also San Antonio," said Marc Anderson, president and CEO of [Visit San Antonio](#), a public-private organization that markets the city to convention planners and travelers.

Geoff Freeman, president and CEO of the travel association, said the 2015 inscription of the San Antonio missions as the first UNESCO World Heritage Site in Texas was well timed to position the city as the host site this year. Two years later, San Antonio was named a UNESCO Creative City of Gastronomy in recognition of local culinary arts and heritage that balance tradition with innovation.

"It was past time to get back to Texas," Freeman said. "It also was a chance for a different experience, something new for these media professionals and buyers to see."

More than 1,000 international convention planners and other travel buyers are among the delegates visiting the city, with more than 90,000 face-to-face appointments during the conference creating opportunities for future inbound international travel, he said.

"These are the people driving millions of visitors back into the United States," Freeman said. "This is a great opportunity for the host city to develop deeper relationships with these buyers."

During the pandemic, the travel association postponed its international conference in Las Vegas in spring 2020, holding a scaled-down version in fall 2021. By the time the industry group gathered a year ago in Orlando, most aspects of international travel had fully rebounded.

Anderson said he's cautiously optimistic that San Antonio is recovering faster than many other U.S. cities from the pandemic and related travel restrictions that affected international visitation.

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Visit San Antonio is deploying its "[Real & True](#)" marketing campaign, launched last year, using concepts of beauty, artistry, creativity and experiences to share the community's historic and cultural riches with the world. City leaders understand the area's authenticity and have been careful to preserve its history, Anderson said.

"The city believes in and understands tourism," he said. "They understand that the revenue that comes in is also tax revenue."

According to the association, past conferences have generated more than \$5.5 billion in travel spending, "securing America's position as a foremost global travel destination and showcasing the best of what the U.S. has to offer."