

NEWS

Missions tour to tell Native American story

By Scott Huddleston | August 16, 2015 | Updated: August 16, 2015 10:05pm

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Photo: Kin Man Hui /San Antonio Express-News

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Ramon Vasquez, executive director of American Indians of Texas, pauses near a burial ground at Mission San Juan while talking about tours his group will provide of four of San Antonio's missions. The tours will offer people a perspective from an aboriginal descendant to bring awareness of contributions

of Native Americans to San Antonio. (Kin Man Hui/San Antonio Express-News)

Gazing across the stone ruins, grassy expanse and restored white church that remains an active Catholic parish at Mission San Juan, Ramón Vásquez contemplated how hard it must have been for the first indigenous people to enter this new way of life.

“You can imagine that some of our people said, ‘Life as we know it ends today, and we need to go into this mission,’” for safety and stability in the Texas frontier of the 1700s, he said.

“Others said, ‘We’ll die, as we are today, and we’ll never enter that mission.’ And they stayed out.”

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That choice — submission to a strange new culture and religion under Spanish rule, in exchange for protection from starvation and hostile invaders — may be hard for people in a free society to process today. But Vásquez, executive director of the [American Indians in Texas at the Spanish Colonial Missions](#), wants to provide a tour that forces visitors to ponder the sacrifices, contributions and dilemmas of his ancestors.

The nonprofit group had talked about a tour of the San Antonio missions for at least 10 years before they were named a [UNESCO World Heritage Site](#) in July, and now the organization plans to offer tours to the public in the fall. It already has scheduled tours as part of a four-day [“Historic Discoveries” vacation package](#) marketed to out-of-town visitors by the city’s Convention & Visitors Bureau, with the first set for Sept. 24 to 27.



Associated Press

Missions World Heritage Timeline

The Alamo and other San Antonio missions were designated as the first World Heritage Site in Texas in July of 2015. Here's a timeline of the process.

Sources: Author-historian Paul Ringenbach, San Antonio Conservation Society



Cassandra Matej, the bureau’s executive director, said the agency partnered with Vasquez’s group to “offer a personalized tour of San Antonio’s missions from tribe descendents” as part of a fall package spotlighting “San Antonio’s epic history.”

“This is a phenomenal way to continue promoting the missions’ recent World Heritage designation, while incorporating the American Indian perspective on the history of the missions,” Matej said.

Vásquez said he offers the mission tour privately to groups but wants to open it to the local public, possibly in October. A 2½-hour tour will likely run about \$50, with a 4½-hour tour that includes food, music and craft demonstrations at \$75.

The tours will benefit the Tap Pilam Coahuiltecan Nation, a group of about 250 active individuals whose ancestors were among a mix of indigenous people, many linked by language and known collectively as Coahuiltecan, who built **the missions** and contributed to early South Texas farming, ranching and cultural traditions.

“I think that’s a good beginning for healing, even though a lot of the history was not a very good one for our people,” said Jesús José “Jesse” Reyes Jr., an anthropologist, board member of American Indians in Texas and, like Vásquez, a Tap Pilam descendant.

The Tap Pilam community, which for years has been engaged in a lengthy process to be federally recognized, has retained its songs and ceremonies but has “pretty much almost lost” its language, Reyes said. The group uses a documented dialect known as Pajalate as its “reconstruction language.”

The tours begin at Mission Concepción, then stop at Mission San José and Mission Espada before ending at Mission San Juan, where the remains of more than 100 mission inhabitants were unearthed and later repatriated in separate ceremonies in 1999 and 2013. Although the Alamo is a historic mission and part of the World Heritage designation, it is not included in the tour because of wait times at the popular 1836 battle site

LOCAL



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downtown, Vásquez said.

A long, painful chapter for the mission descendants unfolded after the Archdiocese of San Antonio let archaeologists excavate portions of San Juan in 1967. Human remains of at least 92 people were used in university studies in Texas. After years of pleading and fighting for their ancestors' return, Coahuiltecan descendants reburied the remains in 1999 on the east side of the mission courtyard, at the site of a mission church that was never completed.

While preparing the bones physically and spiritually for reburial, Reyes lived for a month in a house at the mission's northwest corner, keeping a fire continuously burning.

“The only thing that we could do as lineal descendants was put them back where they came from in the most respectful way, to ensure that this will never, ever happen to them again,” Vásquez said.

In 2012, during a renovation project, the **remains of about 15 more people**, including infants and children, were found near the door of the existing church, which served as a chapel in the mission era. Vásquez said it was common to bury the dead in or near the church at each mission, including San Antonio de Valero — the Alamo. Those remains also were reburied.

San Juan remained an active community, with people living on the site until after World War II, before it was recognized as sacred and historic, he said. But Vásquez said his family members' claims to Native American ties have at times been met with ridicule.

To counter the skepticism, Reyes said he hopes to share stories of the mission “Indian militia” that protected settlers and even presidio soldiers from attacks by indigenous tribes from the north.



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“Those are the unsung heroes of the missions, and that is our lineal descendancy,” he said. “Those are the native peoples from this area who learned how to participate and contribute to the earlier days of what is now San Antonio. And that is the story that I would like told, especially now that it’s an international site.”

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