

A VACATION NEARBY AT CARLOS'N CHARLIE'S
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Ann-Marie was supposed to be a recently repatriated nun. Matt supposedly hailed from Austria. Dan's friend Stephanie inherited a light-bulb fortune. Dan, well Dan's already a 6-foot-6 Mennonite who descended from a long line of lumberjacks and syrup makers. We didn't need to create a story for him. Everyone, in character, was to strike up a conversation with someone we didn't know.

I call it vacation behavior. You know, when you're gallivanting with your friends, instigating harmless mischief. The sun was setting, the gloaming was gorgeous, and we were descending into foolishness at Carlos'N Charlie's, the lakeside bar/restaurant that feels like nothing so much as a joint in a Mexican town popular with American tourists. Perhaps that's because Carlos'N Charlie's bars/restaurants inhabit a number of Mexican towns popular with U.S. tourists, as I learned from Google. Cozumel, Cancun, Ixtapa, Puerto Vallarta and Aruba (not Mexican, but you get the point) — all have a Carlos'N Charlie's. And the only stateside CNC is located right here on Lake Travis. It's got clothing, shots, monstrous drinks and fish tacos. Essentially, it's a Margaritaville.

Part of Carlos'N Charlie's is a restaurant where you can order shrimp po' boys, chips and queso, tuna sandwiches and the like. The food was filling and well-spiced if not delectable, and the Thursday night atmosphere was family-friendly and low-key. The second part of the deal is the bar. The main physical bar itself is lit by neon beer signs and shaped into a big ol' rectangle — perhaps so everyone can see each other and/or the water. People can park themselves on bar stools or scootch over to the 20 or so freestanding tables. On Thursday through Sunday nights, a live band plays cover tunes, and the August blues festival can be a blowout, with people crowding upstairs and down as well as up in the bar and the "beach" below. This year, Soul Asylum and Double Trouble headlined.

The crowd tends toward Texas and those golf visors that look like ball caps with the tops cut out. In other words, it's casual — there's a boat dock below, and plenty of folks come up after a day at the lake, their bikinis lightly covered by tank tops. ("No Shoes No Shirt No Problem," one sign said. "Squat" is painted on the door of the women's room.) There's a second big bar area where kids aren't allowed to go, because of the "adult" nature of the place, as signs warn. (They mean alcohol. And perhaps some adult language. And dancing.) Palapas abound, and drinks can be ordered by the half-yard. If you're up for spending just over 10 bucks, you can get things like Slurricanes and Pain Killers to go with your nachos, then saunter over to the arcade game Golden Tee. Once upon a time, while vacationing in Cancun, I dropped into the popular party establishment Señor Frog's. Carlos'N Charlie's reminded me a lot of Señor Frog's in terms of décor and attitude, and I recently discovered why: They're all part of the same restaurant group. The downstairs 500-person banquet/private function room is actually called the Señor Frog room.

No one in our gang ended up making innocent mischief. No one pulled off an Austrian accent or dropped hints about steamy light-bulb scandals. We weren't really on vacation. There was still work to do the next day, and the long, winding drive down RM 2222, back into town, lay ahead of us.

(BOX)

Carlos'N Charlie's. 5973 Hilina Road, 266-1683.