



meet houston

The New Houston:
It's not what you think.

BY TRACY BARNETT


It was the perfect New Houston moment: A Pavarotti-like voice pulsed over the lawns and the sparkling lake of Discovery Green, a downtown showpiece of art, culture, and green technology. As part of the Houston Grand Opera's first CityCast performance, sumptuously dressed actors beamed scenes from *Macbeth* via an inflatable screen towering over a thousand people. Some lounged in lawn chairs or on blankets; some watched from the patios of restaurants. This was not the Houston of the cattle drives, oil tycoons, or petrochemical industry, which is what most people think about when this city comes to mind, if they think of it at all. Which is a shame, because they're missing out on one of the country's truly great international metropolises, the U.S.'s fourth-largest city.

From business to pleasure

Houston's status as the underdog of top-notch destinations has not gone unnoticed by observers from *Sherman's Travel* (Top 10 Most Underrated Cities), *Hotwire.com* (Top 10 U.S. Places for Value Vacations), *Travel + Leisure* (Cultural Capital of the Gulf Coast), and *ForbesTraveler.com* (Top 10 Best Restaurant Cities), to name a few.

Houston's challenge to redefine itself for the leisure traveler stems from its roots as an engine of the petroleum boom. In 1836, just months after Sam Houston became a Texas legend with the defeat of the Mexican army at the Battle of San Jacinto, two real-estate developers from New York named John and Augustus Allen bought 6,642 acres at the headwaters of Buffalo Bayou with the idea of creating a new city.

The hamlet served temporarily as the capital of the new republic, but it really gained steam with a new port in the 1840s. When Galveston, Texas, was devastated by a hurricane in 1900, much of its commerce moved to Houston; and when oil was discovered at Spindletop in 1901,



Blue Bayou Festival
A celebration along the banks of Buffalo Bayou, a 52-mile waterway that winds through Houston.

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Houston's future as the hub of the new oil economy was assured.

Today, the Energy Capital of the World has energy to spare, and as the oil barons have poured their money into the city's arts, culture, parks, and preservation, another city has emerged.

Here you'll find the nation's fourth-largest museum district, packed with 17 museums and the Houston Zoo; a 17-block theater district throbbing with energy from nine performance companies in ballet, opera, symphony, and theater; and more than 75 art galleries. (A sleek light rail can zip you from downtown to the Museum District or Reliant Stadium in minutes, and five new rail lines are scheduled for opening in 2012.)

But Houston adds a quirky edge to its art scene. Take the annual Art Car Parade. Each May, the city's art community showcases its wacky side with a massive display of the automobile imaginable, with designs ranging from a motorized outhouse to a rolling Zen garden.

We are the world

In 2007, the Greater Houston Convention and Visitors Bureau asked Houston's business leaders to describe the city in one word, and they chose "global." International trade supports a third of the city's jobs. With 100 different spoken lan-

Behind the Scenes

What do ZZ Top, Sarah Brightman, and the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo have in common? They have all employed LD Systems, a sound, light, and video company (ldsystems.com). The Houston-based business began in 1973, when Andy DiRaddo and John Larson started renting sound equipment from out of Andy's parents' garage. Almost four decades later, they've become the area's largest audiovisual equipment provider, and their 407 Garden Oaks office occupies 85,000 square feet—over 700 times the size of the original garage! (Meet more Houston entrepreneurs in Work on p. 124.)



Houston's Art Car Parade

guages, 90 foreign consulates, and myriad nationalities and ethnicities, Houston offers a Guatemalan restaurant, a Middle Eastern grocery, a Vietnamese tea shop, and a Mexican-owned shoe repair shop in one block. In fact, the city's Chinatown is the largest one in the country geographically.

But this cultural diversity is not tucked away; it infuses public life from the cuisine to the music and the arts, to the sounds you hear on the airwaves.

The green side of Bayou City

Houston will surprise you with its lush greenery. The city has more parkland than any other Top 10 city, with 100 miles of hiking and biking trails and an urban park twice the size of New York's Central Park. Buffalo Bayou cuts through the city like a watery ribbon. The kayaker's haven features a hike-and-bike trail linking nearly a dozen city parks and providing habitat to native species and a venue for local artists.

But the city is green in more ways than one. The City of Houston has been named the No. 1 municipal purchaser of green power in the nation and it's a leader in promoting alternative energy, with a third of the city's total electricity purchased from wind energy.

Cowboys with a twist

If it's Western culture you crave, you'll find that, too, of course. The 4,000-strong Downtown Rodeo Parade that converges on the world's largest rodeo in late February is an over-the-top display of Old West meets the New. These costumed cowboys and cowgirls travel for days to be a part of the parade that winds through the cheering crowds filling the Theater District. The pageantry kicks off the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo, a 20-day event in March.

But that's just another facet of the New Houston—a seemingly random tapestry of traditional and modern, upscale and down-home, ultra-country and ultra-urban—all presented with a warm Southern smile.

PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF ORANGE SHOW CENTER FOR VISIONARY ART

Q: How do you fast-track success in a slow economy?

A: MOVE to the Houston region!

Q: How FAST can you get here?

Site Selection Magazine – March 2009

Top Metro in the Nation:
Corporate Relocations and Expansions

Fortune – April 2009

2nd Largest Concentration of
Fortune 500 Headquarters in the Nation

Manufacturers' News Inc. – May 30, 2008

Top U.S. Manufacturing Cities

Inc.com – July 2008

Best Big City for Business

Urban Land Institute – October 22, 2008

Top U.S. Real Estate Investment Markets

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