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Houston for Tourists? If You Think That's a Joke, the Joke's on You



L.A. may have invented urban sprawl, but Houston took it to the next level, because, you know... Texas. But just because this city is hard to define doesn't mean it's not big fun.

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Have you ever been somewhere that was simply enjoyable? Good food, memorable attractions, a culture different from your own, and people who generally seemed happy to be living there?

Houston as a leisure tourist destination might not sound convincing to most, but after spending a handful of days there at the start of summer, I can heartily attest that it's a place that was, quite simply, fun.

And so, it's the latest selection for our twice-a-month series on underrated destinations, [It's Still a Big World](#).

Don't get me wrong—for me Houston remains a place impossible to comprehend, and as I set out to write about it, I find it nearly impossible to firmly grasp a coherent vision of the place. After all, it's huge. It's also, arguably, America's most diverse major city—racially, politically, socioeconomically, culturally—and so what follows is admittedly the tiniest sliver of a tiny sliver of experiencing America's fourth largest city.

The tenor of the visit was created by my first stop and home for my stay—the recently restored, expanded, and reopened La Colombe d'Or. Named after the famed French spot, it's located in Montrose ([a neighborhood once known for its countercultural vibe](#)) and housed in the 1920s mansion of a Texas oil tycoon. Over the past couple years, the Zimmerman family has added the bungalows in the back and now a luxury high-rise.



📷 Tarick Foteh

While it can be a trap to rely on the views of Uber drivers for one's impression of a city, since they have no reason to prevaricate (not knowing what I do), it's often insightful. And every time one realized they were dropping me back off at La Colombe they made a remark along the lines of being excited for its reopening or that they'd heard that it was, a sign of the property as a community touchstone of sorts.

The suites in the original house are spacious and appointed with care. Those in the tower have a more globalist modern aesthetic, while those in the bungalows are quirky. The gym (shared with the tower residence) is one you wouldn't mind being a member of and the pool looks out over the metastasizing expanse of Houston.



The Bar at La Colombe d'Or

📷 Tarick Foteh

The real allure, and why you should swing by even if staying elsewhere, are the public spaces. The dining rooms and bar are beautifully decorated and there is art *everywhere*. And not guy from down the street art. Raoul Dufy, Man Ray, a Picasso lithograph, Dorothy Hood, etc. And all in places that seem a little too exposed to a diner's potential splatter!

And, gosh, was the food good. I love a good hotel breakfast, and the Colombe's will make it incredibly difficult to want to try other options in Houston. And the drinks were representative of something I found everywhere I went in Houston—they were made by people who *enjoy* drinking.

Houston for tourism may not be convincing (yet), but its culinary scene has been anything but underrated in the last decade. My experience dipping a toe into a tiny portion of that scene matched those expectations. The three restaurants where I ate dinner—Squable, Bludorn, and MAD—were all fantastic with very different experiences.

I just want to walk into a home every day filled with the smell of the short rib from Squable, and the waitress there told me to get the sourdough to soak up the broth and I'm forever glad she did. Bludorn is *happening*. If you want excellent people watching in a restaurant where the food is great and the buzz of conversation from people dressed up to go out to dinner is more cacophony than hum, this is your spot. A slice of Houston I won't soon forget. And MAD is just nuts—one of those restaurants where they do things like make desserts look like sunny-side-up eggs and the interior is a total mindfuck. Plus, it's in the swanky new River Oaks District shopping village, so, more people watching.

One of the best parts about visiting Houston as a tourist is you're mostly competing with Houstonians, and most of the restaurants, bars, and attractions haven't been altered by the need to placate [the tourist gaze](#).

For instance the Museum of Fine Arts Houston (MFAH), Houston's main art museum housed in buildings by the likes of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and Rafael Moneo, has 83 percent of its visitors from a 40 mile radius. Which is wild since the collection is superb—Canaletto, Kishi Ganku, Pissaro, Monet, Worth gowns, the Mackay silver Tiffany butterfly napkin clips (worth a visit themselves), Van Gogh, Berni, and a new personal favorite, Grupo Mondongo. And it's always one of the destinations on the museum circuit for blockbuster exhibitions. (Also the cafe at the MFAH is delicious and reasonably priced.)

The MFAH isn't the only cultural powerhouse, as Houston is home to the Menil Collection. Created by the wealthy French immigrants who plopped down in Texas in the mid-20th century and *seriously* collected art, it's also nowadays a template for many private art museums like the Glenstone outside D.C. Inside the Renzo Piano-designed complex are lots of Rothko and medieval art and Matisse, but truly the most unforgettable is the Cy Twombly gallery.

Twombly is the American painter who some might recognize most for the paintings that look like somebody scribbled on a canvas, but if you needed convincing of his genius this is the place to go. Walking the rooms (particularly the one with the green painted canvases) was sublime.

Just down the street is another contribution from a Menil family member, the Rothko Chapel. Inside this brown brick hut is a large atrium with giant black paintings by Rothko ringing the room. (Sadly, the Turrell Skyspace was closed when I was in town).

But there's also a new entry into the art scene—the Buffalo Bayou Park Cistern. Created out of the former drinking water reservoir under the ever growing park that slices through the middle of Houston, it's a cavernous space primed for the kind of installation art pieces such as the one currently on display by Albanian artist Anri Sala titled *Time No Longer*. It's got video, blackouts, creepy audio and all set among the thin concrete columns reflected off the thin layer of water remaining.



© Lawrence Knox

The park is one of a number that have helped rehabilitate the reputation of Houston as an endless sprawl of highways and parking lots (don't get me wrong, it has plenty of those still). While in the Museum District, swing through the free Hermann Park, which despite getting knocked back by the recent freeze still has plenty to make it worth the stroll.

If nothing I've talked about, whether it be cultural curiosity about a mega-city likely very different from your home or food or art, has convinced you to go to Houston, two house museums operated by the MFAH should do the trick.

The first is, I'm sorry, everything you imagined Houston money might have done.

The Rienzi is housed in a pink stucco manse in the city's famed River Oaks District (just grab a car and cruise around it, you'll be glad). The collection of decorative objects and art mainly from Europe is actually lovely, with a number of pieces you'll find intriguing. But the rooms they are displayed in are a weird Frankenstein fusion of historicist and 50s modern. And the backside seems intent on reminding you it's a backside. BUT, but, but, do *not* miss it. It's such a capsule of an era and a way of living that it's actually delightful even if it's not your taste.



Bayou Bend & Gardens

📷 Rick Gardner

Just across the bayou, however, is a house almost guaranteed to please. Built by Ima Hogg (yup, you read that right) in a sort of Southern Regency style, it was actually designed by the same architect as Rienzi, John Staub. Surrounded by beautiful gardens, the house is a dream. But inside it houses one of the best (if not the best) early American decorative arts collections. Hogg built the rooms in the house as period sets to showcase her magnificent collection, starting from the early colonial era up through the mid-19th century, and even has one on early Texas design with a cattle horn chair from San Antonio. While that is fun, and so too are the Greek Revival and messy Victorian Clutter rooms, the show-stopper, undoubtedly, is the Federal-style dining room. It is truly elegance made manifest.

I'm a firm believer in experiencing places for what they are. Only New York City is New York City, and only the Cyclades are the Cyclades. Houston will not be a city you find as interesting as I did if you go in expecting it to be something other than what it is. It's the great American city of the 21st century in some ways and not slowing down—so you might as well check it out.