



An insiders' look at our great cities and towns

Caption TK



Attorney Beth Walker—a Northwestern Mutual client, as are all the Houstonians quoted in this article—moved here after law school in the summer of 2004 to begin a new job. But Walker, a senior vice president at a legal search firm, had serious reservations. “In my mind, Houston was a big, dirty city,” she remembers, “and I didn’t intend to stay for long. How wrong I was! Ten years later, I’m in love with the city, and it’s become home.”

People from all over the world move to Houston for its world-renowned medical center and burgeoning Energy Corridor, making it hospitable to newcomers like Walker, who grew up in rural Minnesota. Like most Houstonians, she now appreciates the city for what it really is—a sophisticated urban center with a friendly, small-town feeling.

Museums and Parks Galore

Whether your passion is history, science, African culture, or visual art, Houston’s Museum District has something for everyone. Located between downtown and the Medical Center are 19 museums and galleries, many free and within walking distance of each other. Adrienne Poyet-Smith, a marketing manager, and her husband enjoy taking their 2-year-old to the Children’s Museum of Houston, ranked number one in the nation by *Parents Magazine* for its innovative hands-on exhibits (cmhouston.org). A favorite outing for empty nesters David Owen, a senior manager at an energy company, and his wife is an afternoon at the Houston Zoo with their two grandchildren (houstonzoo.org). Feed a giraffe, watch a show in the butterfly pavilion, or watch the rhinos while enjoying lunch at the Twiga Café. The zoo welcomes visitors seven days a week and showcases animals, fish, and birds in their natural habitats.

Hello, Houston!

Welcome to H-Town. In the years since brothers John and Augustus Allen founded it in 1836, Houston has evolved from a modest port settlement on the banks of Buffalo Bayou to the fourth-largest city in the United States. The Allen brothers christened the city “Houston” in honor of the first president of the Republic of Texas, General Sam Houston. Once overgrown and neglected, these days the Buffalo Bayou has been revitalized with 20 miles of landscaped trails for running, walking, and biking, and the Bayou City’s skyline features award-winning buildings designed by I.M. Pei, Philip Johnson, and other prominent architects. Vibrant sculptures, fountains, and decorative bridges enhance all public outdoor spaces. The general would be proud.

Barbecue & Blue Bell

Foodies, rejoice! The range of cuisines available in Houston is almost unlimited. Texas is known for its beef, so it's no surprise that steaks and barbecue are among Houstonians' top choices. Poyet-Smith and her husband favor Tex-Mex—Mexican cuisine with a southwestern flair. "Our favorite family restaurant is Chuy's," she says (chuy.com). "The food is great, the margaritas are outstanding, and the ambiance is fun." Ice cream lovers should try a scoop of Blue Bell, made in the nearby hill country town of Brenham and so popular that out-of-towners have been known to fly in a half-gallon for special occasions (bluebell.com)! For shrimp and snapper fresh from the Gulf, try Pappas Seafood. The Owens are regulars at many of the Pappas restaurants, owned by Greek brothers Chris and Harris Pappas and specializing in steaks, barbecue, burgers, Mexican food, and (of course!) Greek cuisine (pappas.com).

Cool Events Year-Round

While Houston summers are decidedly hot, Houston's coolness quotient is high. Its theater, art, baseball and football games, Broadway shows, concerts, and special events like the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo all take place in climate-controlled covered arenas, so visitors are comfortable even on the hottest of days. The 17-block

Theater District is home to eight performing arts organizations and more than 12,000 seats. Only New York City has more seats concentrated in one geographic area (houstonmuseumdistrict.org). "Houston isn't known for being a cultural Mecca, but it absolutely is!" Walker maintains. She and her husband enjoy dramatic productions at the Alley Theater and Theater Under the Stars.



To experience the city at its peak of beauty, Walker recommends visiting Houston in the spring. "Nothing tops the views when the azaleas are in full bloom, usually in early March," she says. The Azalea Trail has been an annual tradition for almost 80 years (riveroaksgardenclub.org).

For another authentic Bayou City experience, plan your trip in early May, when the world's largest Art Car Parade (thehoustonsartcarparade.com) zigzags through downtown, treating you and 300,000 spectators to more than 250 whimsically decorated golf carts, jeeps, vans, trucks—oh, and cars!—from 23 states.

To make a truly out-of-this-world memory, plan ahead to have lunch with a real NASA astronaut and take a NASA Tram Tour behind the scenes.



Space City

Home to NASA's Lyndon B. Johnson Space Center, Houston's official nickname is Space City. "Space Center Houston is a one-of-a-kind experience," says John Bohrer, a 35-year Houston resident who works in the oil industry. "It's the one attraction visitors shouldn't miss." Where else can you touch a moon rock, view live science demonstrations, and discover what it's like to eat, sleep, and conduct experiments in zero gravity (spacecenter.org)?

A native Houstonian, **Margaret Winchell Miller** now lives in Austin, where she works at the LBJ Presidential Library.