

Hello, Houston

Houston might be best known for barbecue and rodeo, but **Tracey Davies** finds a thriving arts scene too

As the sun glitters in the mirrored façade of Williams Tower, a group of rugged men in Wranglers and Stetsons shout “howdy” as they swagger past, causing me to buckle at the knees and squeak out an involuntary “yeehaw” by way of reply. Yep, it’s rodeo season in Texas, when the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo – the largest in the world – dominates the city for three weeks in March, attracting herds of cowboys and cowgirls who come from all over to lasso a calf, bust a mutton or show off their oh-so impressive bareback riding skills.

While Austin has long held the title of most hip and happening city in Texas, Houston has been nipping at its heels in recent years. The city noodled its way on to the culture map when *Forbes* magazine declared it “the coolest city in America” back in 2012. Just over a decade later and bringing its world-class art and dining scene to the fore, Houston is very much living up to the prized title.

WHERE THERE'S OIL THERE'S ART

Thanks to a tradition of cultural philanthropy, Houston – a key player in the world’s oil industry – has become one of America’s greatest art cities, rivalling New York and LA. As well as being home

to the Houston Symphony Orchestra, the Houston Ballet and the Houston Grand Opera, it has more than 70 art galleries and museums, many clutched together in the Museum District.

Top of the list is the Menil Collection, set in the leafy neighbourhood of Montrose. Created by the late John and Dominique de Menil – once described by the *New York Times Magazine* as ‘the Medici of modern art’ – the 15,000-strong collection is spread across five separate spaces, including an entire building dedicated to the work of American painter Cy Twombly. Also self-contained in isolation is the unmissable Rothko Chapel, an octagonal sanctuary and non-denominational sacred space which displays 14 of the artist’s deepest, darkest works.

In the neighbouring Museum District, the super-modern Nancy and Rich Kinder Building, which opened in November 2020 to house the expansive Museum of Fine Arts, Houston’s international collections of modern and contemporary art, is equally impressive. Under a luminous canopy designed to replicate the vast Texan sky, I found a staggering array of modern art – from works by Picasso and Matisse to a mesmerising mobile by Alexander Calder in the lobby, and the

DESTINATIONS

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WHERE TO STAY

Hilton Americas-Houston: With a thousand-plus rooms, two restaurants and a swanky rooftop pool and spa, this downtown sprawl next to the Toyota Centre makes a comfortable base for exploring Houston. Rooms from £180/\$224. [hilton.com](https://www.hilton.com)

Even Hotel Shenandoah-The Woodlands: The first of IHG's health and wellness-focused brand to open in Texas, this hotel offers an outdoor pool, a huge gym, fitness equipment in all the rooms and a healthy bar/restaurant. Rooms from £110/\$137. [ihg.com](https://www.ihg.com)

Courtyard Houston Sugar Land: Overlooking Brooks Lake, this modern pad in a quiet suburb has a comfy lounge bar, an outdoor pool and a lakeside terrace with a fire pit. Rooms from £96/\$120. [marriott.com](https://www.marriott.com)



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo; Sawyer Yards; Goode Co smokehouse PICTURE: Mauro Luna/Monica Kre



Cuban flag made of human hair by Havana-born artist and activist Tania Bruguera.

However, Houston's art scene isn't just about viewing classic and contemporary art; it's a living, vibrant scene filled with the highest concentration of working artists outside of LA. They mostly work from and around the Arts District Houston, an urban arts community of some 300 studios found along the Washington Avenue Corridor, just north of Buffalo Bayou. At its heart is Sawyer Yards, a clutch of industrial warehouses-turned-artist studios which open to the public every other Saturday. Here, striking grain silos house the SITE Gallery, which hosts a wide range of travelling exhibitions each year, while Art Alley, an 800-foot-long collaborative mural by 14 local street artists, is equally eye-catching and fun.

FOODIE HEAVEN

Houston, we have a problem: I didn't pack elasticated trousers. Aside from the turkey legs and fried Oreos served at the rodeo, Houston has become a serious food destination in recent years, attracting several James Beard award-winning chefs. But when in Texas, barbecue is the natural go-to and Goode Co, a charmingly shabby smokehouse which knocks out heavenly smoked brisket, tender pork ribs, smoked turkey and pecan pie to hungry cowboys, caused me to loosen my belt by at least three notches over the week.

A newer foodie hotspot is Post HTX, which opened in the old Post Office building in November 2021.

On the ground floor, Post Market houses a cluster of pop-up restaurants, including sustainable seafood space Golfstrømmen, the only American location by acclaimed Norwegian chef Christopher Haatuft, and Taco Fuego, Houston's most legendary taco truck. On the sun-drenched spring evening I visited, I took my tacos up to Skylawn, the beautiful five-acre urban rooftop park and sustainable organic farm, and ate out overlooking downtown's spiky cityscape.

BOOK IT

Jetset has a five-night room-only package staying at Double Tree by Hilton Hotel & Suites Houston by the Galleria from £866. The price includes Singapore Airlines flights from Manchester and is based on an October 13 departure. [jetsetflights.co.uk](https://www.jetsetflights.co.uk)

Singapore Airlines offers return flights from Manchester to Houston from £469 until early 2024 for bookings made by May 15. [singaporeair.com](https://www.singaporeair.com)

BEYOND THE CITY

Of course, there are plenty of day excursions from Houston, all within an hour's drive. I'm probably not the first to consider a career change after a tour of Nasa's Johnson Space Center. And 20 miles east of the city on the shore of Galveston Bay, Kemah Boardwalk, with its vertiginous wooden rollercoasters, big wheel and the soft sweet scent of candy floss, has a real vibe of Coney Island. Closer to the city, Houston's leafy suburbs house the Woodlands and Shenandoah, where Houstonites head when they want a little fancy shopping and dining. Time it right and catch a performance at The Cynthia Woods Mitchell Pavilion, a stunning amphitheatre which has seen everyone from Slipknot to Taylor Swift grace its beautiful outdoor stage. **TW**