BY BEN MARSHALL

There's more to America's fourth-largest city than big oil, big buildings, and "Houston, we have a problem" references. Thanks to nationally renowned museums, a thriving culinary scene, and abundant green space, H-Town is squashing stereotypes in a Texas-size way. To help you plan your trip, tell us more about you.
Houston ARTS ENTHUSIASTS

CANVAS THE CITY
Uncover quirky and classic finds

MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, HOUSTON
It takes seven facilities to house nearly 65,000 pieces, spanning from antiquity to the present.

ART CAR MUSEUM
If you can't make it for the annual Art Car Parade on April 9, steer yourself toward this temple of four-wheeled folk art, aka the Garage Mahal.

INVERSION COFFEE
Sip a gourmet latte while admiring this light-filled shop's rotating display of local artwork.

ELEVATED ART
Alexander Calder's "The Y" hangs in perfect balance at the Menil Collection.

Noteworthy venues for live music

Last Concert Cafe
Come for the Tex-Mex and stay for the funky local bands that rock this hidden Warehouse District jewel seven days a week.

Cynthia Woods Mitchell Pavilion
Located in The Woodlands, this outdoor amphitheater—one of the world's most visited—accommodates up to 16,500.

Houston Rodeo
(March 1–20)
For country fans, there's no hotter ticket; Last year's lineup included Luke Bryan, Miranda Lambert, and Tim McGraw.

Eye Acclaimed Collections

The problem with Houston's 19-institution Museum District is choosing where to begin. Our pick: The esteemed yet tucked-away Menil Collection. Set on a residential cul-de-sac, this sunbathed gallery features pieces from prehistoric times to the present day, including MicroCosmos, an exhibit of Paleo-Eskimo artifacts from Old Bering Sea cultures on view through February 21. Continue on to the Houston Center for Photography, where more than 900 classes are taught year-round, and then scope out the interfaith Rothko Chapel, where a hushed, octagonal reflection space allows for contemplation.
Houston HISTORY BUFFS

THROWBACK THRILLS
Don't miss these blasts from the past

BISHOP'S PALACE
Book the monthly basement-to-attic tour for exclusive access to this 1892 mansion, located in Galveston.

BATTLESHIP TEXAS
Descend 20 feet underwater to discover this famed vessel's engine room and tight living quarters.

LA CARAFE
Give your eyes a second to adjust as you enter this candle-lit, cash-only bar, set inside the oldest commercial building in town (circa 1865).

Imitate an Astronaut
The key to a successful mission at Space Center Houston: Arrive early. Between glimpsing NASA's historic mission control and the massive Saturn V rocket, and feeling the force of 7 million pounds of thrust in the Blast-Off Theater, exploring the city's role in space history could take some time. Wonder what life is like onboard the International Space Station? The hands-on Living in Space module illustrates the complexities of everyday tasks in zero-gravity conditions and lets you test your skills at virtually landing a shuttle and retrieving a satellite.

Drop your bags at these storied downtown stays

Hotel ICON
Built in 1911, this 12-story bank turned hotel offers 135 rooms and a shuttle to check out city center sights. Magnolia Hotel: Freebies at this stylish 1926 high-rise include an evening beer and wine reception and bedtime cookies. The Lancaster Hotel: Next door to the Theater District, this 93-room charmer opened in 1928 and is Houston's oldest continually operating hotel.
Choose Your Eating Adventure

One kitchen, two distinct menus, and a pair of acclaimed chefs have made The Pass & Provisions one of the city's hottest reservations. Want elegance? Settle in at a white-clothed table at The Pass, where chefs Seth Siegel-Gardner and Terrence Gallivan preside over a constantly evolving prix fixe roster of omnivore and vegetarian meals, either five or eight courses in duration. Craving something more casual? At Provisions, on the other side of the kitchen, the chefs pair rustic dishes like pizza and pasta with a more relaxed ambiance, including walls covered by basketball flooring from a church gym.

MEAL PLANNER

Taste your way around H-Town

BREAKFAST
Wake up with brisket and eggs from Dish Society. The house favorite at this farm-to-table diner comes with smoked Gouda grits and a buttermilk biscuit.

LUNCH
Fielding's Wood Grill in The Woodlands sources its beef and milk locally and prepares its sauces, breads, and ice creams in-house.

DINNER
As the hams hanging in the window of Underbelly's curing room suggest, James Beard Award–winner Chris Shepherd prepares a decidedly pork-heavy menu.
Get Some Fresh Air

With mild winter temps and more park acreage than any of the other 10 most populous U.S. cities, Houston is begging you to come outside and play. Oak-filled Hermann Park, sandwiched between the Museum District and Texas Medical Center, packs plenty to see and do: Paddleboat on McGovern Lake, ride the antique mini train, or relax in the Japanese Garden. Want more? The 445-acre spread is home to 3 miles of trails, 18 holes of golf, some 6,000 animals (at the Houston Zoo), and countless picnic spots beneath an equine-mounted Sam Houston.