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HOT IN HOUSTON

There's no sign on the building exterior of wine bar 13 Celsius. It is located in midtown Houston, Texas, and its modest outside and charming Mediterranean interior characteristics don't seem to fit the state's extroverted stereotype that everything is bigger. But these days, if there is ever a city not to be judged by its cover it's Houston.

*Story: Tim Lamb
Images: Renée Lamb*

Some of Houston's most interesting locations won't be obvious, especially the hottest places to wine and dine. (The city even has a complex tunnel system under the downtown high-rises full of eateries for workers).

European-style wine bar 13 Celsius is both an example of a treasure you can discover in Houston and the perfect place to remedy your jet lag after the 14.5 hour direct flight from Auckland. Inside the bar is an expansive range of global wines served as flights, tastings or by the bottle and partnered with a charcuterie and cheese menu.

Houston is the fourth largest city in the U.S. and there is possibly little known about the city other than its links to the country's space program or its oil market. But, that's Houston's advantage; the surprise factor.

Even from the time your plane descends on George Bush Intercontinental Airport, the city is surprisingly green despite having one of the most complex and widest freeway systems in the U.S.

Much like Los Angeles, Houston is a car, or in many cases truck, city. With petrol about the same price in Houston for one gallon (3.74 litres) as it is for a single litre in New Zealand (hovering around \$2-per-gallon in the second half of 2015), renting a car at the airport is the most efficient way to explore.

Driving will also be the best way to navigate between the glitzy Galleria shopping mall and the city's eclectic dining scene on Westheimer Road.

First timers to Houston shouldn't miss trying one of the city's many Mexican restaurants. There's no shortage of options for "Tex-Mex", but head to Hugo's to sample upscale Mexican.

Frequently named one of Houston's best restaurants, the interior is rustic and servers are sophisticated. However, the diners' dress options, ranging from urban casual to button-up tie, reflect that this city is no longer the stuffy oil and gas destination many may associate it to be.

Hugo's has a detailed Mezcal and Tequila menu, and margaritas poured table-side. However, the best cocktails may be the seafood and ceviche starters, in particular Vuelve a la Vida (Return to Life). Chef Hugo Ortega's comprehensive seafood and meat main courses start-off traditional before being contemporised with a twist.

In addition to uncovering city secrets, Houston can also be your excuse to try experiences that are uniquely Texan or simply not an option in New Zealand. Drive 45-minutes southwest of downtown and walk the trails at Brazos Bend State Park; a reservation area that includes hundreds of easily-spotted alligators living in the ecosystem.

Stay at the nearly 185 square metre, Warwick Apartment Suite at Hotel Zaza, fitted with vintage wingback leather chairs and a 3.5-metre long table for dinner parties, to be in walking distance of Houston's world-class museums. Or secure tickets to one of city's national sporting league teams – the Astros (baseball), Rockets (basketball) or Texans (football).

Timing is everything when it comes to visiting Houston. Locals joke there are two seasons, hot and hotter. So visiting in the U.S. spring (March-May) or autumn (September-November) can often be the best time to visit to avoid the intense humidity.

Another reason to travel in March is to attend the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo Show. Just buy tickets early as the best seats tend to sell-out fast.

The best way to experience the three-week event is by purchasing a HESS Chute seat, which comes with a front-row view of the rodeo, VIP access to 'the dirt' for the evening concert and entry to the giant carnival. Even if fast-paced rides or festival treats liked chocolate-dipped bacon and deep-fried "cookies" are not your preference, the carnival also includes high-end shopping for western boots, hats and jewellery.

Hear something new in Austin

Even in the state capital (2.5-hours drive west), you'll want to choose your time to visit. Austin hosts the only U.S. stop on the Formula One circuit, but is more synonymous with being the country's live music capital. In October, the city hosts Austin City Limits (ACL), a music festival that became so popular that it now spans over two weekends.

The festival now has a unique relationship with New Zealand after organisers announced the inaugural Auckland City Limits, a one-day spin-off of the festival that draws international superstars and breeds local musicians.





Don't be fooled into thinking ACL is marketed only towards a younger crowd. VIP tickets give access to an exclusive area featuring a mini-spa, gourmet happy hours and live feeds into the main stages. A dedicated child-friendly area, "Austin Kiddie Limits", and eating options that promote locally-harvested food are a good representation of the inclusive spirit you'll find in the city.

Its slogan may be "Keep Austin Weird" and the best place to embrace this is in South Austin.

Hidden on South Congress Ave among a collection of funky retail stores with retro exteriors and trendy eateries housed in trailers, food trucks and containers, is the boutique South Congress Hotel.

The Hotel is a representation of the area's rebuild of the sophisticated, but casual approach that Austin appears to define. It has the comforts of a relaxing urban retreat with an alluring rooftop pool and spa-like guest rooms. Plus it's in a location that makes it a short Uber ride to explore one of the city's 250 live music venues or walk to one of the area's independent coffee shops.

Explore the Hill Country

It can be the small towns in between Austin and San Antonio that will give you the authentic Texas experience.

Walk the main street in Fredericksburg to explore German-influenced dining or drive the 290 highway road to sample the emerging Texas wine culture.

In Gruene (pronounced green), you can visit the state's oldest dancehall or shop the boutique stores next to the Guadalupe River.

Meanwhile in Bandera, hill country resorts known as Dude Ranches allow guests to experience cowboy culture and horseback trail rides on working ranches.

On the 2-hour drive from Austin to San Antonio, don't miss taking a detour to Driftwood and visit the Salt Lick restaurant to taste how Texans define barbecue. At Salt Lick, beef brisket is slow cooked – a 17 to 21-hour process, which still incorporates a traditional open fire grill.

"The way we cook was based on how my relatives cooked when they were on the wagon trains," says Salt Lick owner Scott Roberts. What has evolved at Salt Lick is the move to embrace the region's growing wine presence. The land that the restaurant occupies also includes 50-acres of wine-growing grapes, which are bottled and available for tastings and sales in the Salt Lick Cellars.

Discover History in San Antonio

Texas history combined with the addition of several theme parks makes San Antonio a lure for travellers. If travelling with family, there are a number of spacious resorts like the Hyatt Hill Country, which offers easy access to Six Flags Fiesta Texas Roller Coaster Park and SeaWorld.

Staying downtown offers a great way to indulge in Texas history. Whether, that is at the landmark of the state's independence, the Alamo, or at the re-opened St. Anthony Hotel, the first fully-functioning air-conditioned hotel in the world.

The St. Anthony's renovation has managed to preserve the hotel's historical charm, while modernising its pristine lobby, dazzling rooftop pool and grand guest rooms.

The hotel is the prime location to explore the city's downtown attractions like the River Walk, a network of walkways below street level. Venture out before breakfast for almost exclusive access to the River Walk, but take one of the 30-minute river cruises on a Saturday night to see the waterfront restaurants buzzing.

There's always plenty to do beyond the River Walk. The emerging Pearl District is only five minutes drive from downtown and a hip shopping spot for Latin kitchenware and clothing.

The district's Boiler House Texas Grill and Wine Bar may just be the perfect way to end any Texas tour. The menu combines what you may know this state is renowned for, its cowboy-sized steaks, with the flair of originality and surprise that only those who venture to Texas will now know exist. ★

From December 2015 Air New Zealand will fly between Auckland and Houston up to five times a week. This new route will become the fastest way for New Zealanders to travel to popular East Coast destinations, including New York and Chicago. It also allows for easy access to Nashville, Tennessee; the jazz capital of New Orleans and sunny Miami in Florida. Houston is also a key gateway for destinations in Mexico, Central America and the Caribbean.