

THE TIMES**The JFK trail: from Fort Worth to Dallas**

Pioneer Plaza In Dallas

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The Kennedy assassination sites are mesmerising points of departure for discovering these neighbouring Texan cities

Everything is big in Texas, especially in Dallas — except the little white “X” painted on the road that marks the spot where the fatal bullet hit President John F Kennedy in the head on November 22, 1963.

Like many visitors I couldn’t resist scampering out between changes in the traffic lights to stand on that subtle “X” and have my picture taken, grinning half sheepishly, half excitedly.

Once safely back away from the traffic, I noticed something else that is much smaller than it looks in the photographs — the distance up to the sixth-floor window in the textbook warehouse where assassin Lee Harvey Oswald had crouched with his rifle.

His sniper’s perch is preserved behind glass in that warehouse, which at the time was the oddly named Texas School Book Depository and is now called the Sixth Floor Museum — no further explanation necessary in the discreet title.

Looking down from the window later, I held my breath, mesmerised and horrified by the easy sight line down to the gentle curve in Elm Street where Oswald’s bullets unleashed their nightmare.

Like many sites with strong links to Kennedy, the museum has spruced itself up and added fresh material for the landmark 50th anniversary of the assassination.

The newsreels and archive photographs aren’t new but they put the killing in context — Soviet nukes, civil-rights battles, the Mafia threat, Texan political tensions. There’s a new reading room and, recently added, the hat Jack Ruby wore when he killed Oswald two days after the assassination and the suit Dallas cop James Leavelle was wearing while he was handcuffed to Oswald during that shooting.

Conspiracy theories aren’t exactly my thing, but I couldn’t help going back outside to Elm Street and Dealey Plaza

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up the infamous “grassy knoll” to ponder, as you do, if a second assassin fired from there that day. The layout is essentially just as it was in 1963 and although a trip to Dallas doesn’t solve the murder mystery, it’s an illuminating and sobering way to relive those shattering few seconds in history.

It’s also a chance to marvel at an audacious contemporary American city, grown vast on oil money under the blazing sun.

At first I found it overwhelming and soulless — all skyscrapers and freeways. But surprisingly, there is a walk-able heart to the city, especially now a new park has been laid over a highway that previously divided the restaurants, hotels, bars and spas of Uptown from the Arts District.

After lunch at the new all-glass bistro in the park I wandered through the giant art museums (trillions made from the cotton, cattle and oil industries do a lot of paintings buy) and walked downtown to Dealey Plaza, all without getting lost, run over or even mildly dispirited.

You can absorb the scale and wealth of Dallas easily from the café at the top of Reunion Tower downtown, but what I found even more dramatic was bearing down on the skyline from a distance at night, flying along the elevated freeway in a taxi.

I was on my way back from dinner in the trendy Bishop Arts District. These few blocks of boutiques and brasseries in postindustrial brick buildings are overrated but, chillingly (or was it secretly thrillingly?), turned out to be right next to the shabby neighbourhood of Oak Cliff where Oswald was staying — and fled after the assassination.

Ghoulishly intrigued, I walked through run-down, residential streets to a boulevard lined with pawn shops and dollar stores, where I found the Texas Theatre, a retro cinema.

The frantic Oswald was arrested here. I would have gone in for a film or to peek at the seat Oswald cowered in as the police closed in, which is preserved in the bar. But it’s only open on Thursday to Sunday nights and I was daft enough to turn up on a Wednesday, so I satisfied myself with taking pictures of the original sign outside.

No time to go back the next night — it was off to Dallas’s neighbouring city of Fort Worth.

Most people have forgotten or never knew that John F Kennedy spent his last night on this mortal coil in Fort Worth, giving his last speeches there on the morning of his doomed journey to Dallas.

It’s unbelievably poignant now to look at the collection of photographs from that morning, on display at the Hilton Fort Worth where the couple stayed, then called the Hotel Texas.

There are pictures of John and Jackie laughing happily at a VIP hotel breakfast, and JFK bounding outside the entrance to give a speech to ecstatic, multiracial crowds that had waited in cold dawn rain to see their handsome young President, all oblivious that he would be dead before lunch.

His opening words to the crowd, “There are no faint hearts in Fort Worth”, are engraved on the wall of a new tribute outside the hotel.

The suite where the Kennedys slept doesn’t exist any more. In complete contrast, however, there is another hotel at the other end of town where I stayed in the actual room where a very different, but also doomed, couple once slept — Bonnie and Clyde.

The Stockyards Hotel in the town’s authentic historic quarter of the same name, where millions of cattle used to be traded, housed the notorious bank robbers in 1933. I felt insufficiently nefarious staying there without holding up any businesses, despite the handy pistol in the room, which Bonnie left behind. But at least I tried the Buffalo Butt beer in the old saloon and adopted a cowboy swagger down the brick-cobbled streets, where some Texas Longhorn cattle were being wrangled for the tourists.

Fort Worth’s slogan is “Where the West begins” and it’s easier to envisage amid the stockyards than downtown, where insipid new buildings long ago obliterated the bordellos and gambling dens frequented by Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid. You can taste the West, though, in the thick, tender beef. A waiter in one steakhouse told me that the diner on the next table in muddy boots and casual shirt could just as easily be an oil or cattle billionaire as a ranch hand. That’s Texas.

There was time for one final Kennedy wallow. I hopped in a cab to Fort Worth’s cultural district to see the collection of art that was specially curated for the President and Mrs Kennedy’s hotel rooms. Featuring work by Henry Moore, Picasso and American painter Thomas Eakins, many of the pieces were reunited this autumn at the Amon Carter Museum (showing until January 12). Later, in the bistro at the nearby Modern Art Museum, I looked out at pieces the President never lived to see, and raised a glass. JFK, RIP.

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Joanna Walters was a guest of the Dallas and Fort Worth Convention and Visitors Bureaux.

How to get there

American Airlines (0844 499 7300, aa.com) flies non-stop daily to Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport from Heathrow from £627.

Where to stay

Dallas: the Fairmont Hotel (fairmont.com) is well located between the Arts District and downtown historic sights. Although it's blandly corporate, the service is good and there is a large outdoor pool and roof garden. Doubles from £93, room only.

Fort Worth: the Hilton Fort Worth (fortworth.hilton.com) is where John and Jackie Kennedy spent their last night together and attended a VIP breakfast in the ballroom. Archive photos on the mezzanine floor are worth a visit in themselves. Doubles from £112, room only. The Stockyards Hotel (stockyardshotel.com) has Wild West decor and the room where Bonnie and Clyde slept from £146, room only.

From the Cape to the Plaza: in JFK's footsteps

Boston

Kennedy was born in Boston. A new walking tour passes his favourite, old-school Union Oyster House, the Parker House Hotel, where he proposed to Jackie at restaurant table 40, and historic Faneuil Hall, the site of his last speech in the 1960 election campaign. It costs £8 and runs Wednesday to Saturday (kennedytour.com). New displays at the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library in Boston include the flag from JFK's coffin and an exhibition about the Cuban missile crisis (jfklibrary.org).

Where to stay The Omni Parker House Hotel (001 617 227 8600, omnihotels.com) has rooms from £100 a night.

Cape Cod

The quaint beach town of Hyannis Port, a one and a half hour drive from Boston on the Cape Cod coast, has always been the Kennedy dynasty retreat. The main family house can be seen from the beach and you can eat fish and chips at the Kennedy haunt, Baxter's Boathouse (baxterscapecod.com).

An exhibition about John and Jackie's last summer there together, *Days of Joy. Days of Sorrow* , is at the JFK Hyannis Museum, but closes for winter on November 30 (jfkhyannismuseum.org).

Where to stay The Cape Codder (001 508 771 3000, capecodderresort.com) has rooms year-round from £73 a night. From May to October, stay at the Seacoast Inn (001 508 775 3828, seacoastcapecod.com), which has rooms from £65.

Washington DC

The Newseum (newseum.org), the press history centre between the White House and the Capitol, is showing two new JFK exhibitions and a documentary until January 5. Arlington Cemetery on the outskirts of Washington (accessible by Metro) has refurbished Kennedy's grave for the anniversary (arlingtoncemetery.org). Eat at a JFK favourite, Martin's Tavern (martins-tavern.com).

Where to stay The Mayflower Renaissance Washington DC Hotel (001 202 999 4571, marriott.com) was the lodging of choice for Judith Campbell Exner, alleged mistress of JFK and Mafia bosses. Rooms cost from £106 a night.

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