The Freedom to Roam

Texas Two Step

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Houston and San Antonio fit Town & Country better than boots on a cowboy
Texas Two Step

Houston

IN

Atlanta, we have Interstate 285, outside the perimeter and moonshine. In Houston, they have Interstate 610, inside The Loop and "Moonshine." My introduction to all of these, as well as a brief lesson in the history of oil drilling, came within minutes of my arrival. Less than 24 hours later, I had wandered happily through neighborhoods both inside and outside The Loop, rattled off the city's hip "H-Town" nickname as if it was my own and eagerly awaited dinner at the hands of the first chef to bring a James Beard Foundation Award to town in more than 20 years.

HIP HEADQUARTERS

Named after Sam Houston, general of the Texas army that won independence from Mexico and president of the Republic of Texas, the city has long been touted as a hub for business, particularly when it comes to oil. Unbeknownst to many, the city has struck it rich in areas the rest of us can enjoy as well.

Being a one-of-a-kind boutique hotel that sports as much class as it does personality might be hard for some, but for Hotel Derek, a Destination Hotel, uniqueness comes as easily as the black gold on which the city's roots have long been established. Prior to meeting "Moonshine," the painted cow in the lobby of Hotel Derek, I learned that a derrick is an iconic piece of oil drilling machinery (think plunger with a horsehead shape). Such playful cleverness became more apparent throughout the property, where Texas pride flows with a whimsical and welcoming signature style that adds to its already irresistible character.

The first independent hotel in Houston when it opened in 2002 and the only one inside its famed 610 Loop still today, Hotel Derek underwent a multi-million dollar renovation not long after becoming part of the Destination Hotels collection in 2013. Since then, accolades continue to accumulate and the Texas chic hotel rarely ceases to surprise its guests. Where else can you watch a Western movie projected on the...
wall by the outdoor pool or mosey downstairs in the morning for Starbucks at a café that morphs into Tap & Pour, a pop-up bar serving local Houston craft beer at night.

Bold hues, musical beats and modern amenities make this Forbes Four-Star hotel a favorite for locals as well, many of which come for dinner and drinks at Revolve Kitchen and Bar. I’d extracted a girlfriend out of Austin to explore her great state and we started appropriately enough, with a flight of craft beer. Each saddled with five small pours of local brew, we willingly steered ourselves to one refined dish after the other. Aside from serving Southern hospitality with an edge, this haven flips luxury on its übercool side with dedication to detail. It’s not often guests can choose from seven types of rooms from penthouse, terrace and junior suites to Sky Deluxe, located on the top two floors of the hotel and lofts, in addition to standard rooms.

**LEFT:** The hip pool area with its Western movie wall at Hotel Derek; bone-in pork chop with a pecan stuffing at Revolve Kitchen and Bar inside Hotel Derek

**BELOW:** The always bustling dining room at Chef Chris Shepherd's Underbelly restaurant
For another sunny spot where good food and good times await, don’t miss our online-exclusive feature on Bermuda at pointsnorthonline.com.

As part of Houston’s public art scene, the city has become home to some amazing murals. A favorite, according to locals, is this one.

this restaurant had me at “bake shop.” Located in an industrial space, the casual neighborhood eatery is based on the name given to government-sponsored agencies that worked to ensure vendors were selling exactly what they were advertising. Locals dawdle in droves for options like the cake donuts with fried chicken and hazelnut vanilla syrup or the peanut butter, Nutella, banana, bacon brioche toast with fried eggs. Stick around long enough and you can wander to the happening Mongoose versus Cobra for craft beer and cocktails.

At the heart of Houston’s culinary landscape just might be Chef Chris Shepherd of Underbelly. Found in the Montrose neighborhood, Underbelly earned its nameake from things not seen in the city and is designed by Shepherd to share the story of Houston food. Compelled by the ingredients and diversity of his city, Shepherd masterfully merges these passions on the plate. The menu changes daily based on what is freshest and in season — the lone exception being the Korean braised goat dumplings. I confess, this is not something I’d order on my own, but given the rave reviews, I couldn’t resist. As a matter of fact, it might be one of the few times a restaurant has recommended letting my server choose the menu.

Tempted as I might have been, I didn’t do the same next door at The Hay Merchant. Shepherd’s other nationally recognized restaurant and craft beer bar. Surrounded on three sides by chalkboards and taps, I relied heavily on previous training to procure a few pints.

The next morning, we found ourselves at Blacksmith, a coffee shop not surprisingly, owned by Shepherd. What can I say? He set the standard unusually high and had piqued our curiosity.

The same could be said of the city. Seeing a mural that read, “Houston is inspired, hip, tasty, funky, savory,” we realized it already has.
TEXAS TWO STEP

San Antonio

LESS than three hours point-to-point on Interstate 10, the drive between Houston and San Antonio provides just enough time for the metropolitan vibe to fade. Emerging in its place is the vastness of Texas Hill Country — proof that referring to this state mostly by its cities, rather than its beauty, is a mistake.

Second only to Houston as Texas’s most populated city, San Antonio has become the heart of the state’s wine industry, with distinct wineries scattered throughout the area’s stunning vistas and tall, rugged hills. Even still, unlike sister cities like Houston, Dallas and Austin, it hasn’t always been considered a cool sibling. Until recently.

A HAVEN IN THE HILLS
While typical draws include The Alamo, the San Antonio River Walk and even Six Flags over Texas, we had come to experience another side of San Antonio. One where solitude and serenity can be found at water’s edge and where tucked into the tufts of Texas Hill Country the luxurious La Cantera Resort and Spa awaits.

Fitting seamlessly into the Destination Hotels collection, which includes an impressive list of properties each with a personality surpassed only by its sense of place, La Cantera minimizes the need to go anywhere else. Compliments of a multi-million dollar renovation, the expansive resort boasts 498 rooms, five pools and irresistible private pool cabanas. The infinity edge
pool overlooking the expansive view easily persuaded us to play favorites. Life with lap after lap in luxury ... ahh.

Does it get any better? Golfers among us could debate between the two championship courses at La Cantera, but otherwise, the only deliberating I can imagine would be deciding among the indulgent treatments available at the brand new Loma de Vida Spa & Wellness. I say imagine because with a summer grand opening, the highly anticipated 25,000-square-foot indoor/outdoor sanctuary wasn’t quite ready during my visit.

Overlooking lush fairways and wooded bluffs, this secluded destination spa will have an emphasis on mindful living, giving guests ample opportunity to reset body, mind and soul. One particular place designed for recharging and reconnecting will be The Gathering Place, replete with a majestic fireplace, revolving art gallery and terrace with views only found in Texas. Personally, I’d be drawn to the Sky Loft suites — think spas within the spa, each equipped with old-fashioned cowboy bathtubs. Even though each suite overlooks the first hole of the award-winning Tom Weiskopf-designed Resort Course, my inner cowgirl would manifest itself after such a true Texas experience. Even without a horse, said cowgirl would then have enough giddy-up to trot directly to one of the three private garden cabanas and the intimate Saline Grotto pool. There, I would sip an organic, cold-pressed juice or fresh protein elixir from Quenché, with special spa menu items on hand, created by the resort’s chef.

Alas, that peek into future pampering was a momentary mirage for me. Instead, we focused on several of the nine dining venues. At SweetFire Kitchen, we went all out with the resort’s signature buffet; between activities and shopping, we grabbed one of the specialty lattes as well as a few gifts at Henrietta’s Market; then for dinner, we enjoyed an authentic feast of Latin-inspired dishes and handcrafted cocktails at Primo’s Cantina. The lineup included a chef’s selection of house-made salsas, a trio of ceviche and queso fundido made with Mezcal-macerated stone fruit, pickled chipotle and hoja santa. Embracing the full definition of feast, next came Gulf fish with coconut leche de tigre, charred stone fruit, pickled trenso and cashew followed by the Cemita Burger, made with black beans, serrano ham,
LEFT: Hand-crafted ceviche sampler at Primero Cantina
RIGHT: Inside La Cantera's SweetFire Kitchen

queso oaxaca, pickled chipotle, papalo and avocado. Just for good measure, we sauntered into Sire, the well-appointed bar tucked off the resort’s stunning lobby for an unnecessary nightcap.

An oasis of its own, La Cantera is nestled into 550 acres, easily evoking the feeling of a remote escape, yet within minutes of San Antonio’s hottest stops and historical sites.

ON A MISSION

With a deep love for our national parks, I see no point in being close enough to visit one without immediately taking a detour. Such was the case in San Antonio, where eventually I was able to pull myself away from La Cantera long enough to explore the local missions. Established in 1833, San Antonio Missions National Historical Park is responsible for managing four of the five historic sites.

Get a lay of the land inside the Visitor’s Center before venturing to Mission San José, known as the “Queen of the Missions.” As the largest of the missions, Mission San José was almost fully restored to its original design in the 1930s by the WPA (Works Projects Administration). As my Austin counterpart explained, Spanish Colonial Missions were, unlike I’d always assumed, not churches, but communities, where church was the focus. Walking into the small quarters and reading the plaques enables visitors to get a feel for how Mission San José might have looked and operated more than 250 years ago.

After filling up on history, it was time to refuel elsewhere. Though separated from the popular River Walk in the past, the Blue Star Arts Complex now serves as a 7-mile trailhead to the Mission Reach of the San Antonio River Improvement Project. Stop by Stella Public House for farm-to-table pizza and plenty of local libations.

Inside Pearl, once a 23-acre brewery complex that has been at the forefront of the city’s trendy revitalization, we poked into many of the enticing restaurants and bars until finally appeasing our appetite at The Boiler House, Texas Grill and Wine Garden. There, we nibbled on Texas whiskey bacon caramel kettle corn followed by a spread made with black truffle burrata, black garlic and heirloom tomatoes. Locally born and bred, Executive Chef Jeff White, a featured chef at the prestigious James Beard House in New York City, is on a mission to elevate his hometown culinary scene.

Next door sits The Culinary Institute of America San Antonio campus. Like most siblings, San Antonio refuses to be ignored, and nipping at the well-heeled boots of its brethren has garnered attention.

Spending time in two Lone Star stops, I soon forgot about big stars and oversized flags. Texas, I discovered, is home to substantial sophistication.

Houston and San Antonio certainly wear it well, not to mention, it’s a Texas Two Step I can actually do.

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