HOUSTON,
WE HAVE A PARTY

Football fandom touches down in Space City for February’s Super Bowl. But the big game lasts only a few hours in a city full of grit and roughneck charm. Here’s where to go once you leave the stadium.

DIRTIER THAN DIRTY SIXTH

Forty-three years ago, Hunter S. Thompson traveled to Houston to cover Super Bowl VIII, which pitted the Miami Dolphins against the Minnesota Vikings. Thompson spent a week searching for cocaine, hanging out at a “grotesquely violent strip joint” called the Blue Fox and screaming fiery pre-dawn sermons from a balcony at downtown’s Hyatt Regency. The gonzo-journalism pioneer later described the city as “a cruel, crazy town on a filthy river in East Texas with no zoning laws and a culture of sex, money and violence—a shabby, sprawling metropolis ruled by brash women, crooked cops and super-rich pederastic cowboys.”

Houston hosts the Super Bowl again on February 5. Thompson is no longer alive, but the cruel, crazy town he described most certainly is. Houston today is bigger, richer and weirder than ever. It still has no zoning laws—allowing a culture of sex, money and violence to thrive—and the rivers (they’re called bayous down here) are still filthy.

You wouldn’t know any of this from the Convention and Visitors Bureau, which has been engaged in a decades-long propaganda campaign to clean up Houston’s image. The city spent $1.5 billion to build a new downtown dining and entertainment district, expedited for Super Bowl LII. Tourists who stay there will find themselves in a glittering ghetto of chain hotels and chain restaurants, all within walking distance.

That should be a red flag for anyone who knows anything about the city, because Houstonians don’t walk anywhere, and for good reason. Nine months out of the year, stepping outside feels like stepping into a sweaty arm pit. Even if visitors were inclined to walk, there would be nowhere to go; like Los Angeles, Houston—with a greater metropolitan area larger than New Jersey—is designed for cars, not pedestrians. Normal city commutes range from 30 minutes to two hours, and public transportation is sparse and inconvenient.

So if you want to see the real Houston—Thompson’s Houston—the first thing you’ll need is wheels. Because Houstonians spend so much time in their cars and because, frankly, they have a bit of an obesity problem, they like them big. If you want to blend in, your best bet is a Ford F-350 pickup, a Bentley Continental or something similar.

Driving around, you’ll be lucky to spot a few slabs candy-colored vintage sedans with scaly protruding rims and booming stereo. Houston rapper Paul Wall, who owns several of the vehicles, says you can’t understand Houston without understanding its car culture. You gotta relax, because you’re going to be sitting...
“RIGHT NOW, EVERYONE’S TAKING A PIECE OF OUR CULTURE. IT’S WORLDWIDE.”

in traffic for a while to get to the other side of town,” he says. “It’s hot, it’s spread out, and that adds to the slow pace. You hear that in our music, in the way we talk, everything.”

It’s the languid pace that inspired the legendary DJ Screw, who popularized the Sprite-and-cough-syrup cocktail known as purple drank, to pioneer the chopped-and-screwed sound that is Houston’s major contribution to hip-hop. Although the style has since been appropriated by everyone from Kanye West to Miley Cyrus, Houston rappers still see it as their own and are wary of outsiders like Drake—who name-checks the city incessantly and plans to open a strip club here—elbowing in on their turf. “Right now, everyone’s taking a little piece of our culture,” says local rapper Z-Ro, clearly irritated. “It’s worldwide. You’ve got people in France sipping syrup.”

Z-Ro suggests starting your day at the Breakfast Klub, where locals wait in lines around the block to get their hands on artery-clogging specialties such as fried catfish and a side of buttery grits. Afterward, if you’re in the mood to pick up some Houston bling, swing by the PlazaAmericas mall to get fitted for a grill at Johnny Dang & Co., which has created custom mouthpieces for Nelly, Paris Hilton and Hugh Hefner.

You’ll need to remove that grill to eat lunch, which should be either barbecue (Killen’s in nearby Pearland, if you don’t mind waiting in line again), Tex-Mex (try the Original Ninfa’s on Navigation) or Creole (Pappadeaux is a favorite of Houston’s queen, Beyoncé). For dinner, splurge at one of Houston’s nationally acclaimed restaurants, such as James Beard Award winner Chris Shepherd’s Underbelly, where the daily-changing menus incorporate Creole, Vietnamese, Thai and Indian influences, as well as underutilized cuts of meat from the restaurant’s in-house butcher shop.

Thanks to laissez-faire city planning, be

1, 2. Find more than 50 obscure tequilas and mezcal s at the Pastry War, a mezcaleria serving cocktails such as the aquafaba-topped Mexican jumping bean. 3. In October, Johnny Dang expanded his grill shop to a 14,000-square-foot second location.
TRAVEL

1. Enjoy wish living in an ugly city at Hotel Derek. 2. The Hat Store has fitted everyone from President George H.W. Bush to ZZ Top's Dusty Hill. 3. The Breakfast Klub's chicken and waffles.

preparing for some jarring juxtapositions.
Evanston's Phillip Lopate once described the cityscape as "inhospitable, impenetrable and unfriendly to strangers." That's an understatement. Underbelly sits across the street from a Burger King that caters to the local homeless population. The Montrose neighborhood, heart of the city's vibrant gay and lesbian community and now one of its most expensive and rapidly gentrifying areas, recently became infested with so many chain mattress stores that it gained the nickname Mattress.

TWO-STEP WITH THE BEST OF 'EM

Because the city was built on a swamp, the only natural features are its 20 major bayous, most of which are lined with concrete and completely ignored by everyone, except when they flood. Monstrous freeways, the widest of which is up to 25 lanes across but still perpetually choked with traffic, dominate the landscape. However, a few pockets of great beauty combat the endless sea of grotesqueness: Rice University's campus, the wealthy River Oaks neighborhood and the Menil Collection and its environs are examples.

Why would anyone live here? In a word, oil. Although the city was founded in 1836 as a trading entrepôt, it was the discovery of oil in nearby Beaumont in 1901 that set Houston on a trajectory to become the nation's fourth-largest city. Its proudest achievements, from the invention of the artificial heart to the construction of the Astrodome, were made possible by the trillions of dollars that flooded in thanks to oil and gas.

The energy industry may be slowing, but you wouldn't know it from the bars, where plenty of well-dressed tycoons keep up appearances by conspicuously disposing of their disposable income. Start your night with longneck Lone Stars at one of the historic jukeboxes—ramshackle outdoor bar that date back to the days before air-conditioning. Move on to the Pasty War, where you can sample small-batch tequilas and mezcal with a side of tamales, or Tony Brasserie 19 to sip champagne, sharp rye Gulf oysters and observe the city's Botanized socialites in their natural habitat.

Culturally, Houston owes more to the South than the West and is more New Orleans than Dallas. But if you want to play urban cowboy, the city is happy to oblige. After getting fitted with a custom Stetson at the Hat Store, which has dressed Merle Haggard and Lyle Lovett, ride over to Wild West, a cavernous honky-tonk where you can grab a seat by the dance floor and watch couples two-step to George Strait beneath a saddle-shaped disco ball. When all that boot-scootin' makes you hungry, amble across the parking lot to Diablo Loco, a sort of Latino Hooters, where you can wash down an order of fiery wings with a tower of beer that arrives in a giant glass hong. Vanilla tourists considerably stay away from these fine establishments, which is all the more reason to go.

WHERE TO CUT IT UP

Closing time at most bars is two a.m., and after-hours clubs are essentially upscale strip joints. The most infamous of these is V Live, situated a block from Wild West and Diablo Loco. Open from two to six in the morning, Tuesday through Sunday. V Live is probably the only place in town where you can get a haircut and a lap dance under the same roof. "This motherfucking club got a barbershop in it," marvels Z-Ro, a regular. "You can buy jewelry. You can buy a Houston Texans jersey. It's kind of like a minimall where you can see naked women." A word of caution: Despite the club's tight security, several shootings recently occurred in the parking lot. Visit at your own risk. After a boozed-soaked night, you'll need a place to crash. Check in to Hotel ZaZa or Hotel Derek, both recently remodeled, whose pools offer the perfect place to recharge your batteries alongside some of this town's most beautiful people. Sitting in the shade of a poolside cabana, drinking a margarita, you may even be inclined to say (to quote one of the city's unofficial slogans), "Houston: It's worth it." If not, another unofficial name comes to mind: Fuck you, Houston's awesome.