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Texas, 3 Ways

By ROBERT DRAPER NOV. 14, 2014

You might say that a certain otherness has always characterized Texas as a whole — and by "whole," I refer to that entire 269,000-square-mile sui generis behemoth on the map, mallet-headed and dainty-footed, with a single dorsal wing and a swollen belly that appears to contain two or three neighboring states.

Unifying the Lone Star state is the enduring pride Texans take in its sheer bigness, in its defiant Alamo spirit and in the confidence, borne out of its brief (and not altogether successful) status as a former sovereign republic, that it can get by just fine without anyone's help.

"Texas has never been short on self-love, perhaps its greatest natural resource," writes the author and Texas Monthly political journalist Erica Grieder. Being a Texan herself, Ms.

Grieder can be excused for exaggerating; after all, a recent University of Texas/Texas Tribune poll found that a mere 27 percent of statewide respondents identify themselves as Texans first and Americans second.

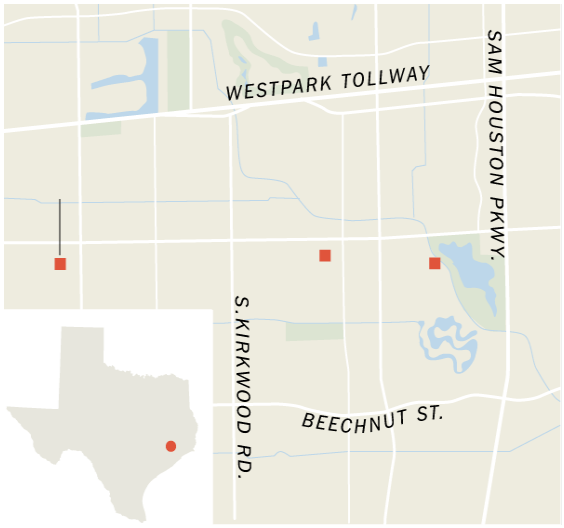
Still, her point prompts a salient question: Exactly which Texas are Texans loving? And for that matter, which Texas do its visitors expect to find when they're visiting? (It ranked sixth last year among states as an overseas tourist draw, according to the United States Department of Commerce.)

I would submit, as a proud native, that Texas is no longer what it, and we, think it is, even after the state G.O.P.'s total domination in the midterm elections. Take its biggest city, Houston, which is also the fourth biggest in America. Today, like the state itself, the city is majority-minority. Thirty-five percent of its 2.2 million inhabitants are Hispanic, though the city's fastest-growing group is Asian. Concomitant with these demographic shifts are political realities that were unimaginable two decades ago. Since 2010, Houston's mayor has been Annise Parker, a gay woman. For that matter, Barack Obama carried Harris County in the past two election cycles, just as he did Dallas County. The urban cowboy has receded into the horizon. The Astrodome lies vacant. Apocalypse now: Texas looks like America!

None of which is to suggest that Texas has assimilated its way into banality. Its frontier tenet — if you can handle it here, you belong here — remains thoroughly in force. At the same time, its newest settlers swear no fealty to the rural Anglo culture that once prevailed. By now everyone knows, from these pages and elsewhere, how cool Austin and Marfa are. The alternative view is that these are manageably de-Texanized dreamscapes for Palo Alto and Brooklyn exiles, but let's not have that argument here. Instead, the next time you're traveling through the Lone Star State, gratify your imagination with areas in the following three cities that conjure up a Texas far more interesting than the stereotypes Texans themselves have long embraced.

Houston: Asia Town

Sequestered in southwest suburban Houston, a few miles apart from each other near Bellaire Boulevard, sit two Asian places of worship. One of them, the Jade Buddha Temple, was built in 1990 by a nonprofit outfit of predominantly Taiwanese-Americans calling itself the Texas Buddhist Association. The other, the Teo Chew Temple, attracts a predominantly Vietnamese congregation and was funded by Hai Du Duong, one of the thousands of destitute "boat people" who arrived on the Gulf Coast in the late '70s and '80s and scrapped their way into Houston's labor force. Both are lovely, dignified structures and well worth a visit. (Sunday services at the Jade Temple are offered in both Mandarin and English, as are Dharma lessons for children.)



But it's the three-mile strip on Bellaire Boulevard between the two temples that offers a new, hidden-in-plain-sight context to the Bayou City. Block after block, store after store is Asian: reflexology clinics, herbal medicine shops, scores upon scores of Korean and Thai and Chinese and Vietnamese restaurants and not a single American fast-food totem in sight. It's an overwhelming spectacle, all the more so because its architecturally uniformity — we're in the Houston suburbs, after all — adds to the feeling of having fallen off the map. The place begs for a guide, and fortunately I had one with me: Christy Chang, director of Asia Heritage Discovery Tours. Ms. Chang, though a Houstonian since 1979, conceded that she was hardly a pioneer: The first Chinese residents, she pointed out, came here in 1870 to work on the railroad.

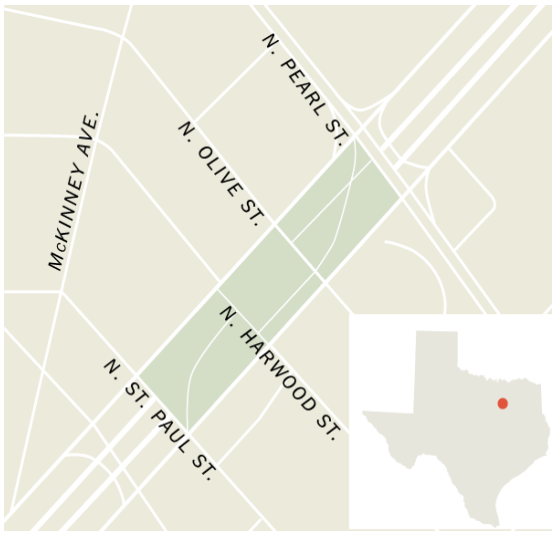
The nexus of Asia Town is the Hong Kong City Mall, erected by the same Hai Du Duong. (Talk about Texas hospitality: When Louisiana evacuees from Hurricane Katrina poured into Houston during the summer of 2005, Mr. Hai sheltered hundreds of them in his building.) On weekends the mall's sprawling parking lot is completely full, and the shopping corridors recall the actual Hong Kong during high season. We toured it on a Wednesday morning. The east end of the mall was redolent of crayfish beignets; nearby, a cluster of elderly men would soon gather to play a Chinese version of chess called Xiangqi.

"When I moved to Houston from Taiwan in 1979, I had to drive all the way downtown just to buy a box of tofu," Ms. Chang told me as we approached the answer to her prayers, the gloriously overabundant Hong Kong Market, a one-stop venue for barbecued quail, woks, live razor clams, dried sea cucumbers and, yes, an embarrassment of tofu. Elsewhere in the mall are shops devoted to jewelry, silk cloths, Asian music and eyeglasses, along with signs advertising the services of a Vietnamese lawyer. I began to gravitate toward the aroma of a Vietnamese sandwich shop. Ms. Chang suggested instead that we take tea now and dine later.

A few blocks east of the mall, we walked into the Ten Ren Tea Shop. Customers filed in and out of a side office where a doctor took their pulse and then prescribed various herbal medicines. From the dozens of canisters on the shelves, the tea master, a gangly young man named Jimmy, removed the high mountain oolong and pearl jasmine and brewed us a cup of each. Both were bewitching and, Jimmy assured us, high in cancer-combating antioxidants. My more pressing concern, though, was starvation. Ms. Chang ushered me off to the nearby Golden Dumpling, a small Chinese restaurant where the only English in view was on two signs: “Thank you for not smoking” and “Cold drinks.” At the counter, however, the cashier offered me a menu written in my native language. Every dumpling I tried — steamed cabbage, chives with dried shrimp, pan-fried with pork — was a deep dive into pillowy bliss, at a cost of about $20 a person. Ms. Chang pronounced the tour completed and left me beatifically reposed in a Houston I had not known existed.

Dallas: Klyde Warren Park

“Inhale. Now, Warrior One. Just … breathe.” A little after 10 on a Saturday morning, some 50 Lycra-clad individuals and their yoga mats lay stretched across a grassy knoll in downtown Dallas. Directly behind them loomed the silver-dark commercial skyline. A few yards away, dog adoption clinic volunteers spilled puppies out of their cages and onto the lawn, while, nearby, a dozen or so children scaled a molecularly shaped jungle gym. Competing with the Enya-esque soundtrack and the yoga instructor’s voice was the oceanic sound loop of Interstate traffic.



For much of the past half-century, the tourism gods have scowled upon Dallas, and the recent tragic cases of Ebola in the city have continued that trend. Even in good times, Dallas is a prisoner of its braying, big-haired caricature. And though frequent visitors know that the made-for-TV antics of J. R. Ewing hardly captured the city in full, it has certainly never pretended to be Austin. I pointed this out to the yoga instructor, Lauren Margulies, once her class was done. Nodding, she replied, “People in Dallas are looking for a way to connect to the outdoors, and that’s something that’s been lacking here. And so to have all these people

on the grass doing this ancient ritual beneath the downtown skyscrapers is such an interesting juxtaposition. Dallas needed this."

Apparently. Since Klyde Warren Park opened in October 2012 — the fruit of a $110 million public-private partnership constructed on top of a former epic eyesore, the overpass of the eight-lane Woodall Rodgers Freeway, as a green corridor linking the city's uptown and arts districts — it has quickly become one of the biggest draws in Dallas and, in the process, an eco-friendly shredder of stereotypes. Here you see the professionally harried and the wayward stretched out on the grass or idled in folding chairs playing chess. You see food trucks. You see shelves of free books. You see a sign forbidding "commercial activity" — drive a stake through J. R.'s wizened heart, why don'tcha! And all of this splayed on a mere five acres, which in size-obsessed Texas surely sets a record for architectural restraint.

Of course, because it remains awfully hard to be humble in Dallas, the park's blue-ribbon donors are honored with plaques designating the Moody and Hart Plazas, the Muse Family Performance Pavilion and the Ginsburg Family Great Lawn. (The park itself is named after the son of the local energy billionaire Kelcy Warren, a donor.) Still, even on busy weekends the park's ethos is peaceable, a somnolent connective tissue between the city's dignified cultural institutions (chief among them, the Dallas Museum of Art and the Meyerson Symphony Center) and the rollicking uptown restaurant scene (epitomized by Stampede 66 and Fearing's). And, as Ms. Margulies, the yoga instructor, suggested, the tableau of an unself-consciously mixed citizenry languishing beneath the shadows of the Hunt Oil and Bain & Company buildings is not simply counterintuitive to Dallas stereotypes; it's a reminder that beneath the bravado is a city that has shed more than a few demons and frankly deserves a break.

Children play in Klyde Warren Park in Dallas. CreditAllison V. Smith for The New York Times

I ate lunch at a splashy new dining spot at the edge of Klyde Warren, Lark on the Park, and chatted with the owner, the longtime Dallas restaurateur Shannon Wynne. When he commented, “Dallas has matured more in the last five years than in the past 25,” I asked him why this was. He guffawed in reply, “Well, it certainly can’t be the locals.” He added that the city had benefited greatly from new blood, and that they in turn had emboldened establishment Dallasites to reconsider the city’s possibilities.

While Mr. Wynne talked, I looked over his shoulder at the restaurant’s walls, which were covered with intricate chalk drawings that rotate quarterly: one by a local tattoo artist, another by a medical illustrator, a third depicting the University of Texas at Dallas’s top-ranked chess team. Meanwhile, outside, dozens of residents were tossing Frisbees, or ice skating. It occurred to me that while Dallas has always exhibited the capacity to surprise others, it had now succeeded in surprising itself.

El Paso: El Segundo Barrio

The street muralist, 37-year-old Jesus Alvarado, known as Cimi, gestured at the little boy in the painting being bathed by his mother in the aluminum tub while shaving his own baby-soft cheek with a razor blade. “I grew up with a single mother, as the only male in the house,” he said. “And the shaving signifies how you have to grow up fast.”

The mural, “El Corrido del Segundo Barrio,” was painted by Mr. Alvarado on parachute cloth two years ago and installed outdoors behind the El Paso Boys and Girls Club, in the heart of the city’s working class Hispanic neighborhood El Segundo Barrio, or the Second Ward, where the artist spent his childhood. The barrio is a montage of indigenous motifs: the Sacred Heart Church, the neighborhood’s cultural and spiritual anchor; el Puente Negro, the nearby crossing where illegal immigrants would sprint alongside trains and into America; street musicians and other town fixtures.

A protégé of the revered local artist Gaspar Enriquez, Mr. Alvarado is a hard-working street muralist but far from the only one. As we drove the tidy streets of Segundo Barrio, ornate images materialized on walls of nearly every block: a depiction of the town’s former “bicycling priest,” Father Rahm; a lavish Aztec reimagination of Romeo and Juliet; a tuxedo-clad man haloed by the declaration “God Is Mexican”; and a remarkable and stirring mural evoking the life of boys in the barrio.

The works were done in broad daylight — though very few were commissioned by the city (“El Corrido del Segundo Barrio” being one exception). Most, Mr. Alvarado said, were informal arrangements in which the shopkeeper might pick up the cost of the painter’s art supplies. However the means, the effect is extraordinary. Segundo Barrio has become its own outdoor museum of the border proletariat.

When Texans and non-Texans alike consider the state romantically, intentionally or not they’re summoning up the big-sky country of the West, with its bowlegged, string-tied paleo-libertarian ethic and its borderland noir mystique. Marfa is other things, but it is not that place. Instead, the vast cattle ranches and endless desert vistas are found west of Marfa, girdling 200 miles of Interstate, concluding at the junction of New Mexico and Chihuahua with its last repository of Southwestern soul, in El Paso.

With about 674,000 residents, El Paso is the state's sixth-biggest city. You can tour wineries, attend farmers' markets and watch touring indie rock bands and pretend that you're somewhere else. Though the city is awash in Hispanic culture owing to Juarez just across the Rio Grande, El Paso's civic fabric is a complicated weave that has long included Irish, Chinese, Syrian and Lebanese émigrés. (The actor F. Murray Abraham, of Syrian descent, spent nearly all of his childhood and college years here.)

Its freshman (and just re-elected) congressman, Beto O'Rourke — whose family came over from Ireland four generations ago to work on the railroad — is a former indie-band guitarist who beat an entrenched incumbent in part by campaigning that the "war on drugs" must end. But when I interviewed Mr. O'Rourke in Washington one day about other matters, I concluded by telling him, "I'm thinking of coming to your district to check out El Paso. Is there anything there that you think would surprise me?"

Jesus Alvarado, a street muralist, in his El Paso studio. CreditNancy Newberry for The New York Times

The congressman nearly sprang from his leather couch. "Oh, man," he said. "You've got to go to Segundo Barrio."

There was excitement in his voice, but also defiance. The barrio dead-ends at the border to Juarez, which for decades has been regarded as a murderous haven of traficantes violent

(though recently its streets have become noticeably safer). Despite this, its neighbor El Paso has been ranked, based on violent crime statistics, as the safest city in America for the past four years. “I think that’s because of the fact that 26 percent of the residents are recent immigrants,” Mr. O’Rourke said. “These folks are strivers, focused on getting ahead. There’s self-policing. And because we’re on the border, we also have one of the highest concentrations of federal law enforcement in America.”

I met up with Mr. O’Rourke in Segundo Barrio and we took another spin. The streets were filling up with day visitors from Juarez gathering cheap products to take back across the pedestrian bridge. He drove me past some of his favorite sights in the neighborhood he calls “Texas’s Ellis Island, the launching pad to citizenship.”

A small bronze plaque on dusty South Oregon Street commemorated the spot where the famed novel of the 1910 Mexican Revolution, “Los de Abajo” (“Those From Below”) was written by Mariano Azuela. No such sign existed to memorialize the escape path taken into Mexico by Steve McQueen and Ali MacGraw in Sam Peckinpah’s 1972 film “The Getaway,” but Mr. O’Rourke gestured vaguely that it was in this vicinity.

A few blocks south resided Mr. O’Rourke’s favorite outlet for chicharrones (cracklings), while on Alameda he pointed an enthusiastic finger at Ciro’s (“awesome flautas with fresh guacamole”), though when the time came for a quick bite we opted for pumpkin empanadas at Bowie Bakery, a favorite pit stop of George W. Bush.

That evening we would see a more sophisticated side of El Paso: opening night to Gaspar Enriquez’s electrifying “Metaphors of El Barrio” temporary exhibition at the El Paso Museum of Art; grilled steaks with roasted chile peppers at the tony Café Central; and a tequila nightcap high up on Rim Road, at the home of one of the congressman’s constituents, the daughter of the former El Paso mayor Jonathan Rogers, who legendarily disdained formality to the point that he would cut off the neckties of visitors with his scissors.

From just beyond her front lawn we could look out onto the twinkling infinity of Juarez, Mexico, at night, and illuminated beneath it, “La Equis,” its hulking new X-shaped monument — a spot worth marking, no doubt, but by now the evidence was clear that the place to be was right where we stood.

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IF YOU GO

HOUSTON

Though Asia Town is frequently referred to as Chinatown, its populace is decidedly mixed (with the plurality of the city’s Asian population being Vietnamese). Its main axis is Bellaire

Boulevard in the southwest Houston district of Alief, with its densest concentration bordered to the east and west by two temples, both just south of Bellaire: Jade Buddha Temple (6969 Westbranch Drive; 281-498-1616; jadebuddha.org) and Teo Chew Temple (10599 Turtlewood Court; 281-983-0097). Both are open to the public.

Asian Heritage Discovery Tours (832-858-2788; asianheritagediscovery.com). Christy Chang conducts tours free of charge on weekdays from 9:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. by prior arrangement. Hong Kong City Mall (11205 Bellaire Boulevard; 281-575-7863). This self-contained complex is Asia Town in miniature. Pedicures, tofu, silk cloths and crayfish beignets are among the offerings.

Ten Ren Tea (10804 Bellaire Boulevard; 281-495-2833). The place for herbal medicines and, above all, handpicked tea leaves. Group tea tastings by appointment.

Golden Dumpling House (9896 Bellaire Boulevard; 713-270-9996). Three years old and indistinct in appearance from other nearby restaurants, Golden Dumpling House is the place for perfectly cooked dumplings of all types. The chive and dried shrimp version is transcendent. Per person, about $20.

DALLAS

The five-acre Klyde Warren Park is at 2012 Woodall Rodgers Freeway in the heart of downtown and is open daily from 6 a.m. to 11 p.m. (klydewarrenpark.org). Activities include a children's playground, free music concerts, ice skating and weekend yoga classes.

Lark on the Park (2015 Woodall Rodgers Freeway; 214-855-5275; larkonthepark.com). A casually upmarket restaurant with park views and rotating exhibits of chalkboard art on its walls. Excellent sandwiches and microbrew beers for lunch and continental fare for dinner. Per person, about $30.

EL PASO

In the one-square-mile historic working-class Hispanic-American neighborhood of El Segundo Barrio, street murals are ubiquitous; among the more notable are "El Corrido del Segundo Barrio" (behind the Boys & Girls Club at Sixth and Campbell Streets), Carlos Rosas' "Entelequia" (also Sixth and Campbell), "The Boxing Hall of Fame" (Stanton and Mills) and "God Is Mexican" (Cesar Chavez and Campbell).

Bowie Bakery (901 Park Street; 915-544-6025; bowiebakery.com). Founded in 1951, the pastry shop features empanadas and cakes favored by George W. Bush and locals.