



36 HOURS

Houston

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The country's fourth-biggest city sits at the frontlines of climate change, immigration and political divide. That endless friction can be exhausting for residents and a turn-off for visitors — so much so that the chest-thumping unofficial motto of the city in recent years was “Houston. It's Worth It.” But if you have a taste for dynamism and beautiful complexities, this city is your buffet — and eating is the town sport. Enjoy the high-low vibe by immersing yourself in the recent influx of world-class art and, in the same afternoon, tying on a plastic bib for Viet-Cajun cuisine, an emerging staple. Explore overlooked African American history, sidle into Texas cowboy culture and indulge at the place that popularized Tex-Mex fajitas.

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Recommendations

Key stops

- The **Nancy and Rich Kinder Building**, the newest wing of The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, showcases a remarkable wealth of modern and contemporary art.
- **Crawfish and Noodles** in Chinatown is one of the best places to try the city's Viet-Cajun cuisine.

- **Buffalo Bayou Park**, with its rolling riverside hills and stunning views of Downtown, dispels the impression that Houston is all concrete.

Restaurants and bars	+
Museums and shopping	+
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Where to stay	+
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Itinerary

Friday

3:30 p.m. **Be impressed by Houston's art bounty**

The new Nancy and Rich Kinder Building of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, which opened late 2020, has become the must-see contemporary and modern art stop for any visitor. The white, curving building by the architect Steven Holl recalls the Guggenheim, and inside you'll be treated to works by Pablo Picasso, Georgia O'Keeffe and Robert Rauschenberg, to name very, very few. Don't miss Yayoi Kusama's immersive installation called "Aftermath of Obliteration of Eternity," an "infinity room" with seemingly endless reflections of dangling lights. The Kinder boasts an exceptional Latin American collection and a gallery dedicated to stirring works about borders and migration. Museum admission is \$19 for adults, or free for some people.



5:30 p.m. **Soak up Texas's essence**

Don't be an H-town rookie and get your Uber caught in the Friday afternoon traffic. Wait it out at one of the Montrose area's beloved watering holes, the nearly 100-year-old West Alabama Ice House. Founded before refrigeration as the place in town to go for cold things on hot days, today the indoor-outdoor, no-frills bar is a crowd-pleaser, with a game on TV and cornhole in the backyard. Cowboy boots and dogs are common, and the affordable, wine-and-beer-only whiteboard menu includes a long list of offerings from local brewers like Karbach and 8th Wonder. Bonus:

The city's best taco truck, Tacos Tierra Caliente, is parked outside, with barbacoa quesadillas for \$4 (just save room for dinner).

8 p.m. **Slurp up H-town's cultural melting pot**

The city is known for its sprawl, which can be admittedly annoying. That is, until you exit the freeway and discover a completely new world like Chinatown, in Houston's southwest. There, you can visit Crawfish and Noodles, the chef Trong Nguyen's hot spot specializing in Viet-Cajun food, a cuisine that's become a local staple. Houston has the largest Vietnamese-American population outside of California, many of whom migrated from Louisiana after Hurricane Katrina. Here, unlike traditional Louisiana crawfish boils, the bugs are seasoned after they're taken out of the water: lemongrass, ginger and fish sauce meet cayenne, paprika and black pepper in a pool of garlic and butter. Fresh crawfish are only available from around January to July (market price), so call for availability — you might have to “settle” for snow crab.





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Saturday

8 a.m. **Perk up with eastside vibes**

Ask a local what part of Houston has changed the most over the past five years, and they'll likely point east, to an area real estate agents now call "EaDo", or East of Downtown. This was the original Asiatown, but in the past few decades many residents moved southwest, leaving the eastside with empty warehouses and barren streets. Cue the developers. Today this

neighborhood is increasingly packed with bars, breweries, Instagram-bait graffiti walls and high-end condos surrounding the soccer stadium. The Cambodian-American pastry chef Vanarin Kuch contributed to the revival by opening Koffeteria in 2019. The coffee shop and bakery's menu captures the diversity of Houston, from tres leches croissants (\$6.50) to Chinese sausage tacos (\$4.50). Try the signature drink, the Salty Cambodian (\$6), a latte made with butter, salt and condensed milk.



10 a.m. **Walk back in time**

The Bayou City's reputation is for tearing down rather than preserving. But at Downtown's Sam Houston Park, a collection of historic structures

has been thoughtfully restored. The Heritage Society offers a popular Black history walking tour (\$15 for 45 minutes) in the area, which includes three sites recognized in 2022 by UNESCO's Slave Route Project. Nearby is the Fourth Ward neighborhood, historically known as Freedmen's Town, where the local historian Charonda Johnson provides one-to-three hour walking tours (\$25 per person). Formerly enslaved people settled there when Texas finally declared their freedom in 1865. With the city allegedly unwilling to provide services, the newly freed residents set up their own utilities and roads: You can still see those brick streets. There is also a stop at the Saturday farmer's market.

12 p.m. **Line up for links and ribs**

Identifying the best Texas barbecue in Houston is a fool's errand. Truth BBQ, though, is a valid contender. The owner and pitmaster Leonard Botello IV started his first location in Brenham, Texas, and opened on Houston's Washington Avenue in 2019. The brisket (\$34 a pound) is melty and mandatory, the pork ribs (\$24 a pound) are peppery and the brisket boudin — a Louisiana-style, rice-filled sausage link (\$8) — is a juicy addition. The pickled garnishes are especially fresh. An in-house bakery also turns out slices of triple-chocolate and banana-caramel cakes (\$8). On Saturdays the line can be significant, so expect to hangrily wait.



2 p.m. **Shop local on Westheimer**

While the glitzy Galleria mall attracts lovers of Versace and Balmain, farther east along Houston's iconic Westheimer Street you can bounce among boutiques offering local treasures and vintage finds. Duck into Space Montrose for Houston gifts, like watercolor prints of the city by the local artist Jim Koehn. Scour the recycled fashion racks at Pavement, then bop over to Leopard Lounge for curated kitsch like Britney Spears concert tees and vintage Western wear. Cross the street for high-end linens and housewares, like monogrammed baby bibs, at Biscuit. If your battery runs

low, a Greek-style frappe (\$4.50) at the library-like Agora coffeehouse should give you back your zip.



Leopard Lounge

4 p.m. **Hike, bike or boat along the bayou**

Buffalo Bayou Park is one of the city's true gems. The popular green space winds 160 acres along the banks of Buffalo Bayou, the waterway that is Houston's *raison d'être*, linking the city with the coast via the Houston Ship Channel. Look out for rainbows at the charming Dandelion Fountain on the south bank between Shepherd and Montrose, and snap a photo from the Rosemont Pedestrian Bridge. Then enjoy the sunset from the hills of

Eleanor Tinsley Park, all while taking in the striking diversity of the city's denizens and the city skyline. Bikes can be rented for \$19 for two hours at Bayou Bike Rentals, or reserve a kayak or canoe ahead from Bayou City Adventures for around \$30 an hour.



7 p.m. **Feast on Tex-Mex like a local**

One anchor holds Houston's diverse citizens together: a love for Tex-Mex. That means bottomless fresh-fried tortilla chips and salsa, a cereal-bowl-size serving of chile con queso (a liquid cheese dip that should never be mistaken for "nacho cheese"), and a sizzling platter of fajita meat, escorted by refried beans, sour cream, pickled jalapeños and guacamole. Every

Houstonian has a go-to spot: Mine is Lupe Tortilla; others swear by El Tiempo, Pappasito's, Teotihuacan, or Irma's. But most would agree that The Original Ninfa's on Navigation is the mothership, luring diners with fresh tortillas and flights (\$22) of inventive margaritas. The founder "Mama" Ninfa Laurenzo claimed to have invented the modern fajita, and the typical queso-fajita sequence described above runs around \$50 for two. Leave your tight pants at home.

9 p.m. **Drink-hop in Downtown**

Downtown may be where many of the country's biggest energy companies are headquartered, but there are also pockets that are great for barhopping, especially along Main Street. Start on Congress Street at Angel Share, a bar housed in soaring rafters, brick and glass, where your order contributes a donation to a changing roster of charities. Next, head around the corner to Little Dipper Bar, where pinball and bourbon collide. A bit farther down the block is Dean's Downtown, a bar in a former department store that's known for its old-fashioned cocktail. Save your stamina for Captain Foxheart's Bad News Bar and Spirit Lodge, where absinthe and speakeasy vibes give way to a coveted balcony patio overlooking Main Street's action.



Little Dipper Bar



Buffalo Bayou Park, which sprawls across 160 acres, has stunning views of Downtown.

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Sunday

9 a.m. **Explore the park**

Start the day in Hermann Park, one of the city's most beloved green spaces. Snap classic Houston photos at the reflection pool and then walk around the loop framed by majestic oaks. If you're lucky, a great Houston scene will be playing out at Mecom Fountain, where teenage girls have their portraits taken in over-the-top dresses for their quinceañera, a coming-of-age celebration. If it's raining or blazingly hot, pivot by ducking

into the Houston Museum of Natural Science and its newly renovated Butterfly Center, which reopens in 2023, or the Children’s Museum Houston — both border the park.



10:30 a.m. **Brunch with a side of jazz**

Walk a couple of blocks to Lucille’s, a restaurant not far from the Third Ward, the African American heart of the city, that won hearts during the pandemic by providing more than half a million meals to frontline workers and vulnerable Houstonians. The chef Chris Williams continues to lead a philanthropic movement to restore Texas’s Black foodways, which earned him Houston Eater’s Restaurateur of the Year Award for 2022. He has a

new cookbook documenting Black Texan cuisine on the way, but you can sample some of those recipes now at Sunday brunch, which has pick-your-juice mimosas (\$7) and live jazz on the patio. The fried-chicken-and-sweet-potato waffle is a salty-sweet standout (\$23), and the oxtail omelet (\$20) and perfectly stewed collard greens (\$6) are cure-alls. Reserve well ahead of time because this spot is hot.

12 p.m. **Stroll through the oaks**

Sometimes Houston can be really beautiful, and one of those times is when you're walking down the median of North or South Boulevard (particularly the east end), two of the most affluent residential streets in the city. Lined on either side by century-old majestic Southern live oaks and opulent mansions of the rich and famous, it's a powerwalker's dream. (Stay in public spaces and be mindful of residents if taking photos.) Keep an eye up (with a closed mouth) for the yellow-crowned night herons, who nest in the oaks' canopy.