

September 17, 2006

GOING TO

Austin, Texas

By **SETH SHERWOOD**

WHY GO NOW Maybe it was when Quentin Tarantino started his annual film series at the Alamo Drafthouse movie theater. Or when Sandra Bullock purchased her 10,000-square-foot lakefront home. Or perhaps when a local boy, [Lance Armstrong](#), began bringing home Tour de France trophies. Wherever trend spotters eventually mark the date, the mantra is now indisputable: the eccentric, laid-back college town of [Austin](#), Tex., has flourished into a Hollywood darling and a byword for cool. By the time MTV split town last year after shooting “The Real World Austin,” the city’s reputation as the Southwest’s hippest metropolis was sealed.

With its anything-goes vibe, myriad bars and honky-tonks, excellent barbecue joints and top-notch homegrown music scene — which nurtured everyone from Willie Nelson to the indie-rock darlings Spoon — the city has been the bohemian heart of [Texas](#) for decades. But Austin is now also one of America’s fastest-growing cities, both in population and possibilities. Avant-garde architectural specimens are sprouting amid the modest downtown grid, where a chic new shopping district is emerging. New clubs and upstart bars of all stripes — tapas, wine, sushi, cocktail — are solidifying Austin as the best little party town in Texas. And with the opening last April of the Blanton Museum of Art, the Texas capital may emerge as a cultural capital as well.

WHERE TO STAY With its Texas-size convention shows and ever-popular South by Southwest multimedia festival, Austin is awash in large, upscale hotel chains aimed at business and special-event travelers. Less common are small design and boutique hotels.

One standout is the three-year-old Mansion at Judges’ Hill (1900 Rio Grande Street, 800-311-1619; www.judgeshill.com). The 48-room boutique hotel is now a haven of scrolled woodwork, chandeliers and floral fabrics. The hotel’s highly acclaimed restaurant serves roasted sea bass with bottleneck clams, garlic spinach and a white-wine lemon sauce. Doubles from \$139.

Hotels and rock music don’t always mix: noise complaints, trashed rooms, ice buckets turned into Jack Daniel’s tumblers. But the sleek Hotel San José (1316 South Congress Avenue, 512-444-7322; www.sanjosehotel.com), a favorite crash pad for musicians, is extending an olive branch. Every Thursday night, the hotel invites a band to play a set and screen a film. The Zen-minimalist rooms start at \$90 (shared bath) or \$150 (private bathroom).

Among the big newcomers is the Hyatt Regency Lost Pines Resort and Spa (575 Hyatt Lost Pines

Road, Lost Pines; 512-308-1234; www.lostpines.hyatt.com). Opened in June, the 492-room hotel is surrounded by the verdant landscape of Lost Pines, about 20 miles outside Austin. It is furnished with folksy-chic décor (think Restoration Hardware meets the Ponderosa) and has rare Austin amenities like an 18,000-square-foot spa, an 18-hole golf course and a water park. Doubles from \$250.

WHERE TO EAT Until fairly recently, Austin's four food groups were basically chicken-fried steak, barbecued beef, pulled pork and breakfast tacos. Fine dining was limited to steakhouses and white-table restaurants with nosebleed prices. These days, however, the city's young chefs are devising menus that are at once more stylish, adventurous, global and populist.

The most exotic newcomer is Uchi (801 South Lamar Boulevard, 512-916-4808), a Japanese-influenced food laboratory overseen by Tyson Cole, who was named one of America's best new chefs last year by Food and Wine magazine. Amid smooth wooden surfaces and playful chinoiserie wallpaper, Austinites dine on pumpkin tempura, uchiviche (striped bass and salmon soaked with tomato, garlic and Thai chilies) and hotate tiara (scallops with heirloom citrus fruit and lemon oil). Imaginative desserts include black pepper sorbet and fresh strawberries. Dinner for two without wine comes to about \$80.

Mexican dishes are modernized and served in an airy Scandinavian interior at South Congress Cafe (1600 South Congress Avenue, 512-447-3905). Popular with young professionals from the high-tech sectors, the restaurant serves wild boar chili posole, crab enchiladas in mushroom sauce, jalapeño-venison meatloaf and more. The dozen specialty tequilas help diners unwind from their retail adventures along South Congress. Dinner for two without wine, \$70.

Once tucked into a residential area, the cult-favorite restaurant Starlite (407 [Colorado](#) Street, 512-374-9012) has moved to the splashy Warehouse District, and now boasts the cool, contemporary feel of South Beach and a globetrotting menu. The culinary trip includes [Japan](#) (via miso-glazed salmon), the [Middle East](#) (spring lamb with saffron spaghetti and merguez meatballs) and the American heartland (Black Angus beef tenderloin). The desserts include a goat cheese and pistachio tiramisù. Dinner for two without wine is about \$90.

WHAT TO DO DURING THE DAY When the Blanton Museum of Art ([Martin Luther King Jr.](#) Boulevard at Congress Avenue, 512-471-7324; www.blantonmuseum.org) opened this April, you could almost hear a citywide sigh of relief. Years in the making and beset by controversy (the celebrity architects Herzog & de Meuron withdrew from the project amid local dissent over their design), the museum seemed snakebitten at every turn. The ultimate design was by Kallmann McKinnell & Wood. The boxy structure — basically a rustic stone rectangle — may lack architectural pizzazz, but the collection of more than 17,000 works compensates. Vast holdings from the Italian Renaissance and Latin America are complemented by works from Whistler, Cézanne, Picasso and Thomas Hart Benton.. Admission: \$5.

Remember the Alamo? If not, the Bob Bullock Texas State History Museum (1800 North Congress Avenue, 512-936-4649; www.thestoryoftexas.com) offers an expansive refresher course in the colorful, and sometimes troubled, history of the Lone Star State. Celebrating its fifth anniversary, the family-friendly museum takes visitors through Indian settlements, Spanish colonization, the war for independence from [Mexico](#), slavery, the oil boom and even [NASA](#)'s space explorations.

WHERE TO GO AT NIGHT Few cities its size can match the electricity and diversity of Austin's nocturnal sizzle. Even better, the action is primarily concentrated in three shoulder-to-shoulder neighborhoods — all within staggering distance of one another.

Retired from the Tour de France and a little saddle-sore, Lance Armstrong could probably use a drink. Good thing he's part-owner of Six (117 West Fourth Street, 512-472-6662), a new bar-lounge-D.J. club in the lounge-packed Warehouse District. No yellow jerseys here, but plenty of spaghetti straps, low necklines and suspicious tans.

Nearby Sixth Street is Austin's venerable collegiate bar strip, a Dantean vision of Jell-O shots and wobbly high-fives. Luckily, it leads to the emergent Red River Street corridor, home to Austin's top live-music sites. Follow the sweet stench of rock 'n' roll to Beerland (711½ Red River Street, 512-479-7625), a glorious dive where the crowd drinks Pabst Blue Ribbon while taking in local rock, punk and indie bands.

Then pretty yourself up at the Beauty Bar (617 East Seventh Street, 512-236-8010), a new outpost of the New York-based salon-turned-cocktail lounge. Like its East Coast counterpart, the décor is 50's kitsch, and the crowd is thick with Goodwill fashion finds. A manicure is a mere five bucks.

WHERE TO SHOP The 2004 unveiling of the angular new City Hall, in a former no-man's-land, has turned Second Street into Austin's hottest new shopping district. Tucked among day spas, gelato parlors and the Design Within Reach showroom is Cowboy Cool (217 West Second Street, 512-708-9000). The boutique combines traditional Western wear with more high-falutin' styles — Euro, glam rock, haute couture — yielding hybrid garments that any jet-setting clubber could love. A few shirts have been designed by the self-styled Hollywood outlaw Billy Bob Thornton (\$185).

The back story of Factory People (1325 South Congress Avenue, 512-440-8002) is equally redolent of Tinseltown's indie side. Two people meet through a personal ad in an alternative weekly. They fall in love. They convert a downbeat Texas gun shop into a D.J.-fueled concept store that tries to inject [Paris-London-Berlin](#) style into the staunchest of the red states. Such is the true-life tale of Le and Thomas Popov, whose vast neindustrial store sells everything from 60's-style boho-chic dresses (\$297) to CD's from Austin bands like Sound Team (\$17.99).

YOUR FIRST TIME OR YOUR 10TH Cue it up. Dingy, dilapidated and delicious: Artz Rib House (2330 South Lamar Boulevard, 512-442-8283) is everything a down-home barbecue joint should be. Check your urban affectations at the door, order the huge pork ribs or tender babybacks, and pray

that the sagging ceiling doesn't collapse on you and the good ole boys nearby. About \$40 for two.

YES, IT'S FREE Night life isn't only for Austin's hip. At dusk, from February through November, more than a million Mexican free-tailed bats awake from their home beneath the Congress Avenue Bridge, said to be the largest urban bat colony in America, and take to the skies. Watching the departing swarm from the bridge walkway is a local ritual.

HOW TO STAY WIRED Surprisingly for a high-tech town, Austin has very few Internet cafes with stand-alone computers. One option, the Hideout Cafe (617 Congress Avenue, 512-476-0473), offers two Internet-ready computers (15 cents a minute with a \$1 minimum) and free Wi-Fi access.

HOW TO GET THERE JetBlue (www.jetblue.com, 800-538-2583) has three daily flights from New York and one from [Boston](#) to Austin-Bergstrom International Airport. Fall fares from New York start at around \$300. Other airlines serving Austin include Continental, Delta and Northwest.

HOW TO GET AROUND The key visitor neighborhoods — the University area, downtown, the Arboretum and South Congress Street — are spread out and don't lend themselves to walking, especially when temperatures hover near 100 degrees. Although the city has a public bus system (50 cents a ride; www.capmetro.org), renting a car is still highly advisable.

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