

WHY WE LOVE DOWNTOWN HTOWN

With its ever-changing landscape, a quirky personality, and a big history that blurs with Texas-sized tall tales, here are 20 reasons to love Houston's Downtown.

1. **Because one man's swamp is another man's paradise**

New Yorkers John Kirby Allen and Augustus Chapman Allen founded Houston in 1836 on an unlikely spot – the then-unsightly convergence of White Oak Bayou and Buffalo Bayou. Few real estate tycoons could have envisioned what this pair did, choosing to name their development for the father of Texas and hero in its war for independence, General Sam Houston. Allen's Landing eventually became Houston's first port and the spot where many a settler stepped off to see their new home, perhaps disappointed in the swamplands that existed where the marketing-savvy Allen brothers are said to have promised glorious waterfalls.

2. **Because our food scene diversity rivals our diverse population**

Foodies rejoice! With imported goods from around the world and homemade prepared foods that showcase the owners' Middle Eastern roots, Phoenicia Specialty Foods is your one-stop-shop for yummy goodness. This Downtown destination is perfect for stocking your pantry and indulging in your need for world cuisine. More than a grocery store, think of it as a Disneyland for food lovers.

3. **Because librarians deserve to have buildings named after them too**

Named for Houston Public Library's first librarian, and listed on the National Register of Historic Places, this 1926 masonry building pays homage to the state's heritage. Not only gorgeous, but the building houses the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, an amazing collection of maps, articles, publications and other documents chronicling Htown's history.

4. **Because of our bearded brethren**

First James Harden, now Dallas Keuchel. Big beards on athletes are nothing special these days, but no city can rock a pair as prominent as Houston. We love our Htown sports franchises and are happy to be home to the Astros, Rockets, Dynamo and Dash... and just a short train-ride away you can get your football fix.

5. **Because you can take a sunset cruise to watch Texas' second largest bat colony emerge**

Cruise down Buffalo Bayou on a pontoon boat for a must-see excursion to watch the bat colony take flight from their Waugh Bridge home at dusk foraging for dinner. Summertime is the best time because it means the bat pups are just learning how to fly. (Cue the "awwws" and squeals of delight here.) It's truly a sight to be seen.

6. **Because we have one of the world's largest "cradles"**

When the Lee & Joe Jamail Skatepark opened on the edge of Downtown in June 2008 it catapulted Houston into an entirely different league for the relatively new sport of skateboarding.

The 30,000 square-foot, in-ground facility draws skaters of all levels from around the city to the park, where they can work on their kick flips and their ollies.

7. Because the community rallies to save what is most important

This 1866 church began its life as a place of worship for emancipated slaves. Antioch Baptist Church is the oldest African-American church in Houston and for more than a century, it's provided worship and missionary services to its Fourth Ward community. The Gothic structure still has the pews from its 1860s incorporation and you can't miss the blue "Jesus Saves" sign.

8. Because quilters are our biggest annual convention

Each fall, crafters from across the globe descend upon the George R. Brown Convention Center for the International Quilt Festival. The weekend is a patchwork of social events, lectures, consumer shows, trade-only events, a quilt-making academy and needling showdowns, all focused on the art and business of quilting. The nostalgic pastime has enjoyed a resurgence of late, thanks to the trendiness of the DIY movement. Not just your grandmother's tattered throw anymore!

9. Because we have a skyscraper the color of money and shaped like a dollar sign

Money talks, especially when it's 71 stories high. The Wells Fargo Plaza shines like the beacon of capitalism it is. The largest multi-tenant building in the southwestern United States is the color of a crisp greenback and has a footprint of two semicircles to form an abstract dollar sign. Its all-glass design encapsulates black granite water walls, soaring lobbies and peaceful outdoor terraces.

10. Because a woman built one of Houston's most beautiful buildings in honor of her sweetheart

Here's a tribute that's not moving. Mellie Esperson built and dedicated a skyscraper at the corner of Travis and Rusk to her beloved husband Niels, an oil man, after his death. The 32-story Italian renaissance building was inspired by her travels to Europe and was the tallest building in Texas when it opened in 1927. Her love's name is etched on the side of the building and the stunning masterpiece remains a showstopper today – its stately columns and a Roman tempietto (tiered monument) soar above the action below; the unique architecture has become one of the most recognizable Downtown. In 1941 an annex went up next door – the first skyscraper to be built in Houston with central air conditioning – and the pair are referred to as the Mellie and Niels Esperson buildings.

11. Because we have an amazing public art collection

From sculptures to busts to tile work, Downtown is a public art lover's dream with more than 65 pieces of public art—and growing. Explosions of color and creativity share space in our busy city, and if you've never stopped to notice them, it's time to slow down your routine. In addition to rotating works at Discovery Green and other Downtown landmarks, there are permanent pieces that have earned their own sightseeing rights over time, like David Adicke's lyrically-inspired *Virtuoso*, John Runnels' *Dream.Boats*, Mel Chin's *Seven Wonders* to the abstract sculptures like those conceived by Joan Miro and Jean Dubuffet.

12. Because one of our beloved Cajun restaurants is located in the cloisters of an Episcopal church

Downtowners cheer when fried chicken is on the daily menu of The Cloister, one of the four locations of Treebeards, a Downtown Cajun-dining institution. Serving up a menu of jambalaya and seafood gumbo in Christ Church Cathedral's social hall and courtyard, devoted members of the flock can also sample Louisiana-influenced specialties in their original location at Historic Market Square and two other smaller grab-n-go locations in the tunnels and Shops at Houston Center.

13. Because you can travel from one end of Downtown to another without ever seeing the light of day

The more than six-mile network of air-conditioned underground passageways and skywalks spans 95 city blocks, defying Houston's extreme natural elements while connecting hotels, businesses and entertainment options. Because the tunnel is only open during weekday business hours, many Houstonians have never traveled the other world.

14. Because you can unpave a parking lot and put up paradise

Discovery Green, a world-class green space that was once a surface parking lot, proves it. The 12-acre urban oasis has had one of the most significant impacts on Downtown in recent years, spurring development and attracting visitors throughout the greater Houston area and beyond. Seasonal ice skating, free public programming, lovely picnic spaces, water features, performance areas and children's attractions are just some of Discovery Green's perks.

15. Because a man with only a 9th grade education transformed Houston into an international hub of commerce

Armed with nothing but Southern grit and determination and the keys to his late uncle's offices, scion-in-the-making Jesse Jones moved to Houston in 1898 as a young man to manage his family's lumberyard. Successful in this and a series of savvy business deals, Jones acquired an impressive amount of real estate, eventually becoming one of the city's lead developers.

The cowboy of commerce settled into a successful career in banking, during which time he invested in oil, raised money for the Houston ship channel and made other significant impacts on the economy. Recognized for his Lone-Star-sized prowess, the entrepreneur was eventually tapped to work with presidential administrations, most notably FDR, a position he used to bring new industries to Texas, like steel. Among other substantial accomplishments, Jones and his wife Mary Gibbs Jones established the Houston Endowment, which today supports many arts organizations including the Houston Symphony, whose musicians perform in the Downtown hall that bears the magnate's name.

16. Because our favorite (and first!) craft brewery is in the neighborhood

Texas' oldest craft brewery, Saint Arnold, shipped their first keg of beer in 1994. Saint Arnold pilgrims can savor a variety of beers—some are year round, some are seasonal and a few are single batch brews. Tours, food and fun abound at their beer hall on the outer edge of Downtown. Cheers!

17. Because we have the city's oldest commercial building still in use with (possibly) the oldest bar in Houston as its occupant

No, you're not tipsy. The building that houses La Carafe, said to be the oldest haunt in Houston, indeed leans due to its age. Dare to step inside, where you'll need cash for the jukebox (think Miles Davis mixed with old country standards) and reading glasses to study the wine list in the narrow, cozily dim room where local history dots the walls in the form of black-and-white photos.

18. Because we have a world class performance arts community

Our little piece of heaven is a 17-block area in the heart of Downtown. Home to Houston's nine professional performing arts organizations, it's only one of five cities in the U.S. with permanent professional resident companies in all of the major performing arts disciplines: opera, ballet, music and theater.

19. Because we have the oldest, largest and best Art Car Parade

Like so many Houston institutions, the Art Car Parade was born Downtown. In 1987, it had "40 entries, 2,000 people – mostly friends and families of the artists. Produced by The Orange Show, the Art Car Parade now features more than 250 wacky works of moving art, a spectacle that draws at least 250,000 people Downtown annually.

20. Because we take our food seriously

We love bright, shiny objects, especially trophies, so we celebrate having three James Beard Award-winning chefs Downtown—Hugo Ortega (Xochi), Justin Yu (Theodore Rex) and the founder of modern Southwest cuisine, Robert Del Grande (The Grove)—plus three additional concepts by James Beard finalists Bryan Caswell (Oxbow 7 and Jackson Street Barbecue) and Michael Cordúa (Artista). Bon appétit!