

AGGIELIFE

THE BATTALION

The B-side of H-town

Houston offers alternative to mainstream tourist attractions

BY JUSTIN GARRETT
The Battalion

As the largest city in Texas, Houston is filled with modern venues of entertainment. From world-class theaters and concert halls to five-star restaurants, Houston stands tall in its ability to provide first-rate cultural commodities.

However, for those who tend to shy away from commercialized, trendy hotspots and would rather check out the local punk scene than the local string quartet, Houston still remains an excellent location for an unforgettable experience.

Just under the surface of this expansive metropolis lies a vast unexploited realm of vintage shops, chic cafes and even a shoe store for cross-dressers.

Although College Station has never been a common rendezvous for drag queens, there is always a first, and Brucette's shoe store is more than willing to help. Need a pair of lace up, knee high stilettos but can't seem to find your size in the women's department? Check out Brucette's where larger sizes are all their speciality.

If cross-dressing, or even being seen in a store catering to that lifestyle, does not sound enthralling, yet fashion is still of interest, then perhaps a vintage store would be a more worthwhile venture. If so, then the Buffalo Exchange on Westheimer is an excellent choice. Once inside, the sweet, musty aroma of yesteryear's threads and '80s punk reverberating from hidden speakers will make one forget today's popular cargo pants and techno rock. Should the overwhelming array of clothing prove to be too much to take in all at once, the courteous and well-tattooed sales staff is always happy to provide assistance.

Another vintage store, located on Bissonnet, offers used clothing and accessories in a refreshingly uncluttered setting. The store has many interesting items, yet the most amazing are displayed behind the counter. These rare collectible may be taken only through trade. The most interesting item, a 14-year-old girl's skull, would be impossible to obtain anywhere else—legally, that is. Hopefully the staff could

also give advice on where and how to decorate your home with such a delightful artifact.

Just down the street from the Buffalo Exchange sits the oldest full line hemp shop in America. Priding on having one of the largest assortments of hemp products around, the Texas Hemp Co. (THC) is a delight to all the senses. Although the store has several items common to all stores of its kind, it is an entirely different breed of alternative store. Owner Richard Tomcala said the store is devoted to promoting items that are less harmful to the environment than their conventional counterparts.

"We're trying to create a living demonstration of alternatives to traditional human needs. Consider wiping your ass with a 20-year-old tree and what's gone into that brief contact with your person," Tomcala said.

Without a doubt, this store is a one-of-a-kind establishment. With little provocation, Tomcala will remove his thick, black-rimmed eyeglasses and reveal his eerily vast knowledge of environmental destruction, government scandal and, of course, the countless practical and efficient uses of hemp-made products. In little time, one is rendered speechless and a little more untrusting of the world that awaits outside the door.

Aside from running the THC, Tomcala also publishes his own environmental paper titled Hemp Magazine. Copies are available in his store and contain articles dedicated to providing environmental awareness as well as publicizing hemp retail stores across the nation.

Also located in this neighborhood is a peculiar shop offering new designer clothes at significantly reduced prices. Adding to the excitement the store provides are the shady characters lingering beside the building who stare at you through dark sunglasses and thick smoke emerging from whatever is burning between their lips. Although most people encountered in this area are extremely friendly, some of their appearances can easily engender temporary uneasiness. Once inside, though, the mood quickly lightens upon seeing price tags so unbelievable they require a confirmation of validity from the sales clerk.

The women's clothing is predominantly

Express and the small but intriguing selection of men's clothing is primarily from Structure. Most of the clothes show few if any defects—deeming them a thrifty shopper's dream.

If one is seeking escape from the fast-paced Houston streets then perhaps the Ale House off of West Alabama could provide relief. The establishment was originally a home built in the late 1800s, and apparently one inhabitant decided to never leave.

"We're not really sure who the ghost is, but we've had different psychics in and they believe that she was a servant who was left here as a young girl," employee Angela Jenkins said.

Modeled after a British street pub, the bar offers an expansive variety of beers and liquors to choose from. In back there is a quaint beer garden and local bands frequently play upstairs. However, none of these attractions draw as many people as the frequent show put on by the local specter.

"We've had things like voices, candles light up, lights come back on. It's just her letting us know she's still here," Jenkins said.

Should one want to avoid a personal encounter with paranormal beings, but still satisfy an interest in the occult and other mystifying areas, the Aquarian Age Bookshelf is more than fulfilling. Not only does the store carry all the latest literature in astrology and other new-age genres, it also has tarot cards, jewelry, new-age music, aroma therapy oils and candles.

Behind the store in a garage apartment known as the "treehouse," classes in astrology and essential oils are taught. The store has been in operation since the '70s and is co-owned by Virginia Gray, the mother of John Gray, author of Mars and Venus self-help books. Given this, the store is a truly remarkable place to chat as well as browse.

These are but a few of the unique and amazing experiences Houston has to offer. Although many of the well-publicized attractions in Houston are well worth visiting, few can compare with the many lesser-known establishments that offer a doorway to the valuable subcultures that flourish throughout this amazing city.

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