

"I'm going to tell this guy I'm a vampire," the stranger said above the sound of saxophone. I wonder if I should be concerned, but my friend Danielle looks at me with a smile and shakes her head, "Welcome to Austin." The private red candle-lit room is filled with locals both young and old, and if there was another tourist in the mix, I couldn't tell you.

The Skylark Lounge gives a warm applause for a scrawny 80-year-old black man in a fiddler's cap. He jumps around the audience with a harmonica in his mouth and more soul than a church choir singing, "If you can't treat me any better baby, I swear I'm gonna find somebody else in Austin that can." It's grungy, a place of blues and good drinks, with a backyard patio full of eclectic pieces that looks like an artist's effortlessly chic junkyard. Mood lighting and cigarette smokers by the ticket seller make me feel as if I'd just disembarked from my motorcycle gang's journey - but not quite as illegal and just the *right* amount of dirty.

Situated on Airport Blvd between auto shops and Taco Bell, the lowkey venue literally lies off the beaten path, completely unassuming. If Danielle hadn't been here before, I would've struggled to find it. Within ten minutes, we'd been escorted to the door by a friendly greeter, passed a food truck, and saw an inspiring blues performance with cowboys and chill BYOB audience members raising their glasses in praise while couples danced to the beat.

A fitting welcome to the city that's a mesh of old country manners, soul, and hip trends.

East Austin may have a rap for being a "rough" low-income part of town, but the kind greeter at the door to this thriving music spot speaks otherwise. The area has recently undergone new development and beyond crowded hubs like "Dirty Sixth Street" (a promenade of bars where drunks roam what is essentially a revamped fraternity party - a do it once, seen it all), East Austin teems with unique character, the young beside the old. In fact, after Danielle shows me around the entire city, the most unique nightlife spots we experience are in East Austin.

In the light of day, you can find Breakaway Records and a cluster of vintage shops off North Loop at the corner of the State Cemetery. Nestled in a residential neighborhood, the North Loop collection of second hand stores, unironic indie coffee houses like Epoch Coffee, and funky diner-esque digs like Homeslice Pizza make the city feel like home. The environment matches its trendsetter vibes - with graffiti art everywhere making for many lovely photo ops. Mueller Park, Austin's old airport, offers 30 acres of land, an expansive lake and an outdoor amphitheatre perfect for picnics, strolls, and accidentally stumbling into Indian weddings. Adjacent to the park lies a center with a movie theatre, eateries, and transformed airstreams titled "Fashion Park." There's an intentional focus on boutique artistry in each store, and it certainly won't be hard to find succulents, sage bundles, and handmade jewelry anywhere you land - or a \$200 embroidered Frida jacket you just can't say no to.

By "anywhere you land," I mean you could land anywhere. Everything is within a fifteen minute drive, and coming from Los Angeles where it takes a week and plenty of patience in traffic to thoroughly explore each diverse neighborhood, it's so refreshing to visit a city this easily accessible! You don't have to try hard to experience food or fashion either, as mobile food trucks and boutiques on wheels are quite the norm in Austin. My inner child that constantly craves a meal is obsessed with these food trucks. If you're worried about finding one, don't be - it's harder *not* to run into them. Partnered with cute trendy coffee houses, attached to music venues, and rampant among bar streets, food trucks seem to be a staple to Austin's alternative style of living.

After visiting Lucy in Disguise with Diamonds (a peculiar year-round costume store nestled amongst the South Congress strip of vintage boutiques), we decide to dine at Spider House. A truly eccentric bar and cafe with a saloon interior and a garden full of multicolored string lights, its outdoor wire-carriage booths make for a perfect date spot for lovers. Or, in the case of yours truly, a perfect spot for devouring that food trailer's mouthwatering vegan burger whilst on a date with a best friend, a toddler, and a happy pit bull. For more authentic artistry, come Tuesday nights when patrons read slam poetry over cocktails and mac n cheese.

Austin is a weird, young, and extremely cool city, whose "Keep Austin Weird" movement strengthens support for small business (the slogan later adopted by hip and happening Portland). Drive that rental car to visit Barton Springs, a spectacular natural pool with views of downtown, and visit Congress Avenue Bridge to see bats fly out at dusk (plan to see more bats during dry spells). Downtown, ditch the car and hop on a Lime electric scooter to skip the hassle of parking. There's a free rooftop pool and bar at The Westin hotel with, you guessed it, delicious food trucks adjacent to its base and free entry to Antone's Nightclub (Austin's oldest blues venue) right across the street. The heart of the city doesn't live in one corner, it can be found from downtown, along south congress and the red river district, to the Domain in the north - but its beat pounds strong in the East Side. If anyone turns up their nose? Well, now you can say you know better.