

EAST AUSTIN: RISING WITH MUSIC AND SOUL

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

Cast in a red glow, the Skylark Lounge erupts in applause for an elder statesman of Austin's blues scene—wiry, Black, and full of fire in his fiddler's cap. He's 80 years old, and he jumps through 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 strong drinks, with a back patio full of eclectic pieces that doubles as an artist's chic junkyard. Mood lighting and cigarette smokers by the ticket seller make me feel as if I'd pulled in from a midnight dive straight out of a Texas road movie—smoky, shadowy, and perfectly unpolished.

Situated on Airport Blvd between auto shops and Taco Bell, the low-key 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 doesn't announce itself with neon or crowds, but step inside its music spots and you'll find some of the city's most vibrant energy. Beyond the packed chaos of "Dirty Sixth Street" (a promenade of bars that feels like a revved-up fraternity party—a do it once, seen it all), East Austin teems with character, where young and old gather side by side and the best nights often unfold in the most unassuming places. In fact, after Danielle shows me around the entire city, the most unique nightlife spots we experience are all 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 secondhand stores, unironic indie coffee houses like Epoch Coffee, and funky diner digs like Homeslice Pizza make the city feel like home. The environment matches its trendsetter vibes with graffiti art acting as a colorful backdrop for photo ops. Mueller Park, Austin's old airport, offers 30 acres of land, an expansive lake and an outdoor amphitheater 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 Truck 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 just about anywhere. Everything in Austin is within a fifteen-minute drive. Coming from traffic-locked Los Angeles where it takes a week and plenty of patience 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. 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 on bar streets, food trucks are a staple of 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. Spider House is a truly eccentric bar and cafe with a saloon interior, a garden full of multicolored string lights, and outdoor carriage booths that are a perfect date spot for lovers. Or, in the case of yours truly, a spot for a best friend, a toddler, and a happy pit bull—complete with the food trailer's mouthwatering vegan burgers. 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 downtown, along South Congress and the Red River district, up to the Domain in the north—but its beat pounds strongest in the East Side. Anyone who's been knows: that's where Austin's soul shines after dark.