

By Mo Gannon : Published June 4, 2011

Familial resemblance evident in Abu Dhabi's sister city, Houston

Say "Houston" to anyone in the world, and they likely won't be able to resist copying the words of astronauts: "Come in, Houston", or "Houston, we have a problem". When you think about it, there is no other city more personified than the Texas base of Nasa's Mission Control, our planet's most enduring connection to space, which began in 1969 with Neil Armstrong's historic news flash from the moon: "Houston, Tranquility Base here. The Eagle has landed."

But as any welcoming person in Houston will be keen to tell y'all, there is more to their city than meets the sky, more to it even than oil: a green, diverse city near the Gulf Coast that is cultivating its cultural heart with a Museum District at its core.

If some of this sounds a little like Abu Dhabi, well, it should. Houston is our sister city, a bond that was approved by its city council 10 years ago. Our connection with the fourth largest city in the United States is more than symbolic. The first big discovery of oil near Houston in 1901 earned it the title Energy Capital of the World, and both cities benefit from oil wealth: Houston's GDP per capita is about US\$62,000 (Dh228,000), one of the highest in the United States, while Abu Dhabi's remains one of the world's highest at Dh332,500 (around \$90,000).

And if Abu Dhabians don't travel to Houston on oil-related business, they often go as medical tourists to receive treatment at the Texas Medical Center, the world's largest collection of hospitals, with international programmes that cater to this region's needs.

Sure, Dallas might be seen as more cosmopolitan and Austin as more cultural, but as the publicist Mark Sullivan assures me, Houston is plenty of both: "It's a real quirky city that people don't really understand."

My mission in Houston is to understand, by exploring the connections that make us sisters, and the contacts I've e-mailed before my visit roll out the red carpet for me as though I'm their long-lost sibling. (If you don't have connections like mine, there's always the Houston Greeters, a non-profit organisation that will pair you up with a volunteer who will show you the city and tailor your visit based on your interests.) "Assalamu alaikum. Kef halek? Ahlan wa sahlam," Deanea LeFlore, executive director of the Houston International Protocol Alliance, greets me in the tourist office. I'm so dumbfounded I forget to say "wa alaikum assalam" back. I've spent the past week in Dallas trying to explain I'm from Abu Dhabi, which was usually met with "Abu Wha-be?!?"

Not in Houston, where most people I encounter have heard of Abu Dhabi, and some of them have been. That may stem from Houston's diversity. At least 25 per cent of its 2.3 million population is foreign-born, and the number of Muslims living here is double the national average.

Houston's down-home hospitality begins at William P Hobby Airport, which sets the mood with a row of large rocking chairs positioned near the taxi queue. I'm picked up by a driver wearing a cowboy hat. It's the closest I've come to anything remotely ranch-like on my visit to Texas, where the sun has started to set on my stereotype of a dry desert state full of cowboys and tumbleweeds.

As we drive along the Gulf Freeway, lined with strip malls and motels, taquerias, waffle houses and billboards for surgeons and www.oilcareers.com, I spot Houston's cluster of majestic skyscrapers - the tallest, IM Pei's JPMorgan Chase Tower, among them - rising above a vast stretch of leafy green trees. When we arrive at Hotel ZaZa, a boutique hotel on Main Street that presides over Houston's Museum District, I'm greeted by more green. The Texas-sized balcony in my Tycoon Suite on the 12th floor overlooks Hermann Park and European-style boulevards with roundabouts that are lined with more trees.

My 185-square-metre room, one of ZaZa's "Magnificent Seven" themed suites, is more like a millionaire's apartment, so over the top and oversized it makes me laugh out loud in disbelief. I have two bedrooms, three bathrooms, a fully stocked kitchen with stainless steel appliances, and a dining room table large enough to host dinner for six. The zebra-skinned chairs in the living room are the size of thrones, with a view through floor-to-ceiling windows of Houston in two directions. After the sun sets, I sheepishly take in the view from my outdoor soaker tub on the balcony, under the light of chandeliers.

The next morning I'm greeted by Houston's unofficial ambassador, Ellen Goldberg, the president of Sister Cities of Houston, which has 17 sister cities around the world, including Karachi and Istanbul. It's part of a larger US group that links cities in other countries with the goal of promoting cultural awareness and cementing business ties. "I think it's important to have these relations," Ellen says, explaining that she moved to Houston from Minneapolis in 1970 and found her new home "pretty xenophobic" as a Jewish woman.

After travelling to Abu Dhabi on business in 1995 and 1996, she worked on the bid to make us Houston's sister, visiting the capital again for the signing in 2002. (Abu Dhabi now has eight other sister cities, including Madrid and Brisbane, Australia, but Houston is its only US sister.) When I e-mailed Ellen before my trip, she offered to give me a taste of "good ol' Southern hospitality" during my three days in Houston. And that she does, setting up my itinerary with the Greater Houston Convention and Visitors Bureau and showing up at my hotel each morning looking just as much at home in a polished dress suit as she is in jeans and a blouse.

The best place to begin is the Houston Museum District, more low-key than Abu Dhabi's elaborate vision for Saadiyat Island, perhaps, but one of the largest in the US. It has 18 cultural institutions, from the Houston Zoo to the Rothko Chapel, spread throughout the leafy green neighbourhood with the city's MetroRail running through it.

Two of the major draws are at ZaZa's doorstep: the Museum of Fine Arts and the Houston Museum of Natural Science. The latter is marking the state's 175th anniversary of independence from Mexico with a temporary exhibition called "Texas!" (until September 5).

"We've been under six flags," Ellen points out, as we wander through the exhibition, which covers all periods: first in the colonial days under Spain and France, then under an independent Mexico in 1821, as its own republic from 1836 to 1845, as part of the Confederacy from 1861 to 1865 and finally as the 28th state.

The exhibition begins with a collection of ancient pots, bowls and arrowheads from its earliest residents, the Clovis Indians, and plates, coins and Jesuit rings recovered from the shipwrecks of Spanish explorers. But the thrust is on the fight for independence, told through battle reports, land-grant certificates and weapons such as the cannon that fired the first shot of the revolution in 1835.

The personal items of its historical figures are also on display: the walking stick of Sam Houston, who served two terms as president of the Texas Republic; the telescope and hatchet of Stephen

F Austin, considered the father of Texas; and the pipe, violin and derringer of Davy Crockett, one of the last men standing at the Battle of the Alamo.

The exhibition nears its end with the story of Spindletop, a small hill in Beaumont where geologist Pattillo Higgins paired up with Anthony Lucas to uncover the largest reserve of oil then seen in the world, with a gusher that spewed oil 18.5 metres high

1. The truth about carbs 2. An exclusive look inside Saadiyat Beach Villas 3. A Dubai mother campaigns to make sure children buckle-up on the road 4. Cheese, tomato and spring onion quiches without pastry 5. One step at a time, UAE racing team closes in on Le Mans dreams for nine days. It led to the first oil boom, the building of a refinery in Houston, the formation of hundreds of oil companies and the opening of the Houston Ship Channel in 1914. (Among the more interesting items are a pair of rudimentary safety shoes with soles of cork to protect oil workers from the ground's heat.)

To learn more about "Texas tea", as they call it, visit the museum's Wiess Energy Hall, an interactive permanent exhibition on oil and natural gas (funded by oil companies, naturally). Want to drill for oil in Saudi Arabia's Ghawar Field? Take the controls at a video game that calculates how much money you're making depending on how you do. Want to see what it's like to ride down a borehole elevator? Step inside the Geovator simulator and watch the sides of the earth change through a window (on film) as the elevator pretends to rumble downward towards rock that's filled with pores of oil. Ellen and I crowd in with a group of boisterous schoolchildren who are silenced when a perforating gun fires charges into the rock: "wow" one shouts, as they cover their ears.

Outside the Geovator are containers of mock crude oil samples that look like black bath balls in tubes, with handles that allow you to grind them into a liquid resembling oil. The samples are different colours and textures, depending on where they're from in the world. (Middle East light crude is a silvery dark grey.)

"This is what I would love to see in Abu Dhabi," Ellen says, and it strikes me that this would be the perfect subject for an entire museum, as an amusing and educational way to demonstrate a place's connection to an industry that everyday people rarely get to see up close.

For a more unofficial tour, Ellen takes me to the photo studio of Jim Olive, a native Houstonian who lives in EaDo (East Downtown), "the art and soul of Houston", as he calls it, where artists' lofts have sprung up in the factories of Old Chinatown.

Jim and Ellen take me on a drive through downtown, where old Gothic-style towers mix with more modern ones, such as the rectangular waffle-iron that houses Shell's headquarters; through the Theatre District, a series of understated modern concert halls for performing arts companies such as the Houston Ballet; along the Buffalo Bayou, with its bike trails and skate park; past Glenwood Cemetery, the resting place of native son Howard Hughes; and through leafy neighbourhoods with saloons and taco trucks.

We stop in the Heights, where Jim takes us to the SculpturWorx Studio of the artist David Adickes. The studio's lot contains the single most bizarre sight of my trip: the giant busts of US presidents behind a chain-link fence (and, just for good measure, statues of the four Beatles towering over them). Adickes, an artist in his 80s whose paintings were collected by Elvis Presley, has made two such sets for presidential parks elsewhere in the States, but this more recent commission fell through, so here they sit, drawing busloads of curious tourists, like a modern day Mount Rushmore in an artist's backlot.

Not far from his studio is another offbeat attraction, the independently owned Art Car Museum,

also known as the "Garage Mahal". The building of scrap metal and chrome, fronted by a garage door, is home to the world's "art car" movement. The assistant curator, Alicia Duplan, explains that its focus is "cars that have been artified", and the featured artist in the exhibition I see takes car art one step further. Mark Bradford builds fantastical mechanised creatures from scrap metal and spare car parts that can be driven, as he does in Houston's annual art car parade.

"These are the sort of things that make a city interesting," Ellen says, reminding me of Sheikh Hamdan's Emirates National Auto Museum on the road to Liwa.

In the evening, I'm picked up at Hotel ZaZa by its publicist, Mark Sullivan, who travelled to Abu Dhabi recently on a holiday to the region and wants to show me what Houston has to offer at night.

"Houston has a lot of restaurants and Houstonians eat out a lot," he says. One statistic says more so than any other US city: four times a week, compared with the national average of 3.2.

He takes me to RDG + Bar Annie in the Uptown District, not far from the Galleria, the largest mall in Texas that's anchored by Neiman Marcus, a Texas department store that is legendary for its service. (If you do go shopping, save your receipts, many of which you can submit for a sales tax refund at the airport.) Like the malls in the UAE, the Galleria is like a recreation centre, with a full-size ice rink and restaurants with patrons spilling outside on outdoor patios pumping club music.

Mark leaves his Audi with the restaurant's valet. "If you're looking for a sister city just look at the parking lot - I think you'll find it familiar," he says. It's packed with Range Rovers, Bentleys and flashy sports cars, the only difference from the UAE being they don't have lucky licence-plate numbers.

"I think I'm a pretty good ambassador to Houston," Mark says, greeting at least three groups of society's well-heeled on the way to our table.

The native Houstonian, who had lived in New York and Austin, moved back to his hometown after discovering that it had grown into a culturally rich, happening place. "Something funny happened along the way in Houston," he says. "It's so international, it's so very interesting. It's one of the most philanthropic cities on the planet. The things here people are doing would blow Austin away."

He introduces me to Robert Del Grande, one of the chefs who is credited with inventing southwestern cuisine after moving to Houston from California in 1981. "He really put Houston on the map here in terms of food," Mark says. I soon see why, with two dishes that redefine with a gourmet twist what too many Mexican restaurants make mundane: Bar Annie Nachos with red chilli beef, avocado and crème fraîche, and chilli con queso with charred chillies.

My last day is saved for Houston's most iconic attraction, the Johnson Space Center. Ellen picks me up and we drive for about 40 minutes on the freeway, stopping along the way to shop for cowboy hats at Cavender's Boot City, before taking the exit marked simply "NASA".

While the space shuttles lift off from Florida, the groundwork takes place here, in buildings where astronauts train with simulators and mock-ups of the space shuttles, where space food is freeze-dried and where all space flights are guided from the Christopher C Kraft Jr Mission Control Center.

A tram takes groups of people through the grounds, stopping to visit the key buildings, on a one-and-a-half hour tour that's narrated over a speaker by astronauts and flight directors.

The highlight is the original Mission Operations Control Room 2, which is preserved behind a wall

of glass just as it was when the men seated in it guided the first moon visit and brought back the astronauts to safety from the aborted Apollo 13.

We sit in the theatre that overlooks the old control room. Our guide points out that it's the same place every US president has sat since the launch of the space programme, although "we haven't seen Obama yet".

It's a pity he hasn't been. The room serves as an astonishing reminder of how much was accomplished with how little. Our guide points out that the small screens on the rows of desks weren't computers: they were just monitors for the giant computers under the floor, which carried the amount of memory equivalent to two digital photographs today. There are no keyboards or mice. "They're not there because they're not invented yet," the guide says, and there are only four televisions, because there were only four American networks then.

There are modern reminders that the United States still has a foot in space. Overhead is a monitor that shows the current Mission Control for the International Space Station, where a few men sit seemingly idle at their stations. And as we take the tram around the grounds, on our way to look at the life-size mock-up of the space station, a prototype of the Mars Rover drives by us.

But it's clear that the US's space programme has seen better days. I'm in Houston when it receives news that it will not be one of the places that gets a space shuttle to display when they are retired this summer, losing out to Washington, Florida and, unbelievably, New York. "One giant snub for Houston", is how the Chronicle described it in a headline, and the mood at the Johnson Space Center is decidedly downbeat. (When I talk to one of our guides between stops, she is uncertain about the future. Nasa just laid her mother-in-law off.)

Nothing, then, could be more moving than the tram's last stop, at a memorial grove of trees that are planted in memory of each astronaut that loses his or her life on a mission. The trees stand at different heights, marking tragedies from long ago and more recent. We look out over the trees, listening over the tram's speakers to George W Bush's speech for the ones who died when Columbia broke up upon re-entry in 2003: "To leave behind Earth and air and gravity is an ancient dream of humanity. For these seven, it was a dream fulfilled. Each of these astronauts had the daring and discipline required of their calling. Each of them knew that great endeavours are inseparable from great risks. And each of them accepted those risks willingly, even joyfully, in the cause of discovery."

It's the only time the former president had ever said something that brought tears to my eyes. After stopping at the gift store to sample a freeze-dried ice cream sandwich, Ellen and I take the road to the historic port of Galveston, now a beach resort with a seawall reminiscent of our Corniche.

We drive over a long causeway over the water, past ramshackle houses on stilts (the area's still rebuilding after Hurricane Ike), past the Galveston Islamic Center, past Stewart Beach and along the seawall lined with Texas barbecue restaurants and surfboard rental shops.

We sit on the patio of Fish Tales Seafood Grill, watching pelicans fly by in the warm salty breeze while we eat crawfish prepared three ways, washed down with iced tea. After lunch we stop for ice cream and saltwater taffy at La King's Confectionary, a historic shop on the Strand in Old Galveston, which is lined with real gas streetlamps and buildings that remind me of New Orleans.

Before saying goodbye to Ellen, I promise to send my new Houston sister a postcard, which she collects from her sister cities, from our new-world oil city in Abu Dhabi.

I make one last Middle East connection on my way to the George Bush Intercontinental Airport: my driver is from Iraq.

"When you come here from there there's a big difference in your eyes," he observes.

Maybe so, but not as much as you'd think.

If You Go

The flight Return flights from Abu Dhabi to Houston via Chicago with Etihad Airways (www.etihadairways.com) cost from Dh5,545, including taxes

The hotel Hotel ZaZa (www.hotelzazahouston.com; 888 880 3244 toll free or 00 1 713 526 9910) offers rooms from US\$233 (Dh856) per night, concept suites from \$585 (Dh2,148) and Magnificent Seven suites from \$1,755 (Dh6,446). The Tycoon Suite costs \$2,340 (Dh8,595). Prices include taxes

The info The restaurant RDG + Bar Annie (www.rdgbarannie.com; 00 1 713 840 1111) is open through the week. Houston Greeters provides tailored two- to four-hour city tours for free (www.houstongreeters.org). For information about the city, visit the Greater Houston Convention and Visitors Bureau's website (www.visithoustontexas.com). For information about how to save sales tax when shopping, visit www.taxfreeshoppingtexas.com