It is indeed perfectly possible to explore some of the most interesting neighborhoods in Houston without a car. In fact, doing so will make you part of a growing trend.

"A new community is coming here that is used to pedestrian amenities. And we're seeing the developers respond to that," explained Laurette Cavizares, about a new generation of recent college graduates and others arriving to work in Houston. "More people are actually moving back into the urban core of Houston."

Cavizares is executive director of the Houston Museum District, an eminently walkable part of Houston that long predates this new trend. "The beautiful thing about our district is that there are nineteen museums all within walking distance of each other," she explained. "The district is one of the largest concentrations of cultural attractions anywhere in the country. It's exactly one mile from one side to the other."

Combined within the district are Houston's hugely popular Museum of Fine Arts, Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, and Houston Museum of Natural Science, which could all easily fill a weekend alone. But then you'd miss the astonishing Menil Collection.

"The Menil campus is unknown to many people," noted Cavizares of what she considers one of the greatest art collections in the world—a collection with a storybook history. The year was 1950. The setting, a crowded ball at Versailles outside Paris. She was an heiress with degrees in physics and mathematics from the Sorbonne; he was a young noble of less formal education and modest means. Her father, with his brother Marcel, had patented a device that forever changed petroleum exploration. Today her family name is as familiar in the oil fields of South Louisiana as it is in Texas: Schlumberger.

John and Dominique de Menil would marry and move to Houston during WWII—where the Schlumberger business empire was headquartered—bringing with them their passion for art. "Imagine what Houston was like then," observed the Menil Collection's Communications Director Vence Muse. "They [the de Menils] administered the shock of the new!"

Right off the bat the couple chose acclaimed architect Philip Johnson to design their home. "It is exactly contemporary with his famous Glass House in Connecticut," noted Muse of the sleek, minimalist residence that the architect designed for the de Menils, one that was a dramatic departure from the Houston norm. "People of means didn't live in houses like that. It looked like a dentist's office."

Today the couple's world-renowned legacy to their adopted hometown resides in a similarly minimalist facility. "It's a small museum with a large collection that is displayed sparingly, in rotation," explained Muse. "The collection spans from pre-history to today. It has enormous breadth."

Only a small portion of the collection is on view at any given time. Muse noted that the museum doesn't want to exhaust its visitors. "We don't let anything get between the art and the viewer. On one enormous white wall there might be just one of Warhol's paintings."

Muse added that the collection endeavored to make each visit a comfortable one—never overwhelming—allowing the viewer to take its treasures in measured doses. "It's always free. You come and go, you walk in, you walk out, viewing a few at a time."

Also part of the Menil Collection is a series of mural canvases by acclaimed Russian-born American painter Mark Rothko, housed in the meditative environment of the non-denominational...
Rothko Chapel. "It opened in 1971 as the embodiment of John and Dominique's enlightened world view and embrace of ecumenicism," said Muse. In the same vein, the sprawling Menil Collection campus is a place intended to be much more than an art space. "Today, it's also a place to do yoga or meditate. It's a very enlightened place, and I'm proud that it's in Houston."

Time to roll up your yoga mat and change back into walking shoes, our exploring has just begun. Nearby is the Rice University art gallery, which Caltzares explained is "the only gallery dedicated to sight-specific installations. They have one big space and bring in an artist to fill up the whole space." The district is also home to the Buffalo Soldier National Museum, the only museum of its kind in the world with 3,500 artifacts that interpret the contributions of the first peace-time, all-black regiment in the regular U.S. Army. Still nearly a dozen cultural attractions await in this tiny, one-mile stretch of Houston. Should you prefer an alternative to exploring on foot, the district is home to several of the bike-sharing stations popping up all over the city. The first ninety minutes of use are free, with a modest charge after that.

Lodging options in the district include the appropriately artsy Modern B&B, which boasts hipster décor and includes a tree-house room with a balcony overlooking the foliage. The B&B was among sixteen "hip hotels in America" profiled by Dwell Magazine.

Alternatively there's Hotel ZaZa, Trip Advisor's highest ranked hotel in Houston, with a guest amenity called the "Magic Carpet," a car service to any point within four miles of the hotel. That perk expands your exploration range into territory that also includes one of my favorite, funky cultural des-

(Top) The Museum District's Hotel ZaZa is TripAdvisor's number one ranked hotel in Houston. (Bottom) When they moved to Houston from Paris during World War II, John and Dominique de Menil brought with them a passion for art. Today their collection is considered one of the finest in the world and continues to grow. Photos courtesy of Greater Houston Convention and Visitors Bureau.

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tinations, the quirky, but beautifully curated, Art Car Museum. You get a hint of the wonders within as you pull up to the museum's distinctive scrap metal-and-chrome exterior, created by car artist David Best. Houston purports to have the most resident art cars of any city, and the museum showcases some of the finest examples of this eclectic art form, along with beautifully curated andhang exhibitions of other art forms.

Back in the Museum District you'll discover that the range of dining choices is as broad as the cultural offerings, from the European-inspired fare of noted Chef Greg Martin's Bistro Meltz—to that museum's campus—to a widely diverse collection of food trucks that regularly gather outside

the district's most popular destinations. The Museum of Fine Arts even offers a "lunch and look" program on weekdays with an hour of free browsing in the museum if you bring your lunch receipt from one of the trucks parked outside.

A particularly good time to visit in January would be the month's last weekend, when the district hosts one of its quarterly Museum Experience events; visitors enjoy special programming at a rotating selection of the district's museums. In January, the Menil Collection, the Rothko Chapel, and the Houston Center for Photography will be highlighted.

In the highly unlikely case that you haven't found enough to keep you amused in the Museum District, there's still no need to resort to hopping back in the car. Instead you can climb aboard Houston's light rail line. While the city's light rail system is in its infancy compared to those in many other metro areas, its Red Line does connect the Museum District to the other region in the city that is currently exploding with pedestrian possibilities—downtown.

If you can't make it for the January museum experience, aim for the first weekend in February when downtown Houston will offer up FROSTIVAL at Discovery Green, where you'll find the largest outdoor skating rink in the southwest. Weekend activities will include a competition between four nationally renowned ice carvers, skating demos by some of Houston's most noted professional figure skaters, ice sculptures, ice ping-pong, an ice graffiti wall, ice throne for pictures, snowball fights, live music, and the Art X art car glow procession. Later you can slip out of your skates and into dressy attire for the Houston Grand Opera's production of Puccini's Madame Butterfly, staged through that weekend. And just think, you'll never have to search for a parking spot.

Here are a couple of tips on getting the best deal possible on a flight to Houston: United offers non-stop flights from BTR to IAH and frequently offers last-minute, weekend deals for departures on Friday evenings or Saturdays, with a return on Monday or Tuesday. Since the period right after the holidays is a low travel period, there's a good chance this deal will be popping up. These fares can be forty percent (or more) cheaper than normal fares. Look for them at united.com under the "deals and offers" tab. Alternatively, consider buying your hotel and flight together as a package from an online travel service like Travelocity or Expedia; you could save as much at a $100 on the combination. —DI