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From left: The HOSS sandwich from the Biscuit Bar; outside Nasher Sculpture Center.

LONE STAR STATE OF MIND

Join *TLP* as we hit the road in search of the best bites in Central Texas

BY LIA GRABOWSKI

COURTESY OF THE BISCUIT BAR OPPOSITE LIA GRABOWSKI



Given that Texas is significantly larger than, say, most countries in Europe, it's fairly impossible to hit all the highlights in a quick trip. The Lone Star State is best explored in manageable chunks: Hill Country for a wine-centric vacation through the state's south-central region; Houston and Galveston for a flavor of the Gulf; or perhaps a city-to-city road trip with a few small-town detours to get a real taste of the state. That's just what we did, starting in Austin and setting our sights on Dallas, to see what Central Texas has up its sleeve.

WEIRD AND WONDERFUL

There's so much to love about Austin, be it the killer dining scene, the impossibly cool attitude, or the intense affinity for Willie Nelson. Whatever "it factor" Austin

has, downtown newcomer **Hotel ZaZa** has distilled it into a neatly packaged city block. Situated on the corner of Lavaca and 4th streets, the comfortable lobby is decked out in brown leather and geometric-patterned textiles; mid-century brass lamps and carved wood chairs; light fixtures that double as modern art and chandeliers dripping in crystals. The carefully curated mish-mash of styles reads both homey and, somehow, inherently Texan, right down to the mosaic of worn rugs that adorn the front of the check-in desk. Set up camp in a plush, expertly decorated suite with a view of the surrounding skyscrapers. (Read more about Hotel ZaZa on page 77.)

For those of us who don't relish an early morning on vacation, brunch is the most important meal of the day. Spend it at the newly opened **1417**, a breakfast and lunch cafe on 1st Street across the Colorado

River from downtown Austin proper. (Worth noting: It's not that Colorado River, it just happens to share a name with the more famous waterway farther to the West.) The backyard patio is perfect for digging into the Eggs in Purgatory, a spicy shakshuka-like dish served with toasted baguette slices.

There's no such thing as a trip to Austin without hitting nearby South Congress' walkable stretch of funky boutiques and casual eateries. Fan favorites include **Letterpress PLAY** for upscale stationery; **Triple Z Threads** for all sorts of giftable goodies with irreverent and relatable slogans; and **Tesoros Trading Company** for handmade figurines, jewelry, textiles, and art from craftspeople around the world. **Parts & Labour** is a must—the artist collective carries apparel, jewelry, paper goods, pet gear, and more, all made by Texans, particularly those from the BIPOC community. (We couldn't resist a few pieces from Austin jeweler Natalie Tischler of Ornamental Things.)

The inevitable line at **Torchy's Tacos** is worth it for the fried avocado tacos and green chile queso, but if lighter fare is what you're after, there's an easygoing menu of housemade sandwiches, salads, sandwiches, and pastries from the deli-tesse at **Tiny Grocer** up the street.

One of the best ways to appreciate the Austin skyline is from that aforementioned river. Book a kayak or paddleboard rental with the **Rowing Dock** and head to the right from their dock for an easy paddle to unparalleled city views. If you're traveling with a four-legged companion, they even have "RUFF SUP" rentals that are designed to keep dogs onboard. If you'd rather remain on land, check out **Lady Bird Lake Trail**, a ten-mile loop along the river.

Be sure to work up an appetite while paddling because an afternoon stop at **Gourdough's** trailer on 1st Street is a necessity. They have a brick-and-mortar about two miles away, but there's something delightfully "Austin" about stopping up to the window of a refurbished Airstream for

COURTESY OF 1417 OPPOSITE STEVE THOMAS

Parts & Labour on South Congress sells wares from local artists. Opposite: Seared halibut and spiced chickpeas at 1417.



a freshly fried, topping-smothered doughnut.

Located on the University of Texas at Austin campus, the **Blanton Museum of Art** is an easy way to spend an afternoon. Open Wednesday through Sunday—with free admission on Thursdays—the museum features rotating exhibits from ancient Greek pottery to contemporary portraiture. Dinnertime means tough decisions, so we've narrowed it down to two favorites. **Nista Tageria**, a short drive out of downtown, is all about the tortilla: They nixtamalize and grind the corn in-house. The tostada topped with ceviche-style tuna and the enchilada potosina taco filled with a potato-chorizo puree and duck fat refried beans are the move, especially when paired with a glass of one of their several natural wine offerings. Alternatively, there's **Ramen Tatsu-Ya**, which has three locations around Austin. The warming noodle bowls are a perfect touch of comfort on a chilly fall evening.

Located a few short blocks from Hotel ZaZa, **Royal Blue Grocery** on Lavaca and 3rd is the spot to stock up on provisions for your road trip adventure, from local snacks and candies to wine, bottled water, and a small selection of items you may have forgotten at home (hello, sunscreen). We snagged a bag of Austin-based Imperfect Bites in the flavor Texas Twist—dark chocolate clusters tossed with mango, Texas pecans, and chili powder. Just around the corner is **Love, Tito's**, a well-stocked gift shop from the acclaimed, Austin-based vodka brand.

BACK TO SCHOOL

When plotting our course from Austin to Dallas, we wanted to hit a few of the hot spots in between, and that started with a detour to College Station. First stop: **1541 Pastries and Coffee** for a quick caffeine fix on the way into town. Or if it's a weekend, grab a seat at **Urban Table** for a spiked mimosa (a splash of St-Germain does wonders) and decadent bread pudding french toast. Texas A&M University

anchors College Station, and college sports fans would be remiss to not check out **Kyle Field**—the Aggies' stadium is the largest in the SEC with a capacity of more than 100,000. If you're sticking around to catch a game, consider a room at the **George Hotel**. It's situated on College Station's Century Square, home to some dozen shops and restaurants all within walking distance.

We're back on the road, though, headed for another college town. Waco is home to Baylor University, but perhaps better known—in some circles at least—as the hometown of Chip and Joanna Gaines and their ever-expanding **Magnolia Market**. Even if you aren't a fan of *Fixer Upper*, the two-city-block Magnolia complex is a sight to behold with the flagship market, six curated boutiques, bakery, coffee shop, baseball diamond with concession stand, and some half-dozen food trucks.

Across Webster and 8th streets from Magnolia, the **Hindery** is a country-chic home decor store filled to the brim with upscale farmhouse finds. As you're browsing, you may end up in the **Boiler Room**, a craft beer and wine bar that blends seamlessly with the shop. For something with a little more punch, there's nearby **Balcones Distilling**. This whiskey-centric operation puts out landmark bottles like the blue corn-based Baby Blue—the first Texas whiskey to hit the market since Prohibition—and a single malt whiskey perfect for Scotch drinkers that combines Scottish and Texas-grown barley.

There's more retail therapy in store at nearby **Spice Village**, a market housing more than sixty independent retailers in a 30,000-square-foot historic building. From there, it's a short walk up Franklin Avenue to lunch at **Clay Pot Restaurant**, a family-run Vietnamese place with authentic bowls of pho and vermicelli along with curries, fried rice, and spring rolls.

Back on the highway, there's one more must-hit stop on the way to Dallas, tucked in an unassuming fuel station off I-35. We're talking about the **Czech Stop**, a tiny mecca of Czech pastries including a



Clockwise from top left: An Aggies game at Kyle Field; Magnolia Market in Waco; Balcones Distillery mixes its whiskeys into refreshing cocktails; a soulful bowl from Ramen Tatsu-Ya.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: COURTESY OF COLLEGE STATION; COURTESY OF MAGNOLIA MARKET; COURTESY OF TRAVEL TEXAS; JUSTIN SAHLER



THE DALLAS ARTS DISTRICT IS HOME TO THREE MUSEUMS AND MORE THAN A DOZEN PERFORMING ARTS VENUES.



Dallas Arts District

COURTESY OF ARTS DALLAS



Suspended above the lobby is **Resistance Reverb: Movement 5**, an homage to the Women's March and subsequent movement sparked in January 2017, created by artist **Lava Thomas**.



From top: Smothered tds from the **Biscuit Bar**; the **Second Floor** at **Exchange Hall**; a half-dozen from the **Salty Donut**.



FROM TOP: THE **SECOND FLOOR** OF THE **EXCHANGE HALL** HOTEL; **BAR**; A HALF-DOZEN OF THE **SALTY DONUT**.

Texas specialty: kolaches. The line to the bustling counter will likely be wrapped around the store, but it'll give you time to plan your order. For the uninitiated, opt for a plain cream cheese-filled and at least one fruit-filled. For savory fillings, the traditional sausage, kraut, and swiss cheese is a strong contender—ask for it warmed up to snack on when you get back on the road.

A WORK OF ART

Pulling up to the **HALL Arts Hotel** in Dallas, you might mistake it for another art gallery. It is, after all, surrounded by museums and performing arts centers and the hotel itself is filled with installations from artists around the world. Suspended above the stark white, minimalist lobby are dozens of pink tambourines, an homage to the Women's March and subsequent movement sparked in January 2017. Wander the hotel to find other striking installations in a variety of mediums, from photography and neon signage to sculptures and delicate glasswork.

Steps away from the hotel sit several museums that are well worth a visit. Among them, the **Dallas Museum of Art** and **Crow Museum of Asian Art**, both of which are free to the public, and the modernist **Nasher Sculpture Center**, where admission is \$10.

A short drive across downtown, another artsy neighborhood beckons. The response to Dallas' sleek high rises, the **Bishop Arts District** is chock full of bohemian flare, with funky boutiques set in cozy cottages. Fuel up for a day of shopping with brunch at **Âme**—the Indian-inflected chicken and waffles are the stuff of legends—or pick up a decadent offering from the **Salty Donut**, like a pastelito-inspired brioche doughnut topped with puff pastry streusel or a tropical treat filled with passionfruit mousse in a dragonfruit glaze.

There's no shortage of cute shops around, but our favorites include **Etienné Market** for kitchenware and funky linens; **SOCIETY** by **Jackson Vaughn**, a dark

and artfully cluttered store filled to the brim with candles, diffusers, perfumes, and other scented goodies; **We are 1976**, stocked with unique giftables; and **Urban Owl** for jewelry, crystals, and housewares. There's also **Epiphany Boutique's** quirky clothing and gorgeous stationery (and Instagrammable vases) from **All Good Things**. Shop from a host of local artisans all at once at **Mosaic Makers Collective**—most of whom focus on Texas in their designs, which make for great trip souvenirs.

Wrap up your visit to the Bishop Arts District with a stop at **Bishop Cider Co. Tasting Room** for a flight of artisanal ciders. From the carefully crafted flavors to the knowledgeable staff, it's easy to lose an afternoon hanging out in the tiny tasting room.

The Exchange Hall is the place to go if you're feeling indecisive about dinner; the downstairs food hall has everything from Lebanese and Moroccan street food to Wagyu burgers and indulgent Belgian waffles. Upstairs, two restaurant concepts and a cocktail bar share one menu and sit-down dining space. You can—and should—get brisnet pot stickers and an unagi roll from **Ichi Ni San** alongside caviar-topped potato croquettes and oysters on the half-shell from **Dunce** and pair it all with a cocktail from **Hard Shake**, like the eponymous blend of vodka, basil, blackberry reduction, and Cointreau. The **Exchange Hall** sits in the middle of Dallas' **AT&T Discovery District**, a newly opened tech and entertainment hub at the base of AT&T's world headquarters. It's a vibrant place to spend an evening with dozens of tables available for outdoor dining, stories-high screens reminiscent of Times Square, and musicians often set up in the plaza.

For our last meal in Dallas, there was no better spot than the **Biscuit Bar** in Deep Ellum for an over-the-top brunch. This spot is dedicated to stacked biscuit sandwiches, smothered tater tots, and all-day brunch cocktails on weekends. We're partial to the **FABB** biscuit with fig preserves, arugula, bacon, and bris, along with an order of tots—fully loaded, of course.