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Getaway: Old meets new in Beaumont

This Texas oil town is full of treasures

by *Cheré Coen*

At first glance, downtown Beaumont appears off Interstate 10 as a non-descript Texas town, an urban district that's seen better days but experiencing bursts of growth in places, a flash of hip bars and restaurants on Crockett Street amid Victorian queens waiting for restoration.

On closer examination, exquisite gems appear. Downtown, the Texas Energy Museum offers interactive exhibits that explain everything from how the area's Spindletop gusher created the Texas oil boom and revolutionized an industry to a film showing the process of refining gasoline through a molecule of petroleum.

The museum is one of many for this city the size of Lafayette. Choose from the Babe Didrikson Zaharias Museum, the Art Museum of Southwest Texas, the Fire Museum of Texas with its massive hydrant out front, donated by Disney, and the John Jay French Museum, depicting 19th century life in East Texas, to name a few.

On weekends, the Cardinal River Boat Tour leaves Riverfront Park downtown to coast up the Neches River, traveling past the city limits and its industry to pristine cypress and tupelo forests touching upon areas of the neighboring Big Thicket National Preserve. The two-hour trip not only gives visitors a chance to see nature at its finest — usually with dramatic bird and gator sightings — but a glimpse into the Beaumont beyond the urban landscape and oil refineries. Trips are offered from 10 a.m. to noon Saturdays, 2 p.m. to 4 p.m. Sundays and 6 p.m. to 8 p.m. Tuesdays now until November.

Other hidden gems are the McFaddin-Ward House and the Chambers House Museum, both homes open to the public in Beaumont's historic district. The Chambers House was built in 1914, owned by C. Homer and Edith Chambers and their two daughters, Ruth and Florence. Because the sisters lived there most of their lives and never married, the house contains almost all the original furniture, personal items and artwork, giving visitors a great glimpse into middle class living between the 1920s and 1945. The Chambers House is open for tours from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. Tuesday through Friday and 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Saturdays.

While the Chambers lived a healthy middle class life, W.P.A. McFadden and his wife, Ida, struck it rich thanks to Beaumont's rush of oil (and cattle investments). They moved into the Beaux-Arts Colonial-style 12,800-square foot mansion in 1907, adding on a breakfast room with conservatory with art glass windows and fountain, storage rooms on the back porch and another bedroom, bringing the total bedrooms to seven, to name a few.

Tours of the impressive mansion and grounds include the gardens with its massive oak trees and the Carriage House that housed a gymnasium, horse stables, auto garage and servant quarters. Reading

about the dapper and temperamental cook Louis Lemon is as fascinating as the owners.

The historical significance of Beaumont's first Catholic Church, St. Anthony Cathedral Basilica, granted it minor basilica status by Pope Benedict XVI and is also not to be missed. Visit the cathedral's Web site for Mass and tour opportunities of this remarkable creation.

Special events occur monthly, including summer camps, movie nights and holiday celebrations. Upcoming spring events at the McFaddin-Ward house include the free "Green Thumbs" workshop for children to learn about gardening from 4 p.m. to 5 p.m. today and May 6 and a special photo opportunity for moms to have their picture taken on the porch on Mother's Day from 1 p.m. to 3:30 p.m. May 9.

Places to eat in Beaumont range from the casual hamburger eatery Novrozsky's to Easy's Tapas and Martinis, a hip spot for drinks and tapas in a converted home off the main drag of the historic district. Newly opened, The Grill features fine dining in a posh atmosphere with specialties such as a delightful blackened Ahi tuna, pecan-crusted tilapia and bread pudding with a rum sauce hinting of cranberries.

Another spot not to miss is Rao's Bakery and Coffee Café, a family-owned operation with several locations throughout town. Visit the original on Calder Avenue and sample some of their delectable cakes, cookies and other exquisite sugar creations. They also serve lunch and coffee, which makes it a great hub while shopping for antiques next door at The Tattered Suitcase or other antique stores nearby. Most accommodations hug the interstate and travel the price gamut. For an inexpensive stay, try the Best Western at the College Street exit, with its easy access to downtown, free breakfast, pool and friendly service.
