AUSTIN POWERS ON

The capital of Texas was a hip, kooky hangout, with a liberal, creative bohemianism. Now its burgeoning economic success and suburban sprawl is threatening locals' desire to keep Austin weird. Long-term resident **Richard Parker** reports

Not so long ago, Austin, Texas, was not much more than a sleepy town of some hundred thousand people, a sprawling college campus and a raucous bar scene – a place to get away from it all.

But in the space of just 15 years, the city has transformed itself and is now the place to go. Americans from every point on the map are moving there for the sunny weather, the nonstop music, a thriving film and cultural life – and for the jobs which are being created, unlike in most places in America. Now it is the 11th largest city in the nation: Austin's population has doubled in 20 years, eclipsing San Francisco's.

Therein lies the tension in what has been a city noted for its relaxed nature. Can the simple feeling of what was once just a big town survive in the shadow of the skyscrapers going up every day? Will Austin, as its informal motto proclaims, stay weird, a retreat for creators and iconoclasts in the face of $1m condominiums? Is paradise – in Texas at least – doomed to be just another paradise lost, spoilt by its own success? It is too soon in the experiment called Austin to rule definitively one way or another.

Yet the city seems likely to retain much of its character in the years to come. Its economic outlook remains exceedingly bright. Even newcomers buy into the ethos of Austin: inquisitive, optimistic, creative and independent to the point of contrarian. And there is also this: Austin is and will likely remain a uniquely youthful island in the sea of an otherwise ageing country. It is the American city destined to be something most can never claim: forever young.

The first 150 years were admittedly inauspicious. In 1839 the leader of the fledgling Republic of Texas, President Mirabeau Lamar, considered the shooting of a buffalo on what is now Congress Avenue a sign of divine providence and established the capital in the village until then known as Waterloo. By 1840, 856 people lived on the banks of the Colorado River. Britain, France and the United States established diplomatic missions in the little town.

Over the ensuing decades, political power grew in Austin but not much else. In 1883, the University of Texas was established on 40 acres north of the river.

Matt Rainwaters

Garbage man
Vince Hannemann, creator of Austin's Cathedral of Junk: proof that the city has retained its bohemian side

Yet by the early 20th century, the bigger cities in Texas, such as Dallas and Houston, passed it by in industry, wealth, population and prominence. In 1961, novelist Billy Lee Brammer captured the intrigues and foibles of the city's political life as well as its relaxed, even lazy backdrop in his masterpiece, *The Gay Place*. As the 1960s became the 1970s, hippies gave way to a legacy music scene and Janice Joplin's voice gave way to Stevie Ray Vaughn's guitar in the 1980s.

The Armadillo World Headquarters arose as an informal centre for the city's emerging sound. Swimming nude at Hippie Hollow was not just legal, it was encouraged. Austin's creative side extended beyond the bars and stages. Art cars – old vehicles painted in elaborate, multicolour schemes – appeared on the streets. Leslie Cochran, a transvestite homeless man, ran for mayor. And Graffiti Park – exactly what it sounds like – took root on the east side of the Clarksville neighbourhood.

In 1991, independent film-maker Richard Linklater captured the scene perfectly in his film *Slacker*. The movie seems documentary in nature as it catalogues characters who have little to do but a whole lot to say, some of it quite political, much of it a commentary on social drift and independence during a time of economic recession. Cast member Ron Marx had moved from New York to Austin after visiting in the spring. He enrolled at the University of Texas and hung around the set, doing odd jobs, until he was cast in his role as political commentarian.

Austin was probably no more iconoclastic or creative than San Francisco, say, or even New Orleans. But it stood in stark contrast to much of the rest of Texas: the conformity of the oil industry in Houston and the cookie-cutter suburbs of the corporate executives up in Dallas. Amid a largely conservative state, Austin was a liberal beacon, earning the nickname 'the People's Republic of Travis County'. Around this time, an environmental movement was stirred to fight and defeat the development of Barton Creek, now a greenbelt – all over a tiny salamander. And so, nearly 15 years ago, college librarian Red Wassenich claims to have coined the phrase Keep Austin Weird when calling into a community radio station to pledge a donation.

SO FAR, ALL THESE NEWCOMERS SEEM TO BUY INTO THE IDEA OF RETAINING WHAT DREW THEM HERE ORIGINALLY

But, beyond the university and state government, Austin had little industry. *Slacker* was set against the backdrop of recession and economic aimlessness. The almost simultaneous collapse of oil prices and the savings-and-loan industry left much of downtown Austin more of a ghost town. I visited in 1992 and marvelled at the empty skyscrapers with 'for sale' and 'for lease' signs on empty windows. Austin was home to one of the highest unemployment rates in America and more vacant real estate than all but six cities. To some very smart people, this was an opportunity.

Austin's greatest natural resource was human: tens upon tens of thousands of young, educated people, all those Ron Marxes and their equivalents. Laura Kilcrease, a royally chartered accountant from Britain who, working with legendary technologist, businessman and dean of the business school, the late George Kozmetsky, helped size up that opportunity and set about transforming the city. 'We needed to start our own companies,' says Kilcrease.

Kozmetsky, Kilcrease and others in higher education, the private sector and government began by fostering local technology companies that not only created jobs but a lasting asset: intellectual property. 'When you build one job at a time you build a very strong structure,' she says. 'In contrast, when you import 100 jobs, you can easily export 1,000 jobs.' And for the tens of thousands of college graduates minted in the region, it was the sunshine, the lake, the music and the freedom to not be in the rat race of, say, New York, Chicago or Los Angeles – climbing the corporate ladder – that was important. She adds, 'The culture mattered.'

Today Austin is the hometown of global brands such as Dell and Whole Foods. IBM has a sprawling campus here, as do Advanced Micro Devices, Motorola, Apple, eBay, Intel, 3M and others. There are easily hundreds of start-ups and early-stage technology companies, not just in Austin but the surrounding area: in nearby San Marcos, the tiny Quantum Materials Corporation engineers tiny crystals for medical devices and the next generation of televisions.

Yes, some landmark hole-in-the-walls went by the wayside. Wassenich and a local T-shirt maker got tangled in a copyright dispute over the Keep Austin Weird phrase, even as new ones, such as, Don't Dallas My Austin, appeared. Kilcrease, now 57, became a venture capitalist. Dell has gone from public to private, and Facebook, Google and Apple have brought their corporate faces here now. Marx graduated from college and became a technology consultant.

Yet the actual hole-in-the-wall venues, the Tiniest Bar in Texas and the Broken Spoke endure – even in the shadow of those skyscrapers. Revellers still celebrate the one-day festival, Eyeore's Birthday Party. Hippie Hollow remains the only public park in Texas that allows nudity. And out near Mount Bonnell, the old Dry Gulch Saloon is still open, though under new management. The art has largely vanished, replaced by life-sized painted fibreglass cow sculptures.

The major music festivals, South by Southwest as well as Austin City Limits, draw hundreds of thousands each. Last year, London-based band Savages wowed the crowds and the critics alike, along with Jimmy Eat World and Shovels and Rope. Comedians Sandra Bernhard and Sarah Silverman appeared in time for yet another festival, Fun Fun Fun Fest, where Slayer and Ice-T performed, among others.

And the list of celebrities who call Austin home or come for a visit is long: Ryan Gosling, Christian Bale, Jack Nicholson, Billy Bob Thornton, Bill Murray, Elijah Wood, Matthew McConaughey, Owen, Andrew and Luke Wilson, not to mention Willie Nelson.

Last November, after German racing driver Sebastian Vettel burned a lap around the city's Circuit of the Americas in 1.36.338 – a little more than a minute and a half and .003 faster than the next driver – the fans drifted into the Austin Ventures Studio Theater for an invitation-only party, featuring gold-infused Champagne, each bottle worth thousands of dollars. Screens displayed the roaring history of Formula 1. By 10pm, the crowd was swelling. By 1am the place was throbbing to the pulse of the DJ.

In the middle of the action was host Nicholas Frankl, 42, who generally throws elite yacht parties in places like Miami and Pebble Beach, but who was hosting his My Yacht Club party here, now. A former Londoner residing in Los Angeles, he is considering buying property in Austin, the city that the sport of the global elite now calls its North American home, as his parties have become such a fixture of the F1 event. As he points out, it is one of the most widely watched sporting events in the world. 'There are more people who know about Austin now because of two Grand Prix,' he says. 'If you were watching TV in Guangzhou you had probably never heard of Austin. But you sure as hell have now.'

Austin is, by any definition, a big city and a still larger metropolitan area. But it is also consistently ranked as a top city for business ➔

Martin Adolfsson/Gallery Stock; Brent Humphreys/Redux/eyevine; Matt Rainwaters; Gallery Stock

Clockwise from this picture Austin's not just 'weird' – it's corporate too; a barbecue truck flies the flag for small-scale ventures; Barton Springs – saved by a salamander; keeping the message alive at Hotel San José; in with the ink crowd

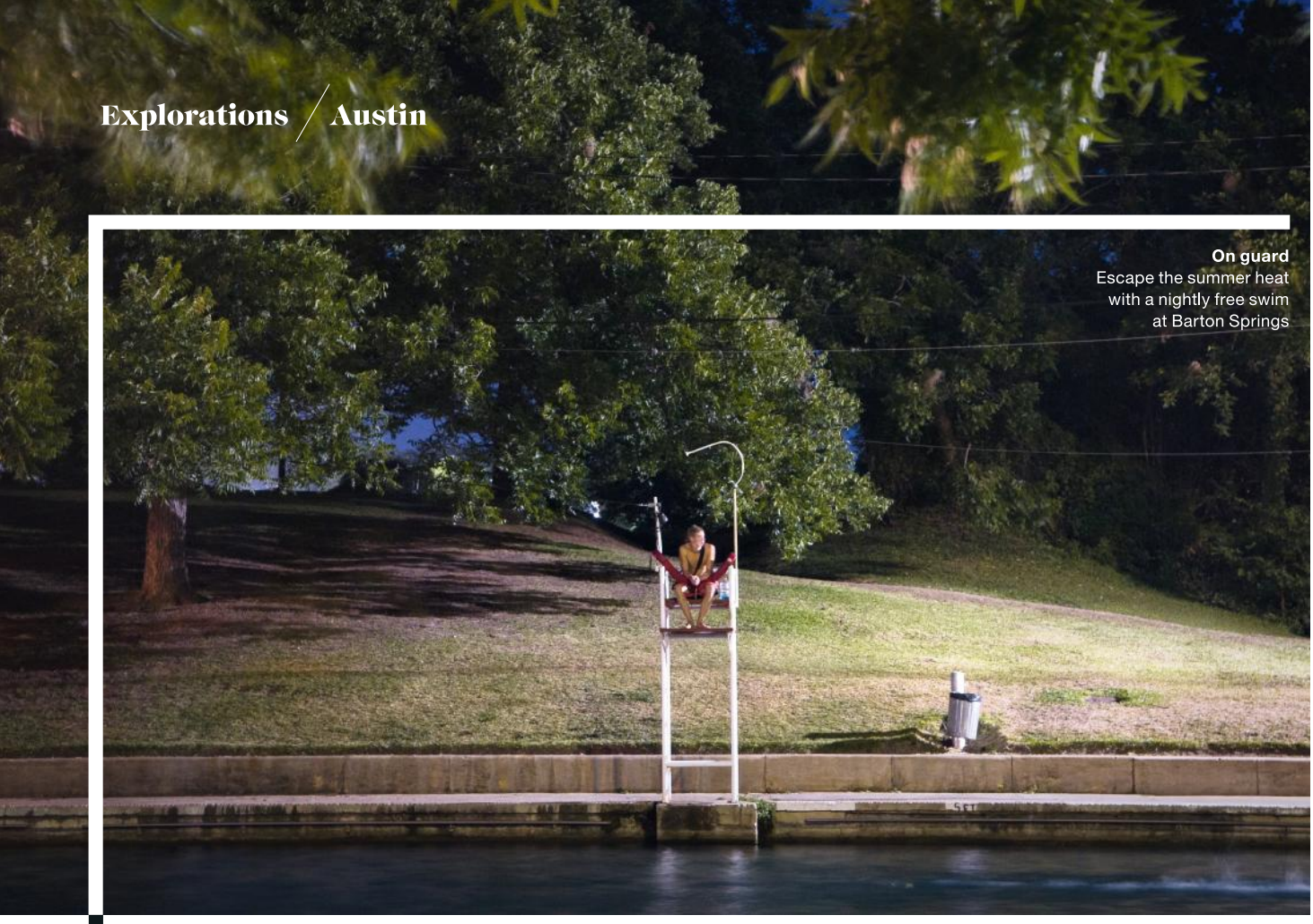
A TALE OF TWO AUSTINS

THE OLD...

- Take a chilly dip on a hot day at Barton Springs Pool. *austintexas.gov/department/barton-springs-pool*
- **Or relax with a cold beer at the Deep Eddy Pool. *deepeddy.org***
- Bite into the famous Fats Domino Burger at Hut's. *hutsfrankandangies.com*
- **Revel in some live music at the Continental Club. *continentalclub.com***
- Say *hola* to real Mexican cuisine at Fonda San Miguel. *fondasanmiguel.com*

...AND THE NEW

- Uchi was named one of the top ten sushi restaurants in the US. *uchiaustin.com*
- **Tune in to the Austin City Limits music festival at the Moody Theater. *acl-live.com***
- Crowd-watching and cocktails are on the menu at the W. *whotelaustin.com*
- **Stock up at the Whole Foods Market flagship store. *wholefoodsmarket.com/stores/lamar***
- Second Street district is *the* place for dinner or brunch (or both). *2ndstreetdistrict.com*



On guard
Escape the summer heat with a nightly free swim at Barton Springs

and quality of life. Now, Austin is nationally and even globally fashionable, having married the attributes of a nice place to live with a great place to find work. A place that is liveable may be more important than a place in which to strive and often struggle – against the odds, particularly if the odds are against most and in favour of, say, the one per cent. In December, Austin's unemployment rate stood at just 4.7 per cent, far below the national average. The outlook is just as strong, if not stronger.

But isn't something being lost in the growth and slickification of Austin? Yes, there is a powerful tension between the glitter and the authentic, though what is authentic has changed with each succeeding generation here. The traffic is just horrible. Honking used to be a social crime. Now it is offensively common. And some of that empty space is being filled in. Everyone is suspicious of the Californians and their intentions.

Yet people still seem to buy into Austin. The city has what youth nearly always possesses: optimism. People like the weather and the outdoors. On a sunny day, the Colorado River is filled with an armada of stand-up paddles, as a brigade of joggers runs by on the banks. People also like that they are relatively free to do their own thing. Unlike New York, Los Angeles or Washington there is no single, dominant employer and no dominant career track with a precious few at the top and thousands more trying to clamber over the rest on their way to the top.

'People here are supportive of entrepreneurs and endeavours, and they kind of let you fall on your face, and that's OK,' says Rebecca Fenby, a 26-year-old singer-songwriter from Maryland who recalls a recent open-mic night. 'I bombed. People were very sweet and supportive and they clapped. People here are very open to hearing what you have to offer and that's because it seems everybody has some type of start-up.'

To a degree, there is still no 'top' that might have the critics griping that, really, all Austin embraces is mediocrity. Yet there are many Austins: many neighbourhoods, each with a fairly small-town feel; many communities, from the typically bland, American suburbs in Cedar Park and Round Rock to the hipsters on SoCo, the couples in Clarksville and more. No, Austin is not perfect. Indeed, it may be, despite its liberal reputation, the most de facto segregated city in Texas, with the majority of its Hispanic and African-American population east of I-35 motorway and being pressurised to move out by rising house prices.

AUSTIN IS NATIONALLY, EVEN GLOBALLY FASHIONABLE, A NICE PLACE TO LIVE AND A GREAT PLACE TO FIND WORK

But it remains perpetually young, educated and ceaselessly curious. Nearly half of the population is aged 20-34; just seven per cent of people here are over 65 and an identical number are children. Nearly half the population has earned a bachelor's degree, if not a higher one. With 70,000 people (students, faculty and staff) now at the University of Texas and about 30,000 more college students in the surrounding area, Austin will likely remain young and educated – for the foreseeable future. So far, all these newcomers seem to buy into the idea of retaining what drew them in the first place.

'The culture is one of inclusiveness,' says University of Texas professor Randolph Lewis, who has organised End of Austin, a multimedia project documenting the city's startling change. 'And yet, underneath the Keep Austin Weird cliché is a kind of traditionalism. People like the way Austin feels and there's an attempt to preserve that. There's a preservationist mentality underneath the eccentricity.'

The culture is young to the point of having a Peter Pan-like quality and that cuts both ways. The city's never-ending festivals and exuberance can be exhausting to someone like me, now 50. And there are plenty of people who actually never grow up; it's not pretty. But by and large, that mentality – which can turn into snobbery, called Austintude, about the rest of Texas – welcomes new ideas into the fold of the old ones.

Blake Gordon/Aurora Photos

Off the mall
Traditional corner shops, such as Comal Food Store, remain

Joel Shuler came here to be a musician but wound up making Brazilian coffee. It turned out that the university had a centre for Brazilian studies. He imports 40,000lb of Brazilian coffee each year, saying: 'Austin is the mecca of curiosity.' Mark Seiler moved from the East Coast in the 1990s for the technology boom but left to start a soda company, Maine Root, which still bottles in Maine but produces syrup in Austin. He calculates that every Austinite buys $5 of his company's fair trade-certified, organic sugar-cane juice soda – instead of mass-marketed, corn syrup soda – each year. Austin ranks with New York, Los Angeles and Washington DC in the company's top markets. Customers here, he says, 'They're adventurous.'

Even the glitter of the F1 globetrotters and the celebrity sushi chefs has been accepted – if not quite fully understood. The upscale restaurants of 2nd Street, which used to be nothing, seem to coexist with the simple pleasure of Zilker Park, just across the river. Whether paradise – at least what passes for it in Texas – found can keep from being lost remains to be seen, of course. But no one has declared the authentic Austin dead.

When I moved here 15 years ago, the previous generation of arrivals fumed that their Austin was passing from view. But I wondered, having arrived back in Texas after years on the East Coast, if Austin wasn't too small. Then, the dotcom boom didn't keep Austin authentic. Now, the movie stars and high-rise condos won't kill Austin, either. Celebrity sightings are just another part of the fun and nobody used to live downtown anyway.

As long as it remains young, attracting newcomers with jobs, the newcomers keep buying in and the city doesn't become an uptight collection of strivers and wannabes who didn't make it to Silicon Valley or Wall Street, Austin will probably remain that egalitarian, largely accepting place. If anything will kill authentic Austin, it is the overdevelopment of urban and suburban sprawl or the collapse of the culture under the technology industry's unrelenting pressure to get ahead and the greed that spawns. Or worse, all three.

And the young? Well, they just keep on coming. Every dusk, the running trail on the banks of the Colorado is filled with them, kicking a cloud of dust into the cypress trees and the live oak. Not far away, Carla Ramos, 18, is serving burgers at the legendary Hut's on West 6th Street. She has arrived from the Houston area and is planning to enrol in the University of Texas in the autumn. Over platters of burgers and onion rings, she strikes up a conversation on topics that range from climate change to urban farming to conspiracy theory. 'There are a lot of young people forming opinions and ideas here,' she says. 'And I don't feel embarrassed to be myself.'

Youth, after all, has the energy to be interested in everything. And it has the optimism that only fades with time. Only a block away, Fenby, the singer-songwriter, is behind the bar at the Dogwood, making ends meet between songs and sets. Asked what is next for her, she replies with a smile and the utter audacity of youth: 'Me? I'm going straight to the top.'

Richard Parker is the author of Lone Star America: How Texas Will Transform the Nation, *to be published by Pegasus Books in the autumn.*

TOP FIVE HOTELS IN AUSTIN ACCORDING TO TRIP ADVISOR

HAMPTON INN & SUITES AUSTIN, THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS/CAPITOL

Located close to the Austin Convention Center and the University of Texas, this hotel has a fifth-floor rooftop swimming pool with breathtaking views. It also has free high-speed internet. From £150 a night. *hamptoninnaustintx.com*

FOUR SEASONS HOTEL AUSTIN

Based in downtown Austin, near to 15 golf courses and over ten miles of lakeside trails, the Four Seasons has 291 rooms (with L'Occitane bath products) which have exceptional views of either Lady Bird Lake or the Austin cityscape. From £241 a night. *fourseasons.com/austin*

LAKE AUSTIN SPA RESORT

Ideal for a relaxing break, the Lake Austin Spa Resort has rooms overlooking Lady Bird Lake and the lush gardens of the resort. Each room has a private porch with lounge chairs from which to take in the views. From £403 a night. *lakeaustin.com*

RODEWAY INN SUITES DOWNTOWN NORTH

This hotel has an ideal location, just five miles from downtown Austin and the Sixth Street entertainment district. In addition, the University of Texas football stadium is only three miles away, while the Austin-Bergstrom International Airport is a 15-minute journey. From £47 a night. *rodewayinn.com*

TRAVAASA AUSTIN

An 'experiential resort' that has a menu of guided adventures, culinary classes, cultural encounters, healing spa treatments, and fitness and wellness workshops. It's surrounded by the ancient live oaks and hills of the Balcones Canyonlands – ideal for those looking for a taste of nature. From £245 a night. *travaasa.com/austin*

Photograph: Matt Rainwaters; With thanks to Hotel San José, 1316 South Congress Avenue, Austin. www.sanjosehotel.com. *Based on World Traveller. Excludes reward flights. **Taxes, fees and surcharges also apply