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Living the Sweet (and Lovely) Life

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Small Town *in a Big City*

With its family focus and community spirit, Bellaire will make you feel right at home.

BY BETSY DENSON

Lest you doubt that Bellaire is a slice of Americana, just look at the town's water tower, which proudly proclaims its Little League National Champions.

"Bellaire very much has a hometown, community feel," says resident Roseann Rogers, aka The Buzz Lady. "It's almost Mayberry-ish."

Founded in the early 20th century on part of a sprawling ranch in what is now southwest Houston, Bellaire is bordered on the south by Beechnut, to the north at Glenmont, to the east at Mulberry and on the west at Bissonnet Street. It has its own mayor, city council and police department, as well as a town square where Opie 2.0 would be right at home.

The area is mostly residential with about 17,000 people. Bellaire's more than 6,000 homes run the gamut from old style ranch to modern rebuild. But as Rogers says, "It is not a planned community; it's a neighborhood."

Plenty of young families are moving here, too, giving it a "young, vibrant" vibe according to John Daugherty realtor Lisa Kornhauser. That also makes it a really fun place to visit.

DINE

Breakfast lovers, take a seat at the **Bellaire Coffee Shop** [5422 Bissonnet St.], where the price is right and the bacon is perfectly cooked. You don't have to go far for lunch because **Firehouse Pizza** [5424 Bissonnet St.] is next door and a favorite of Rogers' family.

Formerly a burger place that did Greek and now a Greek place that does burgers, **Roadster Grill** [5210 Bissonnet St.] is a family-owned joint with a killer souvlaki salad. Nearby, the **Bellaire Broiler Burger** [5216 Bellaire Blvd.] serves up chili cheese dogs and onion rings along with a heaping portion of nostalgia.

One shopping plaza has a trifecta of great restaurants: Try the Massaman Chicken Curry at the Asian fusion **Lemongrass Café** [5109 Bellaire Blvd.]; come for some Italian fare at the family-friendly **Auntie Pasto's** [5101 Bellaire Blvd.]; and step outside the box for Spanish and French cuisine at **Costa Brava Bistro** [5115 Bellaire Blvd.], where chef and owner Kitty Bailey serves up "delicious, healthy" food inspired by her favorite places.

It's a Cuban beat at **Café Piquet** [5757 Bissonnet St.], where roasted pork and maduros [sweet plantains] are a must. Don't miss the burgers at **Union Kitchen** [4057 Bellaire Blvd.] either. Shrimp or Akaushi beef, either one washes down wonderfully with a Bloody Mary.

MARK LIPCZYNSKI

scan this page
to find our interactive Bellaire map.







MARK LIPCZYNSKI

SHOP

When it comes to shopping, Rogers says that **Magpies Gifts** [5000 Bellaire Blvd.] is a household name. "Great gifts, clothing, cards, and you can get just about anything monogrammed," she says.

A literal treasure trove, **Queen of Heirs** [4901 Locust St.] stocks antique and estate jewelry perfect for an engagement, wedding or just because. Vinyl albums are in again and Cliff Dotterer is stocking them at **Black Dog Records** [4900 Bissonnet St.]. Led Zeppelin and Pink Floyd don't stay on the shelves long, but newer stuff like The Black Keys and Green Day sell well, too.

Top online hot sauce reviewer James Wreck wasn't content just to write about the spicy stuff, he wanted to sell it, too. **iBurn** [4227 Bellaire Blvd.] stocks more than 2,000 products and the adults-only section with pepper extracts in the back is so hot you have to sign a waiver.

At **Think Twice Fashions**, owner JJ Smith outfits the pageant set, as well as those looking for a couture bargain, with designer consignment dresses and upscale casual wear. And tucked away in the back of a shopping plaza is the mecca of model trains. **Papa Ben's Train Place** [4007 Bellaire Blvd.], now run by Ben Pearlman's brother Allyn, hosts the Houston N'Crowd model railroad club for true devotees on Saturdays.

DO

Did we mention that Bellaire's Town Square is where it's at? Mark your calendar now for **Holiday in the Park** on Dec. 4, complete with Santa and snow.

The **Family Aquatic Center** [7001 Fifth St.] makes summer fun easy with its splash pad and waterslide. Get your ballroom on [dancing, that is] at the adjacent **Bellaire Recreation Center** [7008 Fifth St.]. Bowling and a full bar are on tap at **Palace Lanes** [4191 Bellaire Blvd.], where you're almost sure to get right to it with 44 lanes available.

At **McHugh Tea** [5305 Bissonnet St.], master tea blender Kim McHugh teaches a variety of classes in addition to serving up her custom blends. And the handmade mother/daughter aprons are fabulous.

Explore inside and out at the **Hana & Arthur Ginzbarg Nature Discovery Center** [7112 Newcastle St.], which sits on almost four acres. Chinatown is just a short drive down Bellaire Boulevard, so you're close enough to head over and poke around. A "dine" and a "do," **Ocean Palace** [11215 Bellaire Blvd.] is famous for its dim sum, while the lily pond outside is a kid magnet, too. A more elevated state awaits down the road at the **Chung Tai Zen Center** [12129 Bellaire Blvd.], which offers free 12-week meditation classes.

SEE

Bellaire had its Centennial in 2008. For an ambulatory retrospective, print out the brochure for the Centennial History Walk [bellairehistoricalsociety.org] and hit the streets.

One stop on the tour is the **"Toonerville Trolley,"** nicknamed after a popular 1900s cartoon, which commemorates the streetcar that ran between Bellaire and Main Street between 1910 and 1927. The Bellaire Sesquicentennial Committee spearheaded the purchase of a similar trolley in 1985 and installed it where the waiting pavilion and a turnaround loop used to be.

With 14 parks, it's easy to see green in Bellaire. **Lafayette Park** [4337 Lafayette St.] is home to the Officer Lucy Dog Park, so called for Bellaire's late K-9 bloodhound. Another addition to the lineup is the five-acre **Evelyn's Park Conservancy** [4400 Bellaire Blvd.], former home of Teas Nursery. Scheduled to be completed within the year, it now hosts a monthly market called Pop-Up in the Park, and the new Family Fit Day.

About a 10-minute drive down Bellaire is the **Jade Buddha Temple**, whose cheerful namesake resides in Hero's Hall. Also in Chinatown is the **Houston Vietnam War Memorial** [11360 Bellaire Blvd.], honoring the partnership between South Vietnam and America with a representation of both soldiers.