

TRAVEL

Loving Lubbock

Once called ‘the most boring city in America,’ Lubbock has a few surprises in store

By Cynthia J. Drake
Special to the American-Statesman

In the early days of June, it is already furnace-level hot in Lubbock, and miles of flat, mocha-colored dirt bakes in the unrelenting sun.

It’s also the night of First Friday Art Trail, and the town has shown up for it, 104-degree heat and all.

Hundreds of Lubbockians, sweat dripping down necks and backs, are roaming down Avenue J, ducking into the row of art galleries here, gobbling tacos and Filipino food from trucks.

Nearby, Hannah Jackson, a sweet-voiced singer in yellow platform shoes, leans into her take on Lubbock native Buddy Holly’s “True Love Ways” inside a concert hall. A free shuttle bus awaits to transport people to the Depot District, where vintage boutiques are hosting more live bands and sips of local wine.

At the Charles Adams Studio Project (CASP) on Avenue J, Victoria Marie Bee, a New Orleans artist living in Lubbock on a two-year residency through CASP, whisks me back to her studio apartment. It’s exactly what I picture an artist’s apartment to look like: unmade bed, dishes in the sink, books of poetry, several empty bottles of Topo Chico.

In the front of her studio, she’s selling her handmade letterpress posters and

photo prints alongside other artists. She tells me excitedly of the Sunday night potluck dinners she hosts for all her artist friends here — some are showcasing documentary films they’ve produced; others work with textiles, paint and metal.

“Lots of local talent come and share a meal and play games,” says Bee, who has drawn inspiration from the collaboration with local writers and artists. “The scene here is not elitist at all and welcomes all who love art.”

In fact, visitors are welcome to join in open classes and studio nights, too, whether you’re interested in hand-building with clay or getting an introduction to lithography. The artists here, like Bee, make you feel welcome — no trace of pretentiousness or intimidation.

Beyond ‘Tech and dirt’

Four years ago, the real estate website Movoto ranked Lubbock “the most boring city in America,” but that seems only to have made room for an epic clapback.

Last year to celebrate National Tourism Week, marketing staff members from Visit Lubbock created a video poking fun at some of the “mean tweets” they’ve received about Lubbock.

“You’d have to drink to stay in Lubbock,” one person had tweeted. The marketing staffers raised a glass of locally made wine

See LUBBOCK, 6



Singer Hannah Jackson pays tribute to Lubbock-born Buddy Holly in a performance during First Friday Art Trail. [PHOTOS CONTRIBUTED BY CYNTHIA J. DRAKE]



Cast Iron Grill owner Teresa Stephens smiles behind a few slices of her famous pies.

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in a toast. “There’s nothing but Tech and dirt,” another person wrote. They touted their 2,300 cultural events per year.

Keep your eye on this boring city.

Construction is underway for a \$155 million Buddy Holly Performing Arts Center that will anchor an expansive arts complex downtown, which already offers nearly 63,000 square feet of space for galleries and studios between CASP and LHUCA (the Louise Hopkins Underwood Center for the Arts).

Lubbock’s lower cost of living appeals to artists, in addition to the opportunity to collaborate.

“Artists are being priced out of everywhere, but Lubbock is definitely affordable,” says Bee. “There is the flat landscape, but there is also so much beauty in the endless sky here. This is a place for the self-motivated and determined. The relative isolation from a major big city gives you a place of self-searching.”

Robert Bruno’s legacy

Bee and artists of her generation aren’t the only ones to draw inspiration from West Texas, of course. Artist Georgia O’Keeffe, who spent a few years living in the Texas Panhandle in the 1900s, once wrote to a friend, “It is absurd the way I love this country.”

Buddy Holly’s brief career in the 1950s had a tremendous influence on the music world, including for the Beatles and the Rolling Stones, creating waves that are still felt today. In fact, one



A building used by the Louise Hopkins Underwood Center for the Arts on Avenue J, the central arts corridor in Lubbock. [CONTRIBUTED PHOTOS BY CYNTHIA J. DRAKE]



Buddy Holly’s gravesite in Lubbock. His name was misspelled in an early recording contract, and he was allegedly too shy to have it corrected.

of the missions of the new performing arts center named for him will be to help showcase up-and-coming artists.

On a warm Lubbock day in the 1970s, sculptor Robert Bruno ate lunch in the shade of a large metal sculpture he’d recently completed. He looked around and dreamed of building a similar structure that he could live inside.

That structure, a spaceship-looking monument

perched on four metal legs, the unfinished “Steel House,” now sits, curvaceous and rusty, overlooking Ransom Canyon. It’s 14 miles east of his original untitled sculpture on the Texas Tech University campus, where he formerly taught architecture.

Bruno died before completing his magnum opus; his bed still stands on the house’s plywood floors.

But the inspiration he felt, perhaps drawn from the Texas High Plains, the cotton fields and even the dirt, is something that continues to inspire new generations of artists in Lubbock today.

Lubbock’s rising food scene

After touring the Bruno house, we head to dinner at the West Table, a new upscale restaurant serving up craft cocktails and dishes like braised short ribs and seared duck, inside the historic Pioneer Building that many folks are heralding as a sign of renaissance for downtown Lubbock.

The attentive service, locally sourced menu and extensive wine list all bear the sophisticated trademarks of restaurants in more cosmopolitan areas.

Other trendy Lubbock establishments such as La Sirena (which received praise last year from Texas Monthly) and new craft breweries and wineries, like the Brewery LBK and

Burklee Hill Vineyards, are popping up across this landscape, appealing to a younger, hipper client base in a town once mainly known for chicken-fried steak.

Not that Lubbock is in danger of losing its roots.

The next morning, we have breakfast at the Cast Iron Grill, a local favorite (tagline: “Boots, Pie and Chicken Fry”). Owner Teresa Stephens uses her Meemaw’s recipe for buttermilk chess pie and once prayed for the families buying each pie that left her restaurant.

She didn’t immediately fall in love with Lubbock after she first moved to the city, she tells us — and she had never made a single pie before opening her restaurant in 2007 — but she considered it something of a calling in her journey to “make a difference in one person’s life.”

Now, she sells 200 slices of pie each day and often sells out during the afternoon rush. And her chicken fry isn’t too shabby, either.

Dirt, revisited

Back at the First Friday Art Trail, there’s a large board for community members and visitors to write words that they associate with Lubbock.

There are the inevitable dirt jokes, of course: “They say you eat two cups of dirt. Here you eat eight,” one person has written.

Others wrote, “Work ethic”; “friendliness”; “ART.”

Someone wrote, “It rains mud,” and another person added underneath, “Just play in it.”

It’s the Lubbock version of making lemonade out of lemons. When life hands you mud, you play in it. And playing in mud turns out not to be so boring after all.