

Hermann Park: A Recreational Destination

By Greg Varhaug

Hermann Park is often referred to as one of Houston's crown jewels. Bordered by the Texas Medical Center, the Museum District, and Rice University, the 445-acre park includes the Houston Zoo, the Miller Outdoor Theatre, the Houston Museum of Natural Science, the Burke Baker Planetarium, the Japanese Garden, and the McGovern Centennial

Gardens. There is also a public, 18-hole golf course with a lighted driving range, a large reflection pool, and a lake with fishing and paddleboats.

A lot has changed in the 101 years since the park first opened. The wide exercise trails shaded by live oaks that run along South MacGregor Way were once paths for horse-drawn carriages and slow-moving automobiles.

Ladies in long dresses and gentlemen in boater hats would stop by the clubhouse for lemonade. Today, Hermann Park hosts over five million visitors each year. Some come to exercise, some to picnic, some to commune with people, and some to commune with nature.

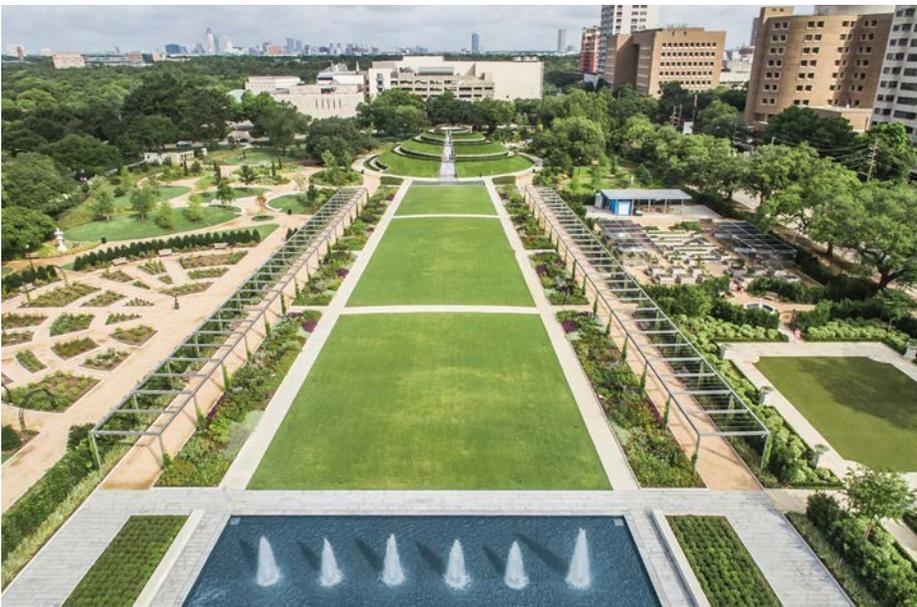
Bring the Kids

The park is one of Houston's most family-friendly attractions. It's a safe, smoke free environment designed with kids in mind. The Buddy Caruth Playground is for all children, featuring climbing equipment, swings, and slides. It's even wheelchair-accessible and provides chair swings to accommodate children with disabilities. All playground equipment and fall surfaces are regularly inspected to insure safety. There is also an interactive water play area, a favorite on hot summer days. Next to that are the large, colorful *Dillidiidae*, bubble-shaped sculptures that kids can play on and around. Picnickers will appreciate the park's public restrooms and concessions.

Romantic Hotspot

Hermann Park is also one of Houston's most romantic destinations. With its meandering walkways, lush gardens, and tranquil pools, it has seen countless first dates, first kisses, whirlwind romances, clandestine liaisons, and formal proposals. The park is often crowded on weekends and holidays, but on a typical weekday evening, you might have the whole park practically to yourself. Without a doubt, the single most romantic place in the park is the Japanese Garden. The park is also a favorite location for amateur engagement and graduation pictures.

Opened in late 2014 to coincide with the Park's Centennial celebration,



THE HERMANN PARK RAILROAD

The Hermann Park Railroad has been a favorite attraction for more than 50 years. It runs a two-mile course around the perimeter of the park, which takes about 18 minutes. The train leaves from the park's Kinder Station once every half hour. In the old days, the train was free, but the train cars were barely big enough to seat adults. The new train cars are larger, and it now costs only \$3.50 to ride the train. The train, which was traditionally a mere amusement, now serves a utilitarian purpose. In recent years, the train has added "substations" near three METRO light rail stops to help people get around the park more easily. The METRO is a great alternative to the sometimes crowded parking lots at the park. The park's trails also connect directly to the paved trail system that runs along Brays Bayou.

the Centennial Gardens and adjoining sculpture garden are the park's most recent improvements. The Centennial Gardens owes much to the efforts of a group of dedicated volunteers who meet regularly to work on the grounds. It's a continuous work in progress.

The Centennial Gardens are really a collection of smaller gardens. There's an arid garden, a fragrant rose garden, and an elevated edible garden containing the finest produce available anywhere. The produce grown in Centennial Gardens is donated to local charities. In addition, the Cherie Flores Garden Pavilion, located in the McGovern Centennial Gardens, is the park's main venue for weddings and private events. The Pavilion has its own parking lot, so it's easy to get to.

With all of this, the most prominent feature in Centennial Gardens is the new 30-foot grass-covered mound with a granite-lined waterfall feeding a reflection pool at its base. A paved spiral path leads to the top of the mound, crossing the waterfall at intervals. The view from the top of the mound is worth the walk. The sound of the flowing water adds to the serene atmosphere.

The Hawkins Sculpture Walk contains 10 busts of memorable figures like Simón Bolívar, Benito Juárez, and Robert Burns. All of the busts were gifts to the City of Houston. There are other sculptures throughout the park. A life-sized Confucius stands in the Centennial Gardens. Oliver Twist stands near the ticket office at Miller Theatre. The Atropos Key is the large bronze sculpture that sits atop the hill in front of Miller Theatre. When John Lennon died, it became a temporary shrine as mourners placed hundreds of candles on the sculpture and around its base.

The Houston Taipei Friendship Pavilion that first opened in 1978 is currently under repair. The Conservancy has engineers studying ways to repair and preserve the elaborately decorated pagoda, a gift from Taipei, Houston's first sister city.

Miller Outdoor Theatre

Another popular attraction at Hermann Park is the Miller Outdoor Theatre. This open-air amphitheatre sits at the base of a gently sloping hill.

The Miller Theatre is more than just a covered stage. It has an elaborate theatrical rigging system for hanging curtains and scenery. It boasts a retractable orchestra pit, a 110 ton AC system, and new overhead fans for better circulation above the 1700 fixed seats. In addition, there is state of the art lighting and sound. Recently-improved accessibility for wheelchairs, restrooms, and concessions make it a desirable destination.

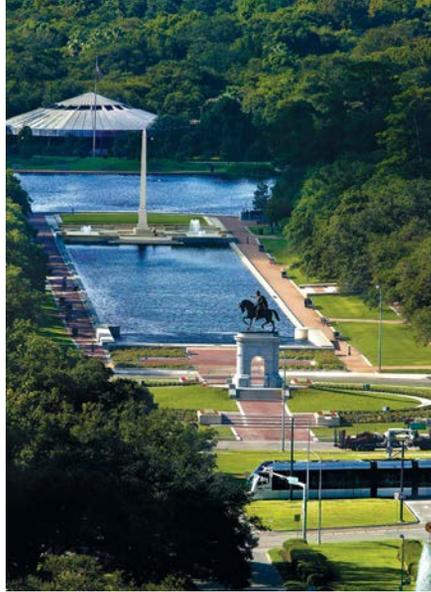
The Miller Theatre is an important part of Houston's cultural history. For more than 90 years, it has provided Houstonians with free, quality entertainment covering the gamut from Shakespeare to Zydeco. The theatre also can lay claim to the longest free season of any amphitheatre in the United States. Miller Theatre has been home to Theatre Under The Stars since 1968 and the Houston Shakespeare Festival since 1975.

Miller Theatre also has been the site of Houston's Juneteenth Blues Festival every year since 1974. Over the years, the Juneteenth Blues Festival has featured such luminaries as Clarence "Gatemouth" Brown, Clifton Chenier, John Lee Hooker, Robert Cray, Johnny "Clyde" Copeland, and Bobby Bland. Last year's headliner was New Orleans music legend Allen Toussaint.

Miller Theatre brings top-notch acts showcasing cultures from around the world through music, choreography, storytelling, and stagecraft. In years past, they've presented the Soweto Gospel Choir, the Chinese Golden Dragon Acrobats, the Royal Drummers of Burundi, and the Indian group, Dashavatar. The GuGu Drum Group, an acclaimed Shanghai-based theatrical group that combines ancient dance, storytelling, and drumming, will perform at Miller Outdoor Theatre on March 18.

John P. McGovern Lake

The John P. McGovern Lake covers



seven acres. While no swimming or wading is allowed, there is fishing for children under 12 and adults over 65 years of age. The lake has islands that serve as temporary habitat for migratory birds like night-herons and ducks. In fact, Hermann Park provides a habitat for a surprising amount of wildlife. Besides the squirrels and crows that

sometimes ~~harass~~ entertain picnickers, the park is home to a variety of nesting birds, fish, amphibians, and turtles.

Improving and maintaining a park like this isn't cheap. The recently-completed Centennial Gardens project cost \$31 million. Kinder Station and the Hermann Park Conservancy Gift Shop cost at least \$2 million to complete. But parks like Hermann have a value beyond providing a public space for recreation. Academic studies show that investing in urban parks increases the local tax base and draws investment to those areas. It also encourages civic involvement. These factors tend to contribute to reducing crime in those areas. The Hermann Park Conservancy is now working on its next twenty-year plan. **N**

Greg Varhaug has written software instruction manuals and procedural manuals for many Houston companies. He operates HoustonGuitar.com, a commercial music-instruction website.