

Oklahoma City Is Booming With Oil and a New Exuberance



Paul Hellstern for The New York Times

ON THE WATER Taxi boats transport tourists on the Bricktown Canal in the city's revitalized riverfront district. By FINN-OLAF JONES
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IT took approximately a day for the song — and who doesn't know that song? — to clear my head once I'd arrived in [Oklahoma City](#). This revitalized metropolis does seem to have a constant wind that comes sweepin' down the plain, but the windfalls from its booming economy have roughed enough new grand urban projects, gleaming museums and sophistication so that one suspects the only folks tempted to yell "Ayipioeay" are visitors. Rising just outside the Will Rogers World Airport terminal is the first evidence of the reason for Oklahoma City's recent resurgence: an oil rig. The rigs are all over town — even on the State Capitol grounds. A lot of pricey crude and gas bubble beneath [Oklahoma](#). "When I moved here, there wasn't much here for someone who was more used to [London](#)'s pace of life," said Dina Hammam, known as Dinky, a social worker and socialite-about-town who arrived from [England](#) six years ago. "The transformation has been incredible. Just look around." A glance around her breakfast spot, the noirish-cool Lobby Bar in the newly renovated Will Rogers Theater, revealed a restored [Art Deco](#) mural of Will himself (local cowpoke made good) and a cafe brimming with Wall Street types and their stylish spouses. The theater looms over an affluent corridor of North Western Avenue that continues along the Tara-sized mansions dotting Nichols Hills. Although the Mockingbird Manor antiques co-op up the street carries handmade blankets, and the French Cowgirl sells tooled cellphone holders to match your saddle, a cosmopolitan elegance presides over this part of town, with foreign restaurants and accents throughout. Newcomers to Oklahoma City might at first have a hard time guessing what part of the [United States](#) they're in. A generally flat cityscape and the [Chicago](#)-style Art Deco [architecture](#) downtown, coupled with the friendly-but-not-too-friendly nods and hellos, hint at the Midwest. Jazz, blues bars and ubiquitous barbecue joints suggest the South. But the wide vistas, blast-furnace winds from the surrounding red-dirt prairie and preponderance of American Indian shops (Oklahoma has 38 sovereign tribes), pickups and cowboy hats indicate that you are indeed in the West. And a Western kind of audacity pervades, from the 55-foot-tall glass Dale Chihuly sculpture in the Oklahoma City Museum of Art — which boasts the world's most comprehensive collection of Chihuly's works — to the exuberant parades and festivals that seem to be a constant. While I was in town, a nationally known local psychedelic band, the Flaming Lips, screened a homemade movie and [music](#) extravaganza, "Christmas on Mars," to a raucous crowd at the dead CENTER Film Festival. At the same time, the National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum was hosting a gathering of contemporary Western artists — imagine a group of people resembling the cast of a Sam Peckinpah movie with paintbrushes. There is also a frisson in the air over the news that the city has managed to snag a [National Basketball Association](#) franchise, with the SuperSonics moving here from [Seattle](#) next season. On the banks of the Oklahoma River, a football field-sized monument is under construction to commemorate the great Land Run of 1889, when 10,000 pioneers rushed into town on a single day. The riverfront has come alive since 1999, when a canal was completed to attract visitors. A derelict warehouse area has been transformed into Bricktown, a lively focal point for night life, teeming with homegrown jazz and blues joints served by taxi boats. One of the more colorful stops is a bowling alley called RedPin — a 10-laner masquerading as a nightclub where even the rented bowling shoes are hip-looking high-tops.

TO regain “True West” bearings, head south of the river, where a bronze sculpture of a galloping cowboy herding a steer to market presides next to the entrance to the Oklahoma National Stockyards. The century-old yards are still used for enormous cattle auctions several times a week, but you can also buy yourself a spot on the food chain one block farther up at Cattlemen’s Steakhouse. Long lines form for lunch and dinner (no reservations taken), so try breakfast. Curiosity got the best of me when I saw calf brains on the menu. “Usually it’s just the old-timers that want this,” the waitress said, handing me a plate of what looked like oatmeal. For the record, it has a slight livery aftertaste and isn’t half bad, though I still felt obliged to wash it down with a couple of mugs of hot coffee and a plate of eggs with a magnificently aged and tenderized steak. There’s much more to feed your inner cowboy. Across the street, at the National Saddlery Company, hand-tooled saddles run from \$1,500 to \$30,000 for a masterpiece with silver trimmings. Down the street, Shorty’s Caboy Hattery will supply you with a custom-made cattleman’s hat described to me by Mike Nunn, behind the counter, as “the only hat that will stay on your head in Oklahoma wind.” On the next block, Oklahoma Native Art and Jewelry carries a broad variety of items from Oklahoma’s tribes. I was particularly smitten by the white pottery pieces with horse hairs burned onto their surfaces in [Jackson Pollock](#)-like swirling patterns — a technique pioneered by the store’s owner, Yolanda White Antelope. Her son, Mario Badillo, was seated at the store’s jewelry bench concentrating on a line of silver animal jewelry whose overlay had distinct sculptural qualities. “I was a rock sculptor when we still had our downtown studio,” he told me. “But then the bomb exploded and my leg got crushed when the wall caved in. It was too hard to move around after that so I became a jeweler instead.” The bomb. All the locals seem to know exactly where they were at 9:02 a.m. on April 19, 1995, when [Timothy McVeigh](#) detonated an explosive-filled truck beneath the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building, killing 168 people and damaging 312 surrounding buildings. Mr. Badillo was one of several people who told me that they still couldn’t force themselves back to that spot. At the Oklahoma City National Memorial that now covers the site, a gently flowing reflecting pool and two massive gates preside over 168 empty bronze chairs — one for each victim, the 19 smaller ones denoting children. After dusk, altar-like lights beneath the chairs suggested gently hovering souls. ANOTHER stirring monument, James Earle Fraser’s famous 18-foot statue of an American Indian slumped on his horse, “The End of the Trail,” greets visitors in the lobby of the National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum. I planned to spend a couple of hours there, but after a whole day I still hadn’t reached the end of the trail myself. Exhibits in tentlike pavilions around a central courtyard cover everything about cowboys from their roots in [Africa](#) and England to how they operate on contemporary corporate ranches. I had an air duel with a couple of passing kids outside the saloon in Prosperity Junction, a replica of a turn-of-the-century cattle town; examined guns used in famous movie shootouts in the Western Performers Gallery — [John Wayne](#)’s personal arsenal was particularly impressive; and learned that denims got their name when a French cloth called serge de Nîmes became popular for ranchers’ pants. The American West Gallery, a 2,000-piece cowboy [Louvre](#) of Western art, includes works by Frederic Remington, Albert Bierstadt and Charles M. Russell. “Make sure to check out the auditorium before we close,” a guide suggested when I was still far from finished browsing, and in I went to be bowled over by five 46-foot-high Wilson Hurley triptychs of sunsets at [Monument Valley](#), the [Grand Canyon](#) and other iconic Western spots. Modern cowgirls and cowboys of every age group and shape were hootin’ and hollerin’ at Club Rodeo, an acre-sized honky-tonk south of downtown near the airport. This is a friendly spot where fellow carousers will help you figure out some pretty elaborate two-stepping or waltzing to local “red dirt bands” whose country sounds are imbued with a blues-inspired twang. The mood turned real cowpokey when the dance-floor lights went dark to be replaced by spotlights on a tennis-court-sized rodeo ring. The revelers shifted to the ring with their dollar beers, and some took turns trying to hang onto bucking broncos for longer than eight seconds. Loud cheers greeted Skunk, a black bull with a white stripe and a reputation for orneriness. The guy set to ride him decided to trade his cowboy hat for a helmet — a smart idea. Three seconds later he was catapulted into the dust. The next ride started, and the crowd whooped it up. Come to think of it, given that it seems to be having the ride of its life, one could say that about the whole city.