

# THE HOUSTON CHRONICLE

## Houston a mecca for tourists?

By GORDON J. QUAN

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Long considered a great place for business and to raise a family, Houston has rarely been viewed as a tourist destination. Yet with the guidance of a native, Houston can be one of the most fascinating cities in the world. That's just what visitors from around the globe will learn next week when the city takes the international stage and Houston Greeters plays host to the annual meeting of the Global Greeter Network.

It's not often that a concept supported by the generosity of a group of passionate locals warrants a global conference, but that's what our friends and neighbors have done with Houston Greeters. For more than six years, Houstonians have supported, joined and volunteered for an organization that connects individuals - visitors or neighbors - with passionate locals who are interested in sharing their favorite aspects of the city.

Much of the local awareness of Houston Greeters has been generated by word-of-mouth and referral, although we have received endorsements from two Houston mayors. Houston Greeters is a nonprofit and offers customized free "greetings" that often consist of a walk or tour and a discussion around the topic or destination. Some of the more than 80 topics that our city's inhabitants are excited to share include the downtown tunnel system, [Discovery Green](#), local ice houses, vintage clothing shops and even something as simple as bike riding along the bayou. The Houston Greeters concept has eloquently provided a needed outlet for individuals to share their interests and learn from a true local.

It's no surprise that Houstonians have embraced the concept with both arms, just as the Houston Greeters logo portrays. We live in a global city that often flies under the radar as a tourist destination for culture, entertainment or interesting experiences. Yet we all have our favorite nooks and crannies we enjoy from living here and we are often quick to share with visiting friends and family.

The traditional and off-the-beaten-path topics of Houston Greeters that inspire our community pique the interests of even the most reticent visitor. The more than 100 Houston Greeters volunteers have educated, entertained, dined, shopped, ridden bikes, discussed art, cheered our sports teams, visited religious houses and even flown over Houston with visitors from more than 30 countries and speaking more than 17 languages. They do this simply from a passion for their interests and a willingness to share with a curious outsider.

Houston Greeters is a founding member of the Global Greeter Network, which has grown to 26 member cities around the world that offer an identical outlet for greeter experiences. Its leadership will be meeting here next week to share successes and to discuss ways to make these exchanges even more accessible to everyone. The Global Greeter Network has fielded requests

from more than 200 cities around the world interested in learning about the concept and how it can be implemented.

We are proud to have such a wealth of diverse, passionate individuals who share our city with others. The Houston Greeters have created a way for Houstonians to join a global community while sharing what's important to them locally - something we can all appreciate.

The demand for this type of real-world interaction from both locals and visitors has proven to be the driver behind the growth and success of this emerging global network.

While the personal benefits of connecting individuals over common interests can be obvious, our city is realizing a benefit much larger. Stories of new and interesting greets are being shared among travelers; corporate recruitment and retention managers are directing new hires to familiarize themselves with the city through a greeter; and business owners are welcoming local greeters and their visitors to their establishments.

So whether you're passionate about dessert bars, urban gardens, chocolate, dance or rodeo, or if you're just curious about them, chances are there's an opportunity to experience it through a greeter. Next time you're in Paris, Berlin, Abidjan, the Ivory Coast or just looking for something to do in Houston, look up a greeter and I'm sure you'll enjoy the insider experiences that person can offer.

*Quan is chairman of Houston Greeters, a former mayor pro tem and City Council member and co-chairman of FosterQuan, an immigration law firm.*

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