

## Houston's shops, medical centers attract visitors

By KATHY BERGEN

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HOUSTON — The trip to Houston was not the main event, merely a pit stop on the way to a Caribbean cruise leaving from a nearby port. But Flor Hernandez's family fell in love with the city, squeezing in visits to the aquarium, the art museum and the shopping district.

"I feel comfortable here," said Hernandez, a Mexican tourist finishing up a stroll through the cavernous aquarium with her husband and two children. "The downtown has a lot of buildings, but still there are open spaces, trees, parks. It's very tranquil."

While Chicago is struggling to lure more foreign visitors, Houston is racing ahead, chalking up 22 percent growth in overseas visitors from outside North America in 2013. And while Chicago is courting Mexican tourists, Houston has a long relationship — its share of that market is more than double what Chicago pulls in.

Houston, the nation's fourth-largest city, owes some of its success in the overseas markets to business travelers coming to town during the resurgence of the energy sector — a boom that is tailing off because of the recent plunge in oil prices. And its base of overseas visitors is half that of Chicago, making it easier to achieve a startling growth rate.

But observers say the city

also is adept at aggressively promoting its core strengths: the Texas Medical Center, a consortium of 56 hospitals and research institutions that caters to international patients; NASA's famed Space Center Houston; and mega-malls that draw waves of weekend visitors from Mexico eager to shop tax-free.

With Hispanics making up a more than a third of its population, Houston has been marketing itself in Mexico for more than three decades. Houston uses a Spanish-language website and Spanish feeds on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram to promote the city as a weekend shopping destination for people from Mexico, the city's biggest source of international tourists. As in all of Texas, sales taxes are refunded to international visitors — a rare perk in the U.S.

Earlier this year on a springlike afternoon, visitors from Mexico, Latin America, China and Africa found their way to the tax-refund office in a lower-level corner of the tony Galleria, a sprawling shopping mall in Houston's Uptown neighborhood. Many walked in clutching thick stacks of shopping receipts they planned to review with clerks who spoke Spanish and Mandarin.

Among them were Brazilian visitors Leandro Vieira, an economist, and his girlfriend, Juliana Ravanini, a pathologist. They began their vacation in New York

City, where they saw the Statue of Liberty, the Empire State Building and a Broadway production of "Phantom of the Opera." But they saved their shopping — for an iPhone 6 and an iPad — for Houston.

Viera estimates the purchases cost \$1,000 less in Houston than they would have in Brazil, plus the couple saved about \$50 in sales taxes. "I'm very, very happy," he said. "It's like the (air) ticket, you know. We flew for free."

International tourists also make up a third of the 823,000 visitors annually to Space Center Houston, the visitor center at NASA's Johnson Space Center. Among the attractions: lunches with astronauts, tours of the historic mission control center and a new exhibit opening later this year — the Boeing 747 shuttle carrier aircraft with a replica space shuttle affixed on top.

And at the city's Texas Medical Center, medical tourism is a big draw — 16,000 to 20,000 international patients arrive for treatment every year.

One of those patients, Felix Moseholm, a 17-year-old music student from Denmark, has a rare form of cancer that starts at the back of the nose. He came to the MD Anderson Cancer Center, a part of the Texas Medical Center, to receive proton therapy, a highly precise form of radiation treatment not available in his home country.

The city's reputation for medical prowess played a role, as did his doctor's referral.

"From everything I've heard and everyone I've talked to about Houston and the cancer treatment in Houston, I've heard that's the place where they are the

best at it," said Moseholm, a double bass player with a taste for jazz.

Had he stayed in Denmark, conventional radiation treatment likely would have made it impossible for

him to eat, forcing him onto a feeding tube – something he feared, according to his mother, Kathrine Schroder Moseholm.

"He's through five weeks of treatment now, and he's

actually eating normally and living pretty much a reasonably OK life," she said during their winter stay. "It's amazing."



ANTONIO PEREZ/CHICAGO TRIBUNE PHOTOS

A family from Mexico tours Space Center Houston. Overseas tourism to the Texas city increased 22 percent in 2013.

