

Riding the rails in Dallas: Trolleys bring city's past to the present

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Byline: Barbara Balfour

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As we try not to slump over in the sticky, sweltering Texas heat, we hear our lifesaver coming before it even rounds the corner.

Clanging and clicking away along McKinney Avenue in Dallas, this historic trolley announces its prompt arrival every 15 minutes, seven days a week.

Though it's not air-conditioned, it's a welcome refuge to those who need shade on this scorching summer morning.

The best part? It doesn't cost a dime to get on. Along with the usual medley of overexcited tourists, Texans out with their kids, and the odd local on their way to work, we climb on for a slow tour of one of the city's fastest-growing neighbourhoods.

The McKinney Avenue Trolley has been voted the best way to pretend you're in San Francisco - without the precarious hills along the way.

And with all the cool shops and galleries you could stop at enroute, why you'd want to pretend to be anywhere else is a mystery.

Its five restored vintage cars run along six kilometres of track that includes easy access to more than 100 restaurants within walking distance, including Nobu (co-owned by Robert DeNiro and renowned Japanese chef Nobu Matsuhisa) and a former church building converted into a Hard Rock Cafe.

What is especially striking is the juxtaposition of such modern conveniences in a neighbourhood that dates back 125 years ago as a freed slave settlement, but is now known as the trendy uptown district.

The rebirth of this trolley system began in the early 1980s, when workers excavating the brick street paving along McKinney Avenue noticed trolley tracks underneath that dated back more than 30 years.

A local businessman and restaurateur, Phil Cobb, came up with the idea of resurrecting the trolley and contacted a streetcar collector who lived in the area to make it happen.

Since the electric streetcar started running again in 1989, says its business director, Courtney Dodson, "The neighbourhood has grown up around us. There's been close to \$1 billion in developments around here since we started, including the majority of the highrises."

When the antique streetcar system first started, they were largely manned by volunteers who ranged from the president of a bank, to a cardiologist at a major hospital.

After the trolley partnered with the local transportation authority in 2002, they no longer had to charge fares, started implementing their schedules like clockwork and hired paid operators.

By expanding to connect with a nearby light rail subway station, they serve as a reliable transit option for locals as well as a tourist attraction.

Its hop-on, hop-off style works well for us as we dart in and out of whatever looks good from our window-side seats. First stop: an organic breakfast at the Dream Cafe a few blocks away, its spacious courtyard patio filled with yuppies and young chatty moms out with their toddlers.

We poke through several antique shops on nearby streets, then get back on for a leisurely ride to the Dallas Museum of Art, which features many thought-provoking impressionist, modern and African art exhibits.

Our last stop? The West Village Retail District, what some refer to as the hottest shopping centre in Dallas for eclectic, high-end treasures at corresponding prices. There you'll find more than 40 shops toting everything from European purses, to exquisite chocolates with names like Take Me Now.

In addition to touring the neighbourhood, the streetcars can also be rented for private functions. A more viable option for visitors is the railroad dining car currently being restored to serve food on board in the evenings.

With seating for 30, the car will be equipped with a bar and a restroom to host a reservations-only dinner several times a week. Call 214-855-0006 for more details.

If You Go:

Getting around: The McKinney Avenue Trolley runs from 10 a.m. to 10 p.m. daily, 365 days a year. Check www.mata.org for schedules. It connects McKinney Avenue shops and restaurants with the downtown Dallas Arts District. The Dallas Area Rapid Transit (DART) operates a light-rail system that connects to the trolley; check www.DART.org to plan your trips.

Dallas weather: While summers are hot and humid, the fall brings warm days and brisk nights, so pack a light jacket and some sweaters that can be added on in layers. The average fall and winter temperatures can range from 20 C to below zero.

For more info: Check the Dallas Convention & Visitors Bureau at www.dallascvb.com; the Dallas Museum of Art at www.dm-art.org; and the www.uptowndallas.net/index2.htm for the latest on what's happening in this trendy district, plus coupons and special offers from local businesses.