



WRITING SAMPLE

Publication: MaxAvenue

South Congress: Urban Hipness Meets Austin Originality

Written by Gretchen Heber

South Congress Avenue is one of Austin's most beloved areas. The district, just south of the state capital's downtown, is a mecca for funky, only-in-Austin shops, superb restaurants and unrestrained hipness.

The neighborhood just west of this famed avenue, sometimes referred to as "South Congress" but technically a part of the Bouldin Creek Neighborhood Association, is home to a delightful mix of people from all walks of life. Older folks, singles, couples and families all love this eclectic part of town.

"I've lived here for about a year, but my next-door neighbors have been here since the 1940s," says Paula Kothmann, a South Congress resident who works for a non-profit organization that helps homeless people. "It's close to everything," she adds.

Austin's central business district — and the Texas capitol — is a short 5 minutes north, and Austin-Bergstrom International Airport is about 20 minutes away.

Houses for sale in South Congress vary greatly in size, style, price and age. Some areas of the neighborhood were developed in the 1880s, while others are under construction today. Adorable 380-square-foot bungalows sit side by side with much larger homes, some in excess of 8,700 square feet. Prices for South Congress homes range from \$90,000 to \$1.1 million, with the average being \$336,983.

Much of the new construction is the result of older homes being updated and expanded to accommodate urbanites who want opulence and the convenience of downtown living.

Kids living in South Congress can attend Travis Heights Elementary School, Fulmore Middle School, both about a 5-minute drive away, and Travis High School, 10 minutes away. All three

Austin ISD schools received an “academically acceptable” rating from the Texas Education Agency in 2011.

Pretty much everyone in South Congress appreciates the easy access to the numerous shops and eateries that characterize pedestrian-friendly Congress Avenue.

“I like the walk-ability. I lived in Europe for several years, and I like being able to do things without a car,” says Kothmann. “A lot of times when we go out to eat, we go in the neighborhood.”

First Thursday is First in Neighborhood Fun

A young couple is thrilled to have just purchased and moved into an adorable 1930s bungalow a short drive from the downtown high tech firm where they both work in video game development. They're pleased with their compact home in South Congress, knowing they can add on when it comes time to start a family.

Exhausted after a day of unpacking, and hungry, they decide to walk the two blocks to Congress Avenue, where they know plenty of restaurant choices await. It's a Thursday and they don't expect it to be too difficult to get a table at one of the eateries.

But what's this? Congress Avenue is absolutely packed with all sorts of people having fun, reveling up and down the avenue as they visit street vendors of all stripes. Wow! There goes a unicyclist dressed as a clown and juggling batons! The pair smile in awe as they take in all the activity. Approaching one of the booths, they ask a vendor what's going on. It's the first Thursday of the month, she says, and so the neighborhood celebrates with First Thursday, a giant block party where the shops and restaurants stay open late to accommodate thousands of revelers who come for the excitement.

The couple is more certain than ever of their decision to buy a house in South Congress. What a fun place to live, and what a fun event to look forward to each month!

“We love First Thursday,” says Andrew Burnette, who's worked at South Congress Avenue's Big Top Candy Shop for two years. “It's a time when families come out. We have the circus theme, so the more people that squeeze in here, the more circus-like it is and the more fun.”

All the Basics, Plus Much, Much More

With so many distinctive shops and restaurants just blocks away, neighbors can easily access all the necessities by foot — Ace Expert Alterations and Cleaners, Body Vida workout studio, Dirty Dog grooming shop and Maximum FX hair salon are all nearby.

Groceries are available at Farm to Market Grocery, blocks from the neighborhood, and major grocer H.E.B. is just a mile south.

Dozens of Austin's most interesting shops are within an easy walk of the South Congress neighborhood. Residents spend hours sorting through the joyful collection of "antiques, oddities and curious goods" found at Uncommon Objects. Genuine Texas and western apparel can be found in all shapes and sizes at Allens <no apostrophe> Boots. Neighbors looking to redecorate can check out Antigua, which showcases authentic and colorful Latin American art and décor.

Residents parched from shopping can purchase a beverage at neighborhood hangout Jo's Coffee, where they're sure to run into other South Congress neighbors and participate in one of the area's most entertaining endeavors — people watching.

When it's time to dine, walking-distance restaurant choices are myriad, too. Home Slice Pizza serves New York-style pizza by the slice or by the pie. Customers at Lucky Robot can order their Japanese-inspired meals via tabletop iPads. Guero's delights locals with its time-tested Tex-Mex served in a turn-of-the-century feed and seed store.

When a special occasion demands a special restaurant, neighbors know Vespaio Ristorante is the place to go. Intimate, authentic and delicious, this South Congress gem offers Italian classics such as linguini con vongole as well as specialties such as oak fire grilled beef hanger steak with veal reduction. And neighbors also know that Vespaio is a great celebrity-sighting place.

South Congress residents who need the variety and quantity of stores offered by a standard indoor shopping mall can head to Barton Creek Square, 10 minutes away by car. This large mall houses more than 170 shops and restaurants, including The Apple Store, Banana Republic and The Art of Shaving. Hungry shoppers can feast at California Pizza Kitchen, Panda Express or Charley's Grilled Subs, among other restaurants.

With Arms Open Wide, This Austin Gem Welcomes Everyone

South Congress's proximity to the renowned, vibrant and eclectic shopping, dining and entertainment district by the same name makes this neighborhood an exciting one for residents lucky enough to live there.

Just steps from some of the city's best restaurants and funkier shops — not to mention great people-watching — South Congress neighborhood itself is a treasure of historical homes interspersed with contemporary architectural masterpieces. Mature trees and friendly neighbors contribute to neighborhood's appeal, as does the raucous monthly block party, First Thursday.

Neighbors of all shapes and sizes and of a wide variety of cultural backgrounds fill this diverse neighborhood. Proximity to good schools, Austin's central business district and the state capitol offer convenience for families, professionals and government workers.

gretchen@socialgazelle.com | www.socialgazelle.com

“It’s a great place to call home,” says Kothmann. “Everyone’s friendly.”