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- BREAKING NEWS
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- COLUMNISTS
- ENTERTAINMENT
- GOSSIP
- LIFESTYLE
- NEWS
- POST OPINION
- REAL ESTATE
- SPORTS
- STYLE
- TRAVEL

SPECIAL SECTIONS

Real Estate

The Rhythm of Latin New York

Every Tuesday

Search Sale & Rental Listings

Listings & Features

PAST SECTIONS

- Classified
- Classroom Extra
- Comics
- Coupons
- Games
- Home Delivery
- Horoscope
- Last 7 Days
- Lottery
- Newsletters
- Post Store
- Post Winners
- TV Week

EVERYTHING CHANGES



ORLANDO: The lobby at the Ritz, home to the stellar Norman's.

- Email
- Print
- Archives
- Reprint

cafes, shops - and a growing number of condos. Its centerpiece is the 2-year-old Mill City Museum. Also stop by the Soap Factory, a converted warehouse featuring rotating art exhibits (518 Second St. S.).

Insider's tip: Somalian immigrants have been flocking to the city, and restaurants, serving that country's Italian-Arabic fusion cuisine, are popping up all over. Try Safari, a welcoming storefront operation just east of the Walker (1424 Nicollet Ave.).

Where to stay: The chic Le Meridien Minneapolis is a good bet. And its restaurant, Cosmos, is a hit (weekend rates from \$199; lemeridien.com).

April 5, 2005 -- ART ATTACK IN MINNEAPOLIS

Why now: The Walker Art Center reopens April 17.

Details: Pritzker Prize-winning architectural firm Herzog & de Meuron has doubled the renowned Walker's size with a modernist expansion; the new space includes a 385-seat performance center (walkerart.org).

A bigger, better **Minneapolis Institute of Arts** is also in the works (a new wing opens in 2006), as is a new home for the Guthrie Theatre.

What else: Check out the Riverfront District along the Mississippi River, the former hub of the city's now-defunct flour industry. You'll find cobblestone streets,

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Getting there: Daily direct flights on Northwest (nwa.com).

Info: minneapolis.org.

CULINARY CURIOSITIES IN ORLANDO, FLA.

Why now: The food. Really.

Details: Tucked away in Grande Lakes, a mammoth conference resort off a lonely parkway, three minutes from Sea World - and just a few more from Mickey - are two restaurants worth a special trip.

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Medals
Winners

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Norman's, from star-chef Norman Van Aken, is at the Ritz-Carlton Orlando. Guests in the elegant, round

dining room are attended to by top-notch servers, the cheese trolley is outstanding, and the eclectic menu is tough to top (i.e., oysters served with tequila lime granita and desserts that will send you into sensory overload).

Things are more down to earth next door at Primo in the J.W. Marriott, where chef Melissa Kelly whips up Italian-inspired dishes. The fresh, organic ingredients are thanks to a partnership with Central Florida farmers and a garden out back. The saltimbocca with olive oil mashed potatoes, swimming in sage gravy is comforting and classy (both restaurants are at 4000 Central Florida Pkwy.).

What else: You'll be hungry again, eventually. Orlando's "restaurant row" on Sand Lake Road has a handful of mostly strip mall-based eateries that locals love.

Try Cedars, a sophisticated Middle Eastern joint (No. 7732); Seasons 52, an American grill-style restaurant with an excellent wine list (No. 7700); Anaelle & Hugo for Mediterranean (No. 7533); and the Samba Room, one in a chainlet of nouveau Cuban joints, where, weekends, the dance floor heats up (No. 7468).

Insider's tip: To see one of the East Coast's most inviting neighborhoods, take a leisurely stroll through the casually chic Thornton Park district, located across Lake Eola from downtown (625 E. Central Blvd.).

Where to stay: The elegant Ritz-Carlton is the place to go for service (packages from \$279; ritzcarlton.com). Thornton Park's Veranda Bed and Breakfast is quieter, and has 12 unique rooms (from \$99; theverandabandb.com).

Getting there: Song and JetBlue have fares below \$200 (flysong.com, jetblue.com).

Info: orlandoinfo.com

MONTREAL IS THE NEW AUSTIN

Why now: The home of Celine Dion is, ironically, North America's new music mecca.

Details: Montreal, the culture capital of Quebec, is also "the" place for music. Heralded bands like Arcade Fire and the Stills are just two of the more commercial names in a town known for its grab bag of mini-scenes (heavy metal, for instance, is still enormous around here).

A good place to get introduced to the alt.scene is Boulevard St. Laurent in the Plateau district. Here you'll find Casa del Popolo, a cafe and concert space (No. 4873) and, across the street, La Sala Rossa, a lovably decrepit live-music venue (No. 4848). During June, these two venues are the launching pads for the Suoni Per Il Popolo festival, a collection of new and innovative music (casadelpopolo.com).

Info: montrealmusicscene.com

What else: Hang out in the vibrant, cutting-edge Plateau district and then, for dinner in a calmer setting, go to the upscale Outremont, adjacent to the Plateau, and eat at cozy Rumi. It serves affordable Middle Eastern food, but the real draw is its high energy, secret-vibe atmosphere (5198 rue Hutchison).

Insider's tip: Don't discount the importance of starting all conversations in French.

Where to stay: For romance, try the Auberge du Vieux-Port in dead-sexy Old Montreal (from \$145; aubergeduvieuxport.com). For a more central location, try the Sofitel (from \$131; sofitel.com).

Getting there: A 6-hour drive from N.Y.C. on I-87, or an hour on Air Canada (aircanada.ca).

Info: tourism-montreal.org

GO AROUND THE WORLD IN HOUSTON

Why now: The bigger and better International Festival hits town April 23.

Details: What began as a small arts festival in then-dying downtown Houston has become a raucous, successful celebration of global art, music and food.

The event takes place April 23-24 and April 30-May 1 in and around Sam Houston Park. The country being featured is India, represented through a craft market, lots of food and dance performances. Other music will range from Shemekia Copeland to blues legend Taj Mahal (tickets \$7; ifest.org).

What else: May 14 is when two parades sponsored by the city's Orange Show Foundation hit town. The Anything that Floats Parade takes place at the Buffalo Bayou watershed downtown where people compete for wackiest non-motorized floating apparatus. Later, join spectators for the Art Car Parade, for which elaborately decorated modes of transportation (i.e., roller skates and hot rods) compete for fabulous prizes (orangeshow.org).

Insider's tip: On weekend nights, Main Street closes to traffic and cafe tables fill the sidewalks, as the new light-rail buzzes on by. Eat fancy at the power-crowd spot BANK, yet another Jean-Georges concern, located inside the new Hotel Icon (220 Main St.).

Where to stay: Downtown, it has to be the Hotel Icon, with its swanky rooms and mini-spa (rooms from \$199; hotelicon.com).

Getting there: Continental is your best bet for a non-stop flight (continental.com).

Info: visithoustontexas.com

compiled by NYPTstaff and written by David Landsel

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