

THIS SOUTHEAST OKLAHOMA HOT SPOT DRAWS GAGGLES OF VISITORS FROM TEXAS AND ARKANSAS, SO WHY HAVEN'T YOU BEEN YET?

HOCHATOWN CALLING

BY GREG ELWELL

TEXAS, TEXAS, TEXAS, Arkansas, Louisiana, Texas, Texas, Louisiana, Texas . . .”

Perched along the edge of Beavers Bend State Park, the McCurtain County Game Reserve, and the Ouachita National Forest, Hochatown hauls in tourists by the busload. But stop at any of the businesses along U.S. Highway 259—which anchors this unincorporated community that historically has been considered a part of Broken Bow but now is taking on an identity all its own—and take a look at the license plates. They’re almost all from out of state.

With golf, lodging, camping, and numerous other amenities, Beavers Bend State Park offers a resort experience in the heart of Hochatown.



Above and below: Coyote Ridge cabin is one of nearly fifty luxury cabins managed by Beavers Bend Adventures.

Smack dab in the middle of Hochatown, the parking lot outside Grateful Head Pizza Oven & Tap Room is by no means an outlier. Even on a drizzly Sunday morning, throngs of diners wait for tables and explore the nearby souvenir shops, many clad in T-shirts that make it clear they're visitors. Amid the restaurants, breweries, mini-golf courses, and hiking trails, the only thing that seems to be in short supply in this southeastern Oklahoma resort town are Oklahomans.

It makes sense when you consider that Hochatown is closer to Dallas, Texas, and Fayetteville, Arkansas, than it is to much of Oklahoma, but it is odd to see so much of the Sooner State's natural splendor enjoyed by non-Okies. And local business owners would like to change that—at least a little.



JOHNN MANNING WASN'T born on a horse, but you'd be forgiven for thinking so if you saw him ride. Manning, a former cowboy and owner of Riverman Trail Rides, says he can't remember a time in his life when he wasn't riding regularly. Even during his years as a welder and working at a paper mill, he

always had horses. Though it was at the mill that his life—and his luck—changed.

"I never win anything," he says. "But there was a football pot at work, one of those hundred-square boards that cost five dollars a square. There were only two or three spots left, and I put down my money."

Lo and behold, Manning won. And the big prize in the pot was Duke, a friendly and gorgeous eighteen-month-old colt that became the very first animal employee of Riverman Trail Rides. Duke, the five-dollar horse.

That wasn't Manning's only brush with luck. In July 2008, a friend from Broken Bow who owns River's Bend Resort implored him to start a trail-riding business.

"I thought she was crazy," he says. "But I also knew she was a smart businesswoman. And here we are, eleven years later."

Working with his wife, sons, and a few hired hands, Manning and the Riverman crew take riders of all experience levels on horseback journeys through the majesty of rural McCurtain County. Rides start at an hour—a good length for tenderfeet—all the way up to all-day treks.

"If you ride with a group, you ride to the level of the least-experienced rider, so we

encourage people who want a more challenging ride to take a private one," Manning says. "There's a few people every year that think they want an all-day ride, so we give it to them. Of course, with that, we supply a full catered lunch. Some of those we have to cut short because, by hour six, they're riding sidesaddle, if you know what I mean."

It's simultaneously nerve-wracking and exhilarating to put your trust in a one-ton animal that wears metal shoes, but all those jitters fade when you look out over Glover River, the last free-flowing river in the state. And then they all come rushing back when Manning guides wide-eyed visitors' horses across the water.

"We wanted to give people an experience like we had growing up riding horses," he says. "You get to see all kinds of terrain rather than just riding around a flat circle. Crossing the river is one of the ways we set ourselves apart from the competition."

And if there's one thing Hochatown has more of than out-of-state visitors, it's competition. Manning says he's friends with the other trail ride business owners in McCurtain County, and they often help each other out if someone is looking for a service they don't provide—Riverman won't let kids under ten ride solo, for instance.



THE CABIN BUSINESS, on the other hand, is a bit more cutthroat.

When you're staying in Hochatown, chances are good you're staying in a cabin. Lakeview Lodge at Beavers Bend State Park offers something most akin to the hotel experience without getting too far outside of the area, and there are plenty of spots for camping outdoors or parking RVs, but most visitors choose from the thousands of luxury cabins for rent.

Outside of Hochatown's main drag on U.S. Highway 259, the hills are honeycombed with dirt roads leading to cabins with names like Squirrel's Refuge, Oh, Dear, and Lucky Log. Some are romantic studio cabins for couples, while others are rustic mansions large enough to sleep parties of ten or more.

A tour of Rustic Mountain Lodge, part of the Rustic Luxury Cabins group, is a scene out of a McCurtain County episode of *MTV Cribs*. It's a brand of homestyle opulence

to which every country boy or girl aspires, with dens that feel like cathedrals and plush bedrooms that open onto balconies just a few feet away from wildlife.

My stay at Coyote Ridge, from Beavers Bend Adventures, had me clutching the door frame when it was time to check out, because it was all over and done far too soon. Located off Stephens Road, a few miles north of Hochatown's business center, the three-story cabin nearly begged for snow to fall from the sky—anything to keep me inside for a few hours more. I felt both isolated and completely at ease inside the building's log confines. My phone couldn't get a signal for calls or texts, but Wi-Fi and satellite TV meant entertainment and contact with the outside world were close at hand. Despite a surfeit of restaurants calling to me from down the road, I was smitten with the wide-open kitchen and longed for a weekend searing tri-tip roasts on the outdoor grill a few feet away from the hot tub.

While McCurtain County's cabin culture has exploded, one area that hasn't caught up is infrastructure. If you can, it's best to arrive during the day for an easier time scoping out road signs and cabin names, because streetlights are largely non-existent in Hochatown.

"We're talking about that, and maybe adding a stop light," says Janine Carter, owner of Beavers Bend Adventures. "Right now, they're estimating there are three thousand cabins in and around Hochatown, up from about seven hundred a few years ago. The whole

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John Manning, owner of Riverman Trail Rides, has turned his favorite outdoor hobby into a thriving business.





LORIDUCKWORTH

market changed for us. We went from having ten competitors, and then all of the sudden, we have a thousand competitors.”



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MOST BUSINESSES IN town have a side hustle building and renting cabins. Even brothers Mitchell and Mark McDaniel, who each manage their own enterprises—Mitchell is part owner of Hochatown Distilling Company, and Mark is part owner of Mountain Fork Brewery—working with their other brothers developing cabin properties. It all works, because it all works together.

“One of the reasons we are able to wait and age our bourbon is because we view the time as an investment,” Mitchell says. “Hopefully in the next few years, we’ll be able to move the distillery into the black.”

Hochatown Distilling Company currently sells Spear Point Vodka and Straight Bourbon Whiskey through liquor stores, and they’re looking to expand distribution as production increases, Mitchell says. If the laws change for direct sales—similar to what Oklahoma wineries and breweries can do—he’d like to produce flavored moonshines.

“I think we’d sell a bottle to every tourist who comes through,” he says.

Above, Mitchell, Tommy “Blue,” and Mark McDaniel of the Hochatown Distilling Company and Mountain Fork Brewery know that a good drink keeps tourists and locals coming back for more.

In the meantime, those who want a taste without committing to an entire bottle can either take a tour of the distillery or pull up a stool at The Speakeasy Sampling Room, where cocktails made with the local spirits, among others, are available.

Another moneymaker for the distillery is Mountain Fork Brewery, where Mark and his partners age American Scotch and MFB 9.0 beers in bourbon barrels for sale at their brew pub. After hiring head brewer Johann Fultz to dial in the flavors of the beers, Mountain Fork began distributing to its biggest market: Texas.

“I’ve seen some visitors from Texas buying cases of Sneaky Snake—two or three at a time—to take home with them,” Mark says.

As nice as it is to have a taste of vacation at home, most Hochatown flavors don’t travel so well. In a strip mall attached to the brewery, Mark’s wife Xiuling runs The Noodle Shop. The China native keeps the menu tight—four noodle dishes, four fried rice dishes, two kinds of dumplings—but the flavors are a trip. Spicy Noodles, which come with chicken, pork rib meat, or beef, masterfully toe the line between not-spicy-enough and fire-breathing-dragon heat with a flavor that will have visitors gulping them down by the chopstick full. The soy sauce fried rice, made with bacon, egg, corn, and lots of diced bell peppers, could be renamed Breakfast Rice, and folks would line up in the morning for a bowl.

Other spots in town are nigh legendary. Rolling Fork Takery offers healthy and delicious to-go dishes perfect for a day on the lake or quiet time inside a cabin, and Grateful Head takeout boxes can be found in just about every trash can in town. Nearby, at The Blue Rooster, the fare is largely deep-fried, including whole chickens and delicate catfish filets. While there are hints of Cajun flavors here and there—fried boudin balls are on the appetizer menu, and crawfish boils start in March and last as long as fresh crawfish are available—this is the kind of place you can bring just about everyone. Even vegetarians can cobble together a meal of fried veggies including pickles, green tomatoes, mushrooms, jalapeños, and yellow squash.

Still, with many cabins sporting both grills and expansive kitchens, it’s not a bad idea to cook a few meals. Mountain Man Meat Mar-



Grateful Head Pizza serves a healthy variety of beers and some of the best pizza in the state.

RETROSPEC FILMS



Along with a full bar, The Tasting Room often features live music and games.

LORIDUCKWORTH



Fried rice gets the star treatment at The Noodle Shop.

LORIDUCKWORTH



Xiuling McDaniel’s Noodle Shop specializes in Asian dishes like fried rice, dumplings, and, of course, noodles.

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KIM BAKER/OKLAHOMA TOURISM

ket cuts Certified Angus ribeyes, filets, and a variety of other steaks, as well as thick-cut bacon and different styles of sausage. Don't go in expecting a grocery store—those are easy to find up the road in Broken Bow—but there are plenty of goodies on the shelves and in small refrigerated cases for those open to trying something new.



HOCHATOWN, FOR ALL its popularity and growth, still is a pretty small town, but the number of amenities and activities belie that fact. Other than hiking near Broken Bow Lake and fishing in the Mountain Fork River, younger visitors might enjoy a stop at Beaver's Bend Mining Company to pan for gemstones, climb the outdoor playground, or see a blacksmith at work. That'll also give parents a chance to slip over to Hochatime for souvenir T-shirts, water bottles, and the like. Added bonus: A portion of every purchase goes to Friends of Beavers Bend, a non-profit that works to conserve the area's natural beauty.

Jessica Alkirwi, who started Hochatime with Kim Kennedy in 2015, says they fell in love with the area and wanted to give visitors something meaningful to take home.

Visitors of all ages can mine for gems, rocks, fossils, and more—and learn about geology in the process—at the Beavers Bend Mining Company.

Cyclists, hikers, and anyone else who likes to get outside will benefit from the extensive system of trails and paved roads at Beavers Bend State Park.

"We started small, with just one shirt design, which we sold in other stores around town," she says. "One thing turned into another, and we needed more space, so now it's our second year in the store. We're expanding from souvenirs to carrying more items that people can use while they're in Hochatown. Next week, we're getting hammocks."

If *Hochatime* has a meaning, Alkirwi says, it's taking a deep breath, letting go of the stress of the city, and embracing joy.

"There is so much to do, and there's so much to not do. It's whatever floats your boat," she says. "You could hit a grocery store, go to your cabin, not leave the entire time, and have a great visit. There are no stop lights. You just do your thing."

Whether you spend a week, a night, or an hour in Hochatown, that attitude permeates the entire area. The restaurants are diverse and delicious. The cabins are luxurious. The drinks are strong and tasty. Beavers Bend State Park and Broken Bow Lake are surrounded by natural wonder and filled with every type of outdoor activity from fly fishing to hiking to swimming, boating, zip lining, golfing, and more. Step outside and breathe in that freedom. You'll find yourself gasping for another lungful the minute you leave.



This is only a listing of a few of the places in this article, as Hochatown is full of exciting restaurants, luxury cabin operators, and attractions for the whole family. Visit TravelOK.com for a comprehensive listing.

RIVERMAN TRAIL RIDES

- > 1735 Pine View Road in Broken Bow
- > (405) 833-6671
- > rivermantrailrides.com

HOCHATIME

- > 9231 U.S. Highway 259 in Broken Bow
- > (580) 749-9490
- > hochatime.com

BEAVER'S BEND MINING COMPANY

- > 9221 U.S. Highway 259 in Broken Bow
- > (580) 494-6102
- > facebook.com/bbminingco

BEAVERS BEND ADVENTURES

- > 21 Oak Leaf Lane in Broken Bow
- > (214) 789-5322
- > beaversbendadventures.com

RUSTIC LUXURY CABINS

- > 33 North Lukfata Trail Road in Broken Bow
- > (580) 306-2282
- > rusticluxurycabins.com

THE NOODLE SHOP

- > 117 Lukfata Road in Broken Bow
- > (580) 306-4669

THE BLUE ROOSTER

- > 10251 U.S. Highway 259 in Broken Bow
- > (580) 494-6361
- > facebook.com/blueroosterok

MOUNTAIN MAN MEAT MARKET

- > 24 Crooked Oaks Lane in Broken Bow
- > (580) 584-5337
- > mountainmanmeatmarket.com