

# Around the World on Beltway 8

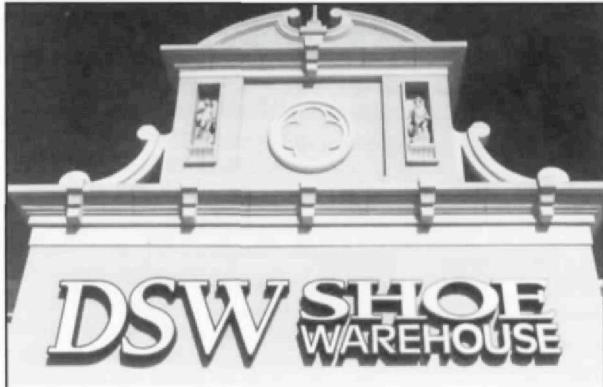
BY LARRY ALBERT

San Jose, Ca	1830	6:10 pm	On Time	C-39
San Jose, Cr	1103	7:03 5:41 pm	On Time	D-7
San Lui Potosi	2607	7:28 4:08 pm	On Time	
San Lui Potosi	2229	4:08 pm	On Time	D-12
San Pedro Sula	1969	7:99 4:12 pm	On Time	D-4A
San Salvador	827	6:47 4:30 pm	Delayed	D-9
Seattle/Tacoma	426	2:30 pm	On Time	
Seattle/Tacoma	1492	8:19 6:02 pm	On Time	E11
Shreveport	2537	4:36 pm	On Time	B61
Shreveport	2637	5:55 pm	On Time	B83
St. Louis	2189	4:37 pm	On Time	B70
Tampa/St. Pete...	1607	7:60 1:45 pm	Arriving	C-18
Tampa/St. Pete...	1707	7:07 4:30 pm	On Time	C-36
Tegucigalpa	1117	7:11 4:24 pm	On Time	D-3

You can fly almost anywhere from the airport.



But why bother? So much of the world revolves around Houston already.



I went shopping for shoes at DSW Shoe Warehouse. DSW stands for Designer Shoe Warehouse.



It's in an Italian shopping center past Beltway 8, on the side of the I-45 freeway.



I asked the store manager where the Italian shoes were. They weren't organized by country, she told me. "You'd have to look at each pair to see where they came from."



She said there wasn't any connection between the design of the buildings and the shoes inside. "It's just a strip," she said.



This pair was especially comfortable. I thought they were from Italy, but when I got to the checkout I noticed a tag that said MADE IN BRAZIL.



Afterwards I walked down to the end of the shopping center, to a bar called Buffalo Wild Wings. I ordered some Caribbean Jerk Buffalitos, which turned out to be chicken tacos.



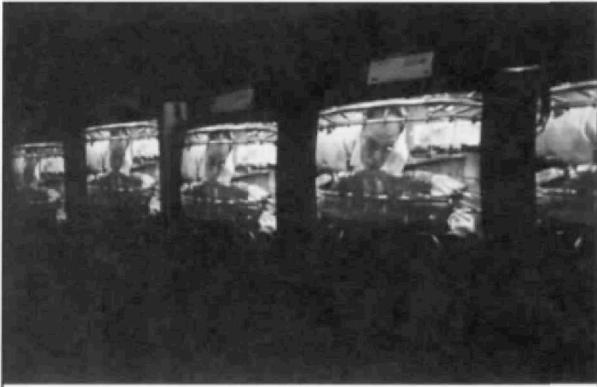
The basketball finals were on TV, along with a NASCAR race called the "Food City 500." There was a war on, too. It was in Iraq.



I played a game on NTN, the National Trivia Network. The questions were posted on some of the TV screens, and I punched my answers into a gameset.



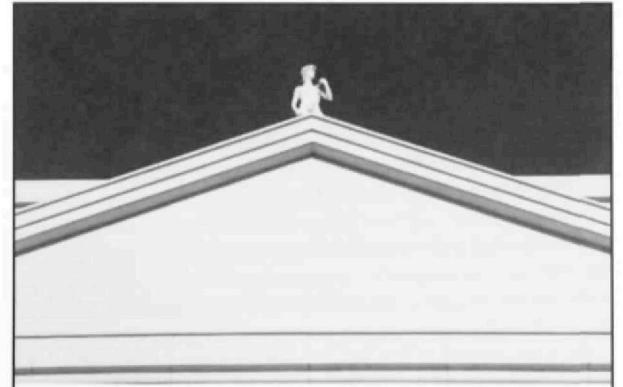
Between rounds, brief news headlines flashed at the bottom of the screen. "Iraq Campaign Dents On-Air Advertising," one of them said. I did pretty well for a while, but I messed up on a question about Henry VIII's wives and ended up in fifth place.



There were more TVs on in Conn's when I wandered in, but most of them were tuned to the Food Channel. A salesman named Gary told me they weren't allowed to show the news while the war was on, because customers might get upset.



Already that day, Gary said, a mother had complained when her child wandered over to a TV that showed some women dancing in bikinis. Outside, at the front of the shopping center overlooking the freeway, I found a statue of a woman with no arms, stuck on top of a pole.



Sculptures were planted all over. This one on top of Oshman's Supersports USA looked kind of familiar. It was a man wearing a big fig leaf.



In the middle of the shopping center, in front of a store called Country Clutter, was a big fountain. Two hairy men were trying hard to hold up the Earth, which was wet and dripping all over them. The horses around them looked upset about the flooding.



Sometime later, while the war was still going on, I passed this scene of destruction outside Memorial City Mall.



It was a new Target.



In Greenspoint, I stopped to take a picture of a big metal building that had a lot of flags out front. A sign said it was the Harvest Time Church, and that Shelton Bady was the bishop.



A man in a Range Rover stopped and asked me what I was doing. He turned out to be Shelton Bady. He said the flags represented all the different nationalities of his congregation. He said they were still missing a few. He had just come back from a trip to Honduras.



Bishop Bady said he thought it was important to try to understand different cultures, and that he wanted to use that understanding to expand others' concept of God. "You can't know God and be distant," he said.



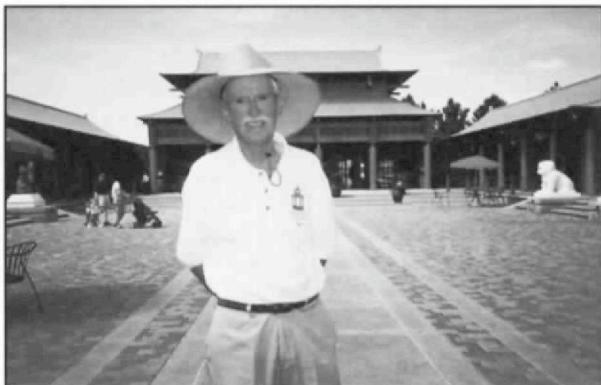
After a while, we said goodbye and I went across the street, where there was a traveling amusement park set up in a supermarket parking lot. I watched two kids get off a ride called Paratrooper.



But just as they landed, one of the kids tripped over a cable, hurt his leg, and started crying. His mom tried to comfort him by saying she'd take him to get some chips and salsa, but he wanted to ride again.



Later, I ate dinner at IHOP.



Have you been to Forbidden Gardens? A man named Tom greeted me at the front gate. Tom said he lives in Scotland and Norway. He was getting ready for a trip to Alaska.



Tom ushered me into a room to watch a movie about the Forbidden City and the tomb of Emperor Qin in China. The movie plays continuously, he said, so it didn't matter when I walked in. After the movie began to repeat itself, I went outside for the tour.



Our tour guide, Elizabeth, told us that Ira Poon, the man who built Forbidden Gardens, chose to build it out here in Katy because the land reminded him of his hometown, Hong Kong, and also because the land was much cheaper than in Houston.



Elizabeth showed us the tombs of Emperor Qin, who ruled China in the third century B.C. He built an army of 8,000 terracotta soldiers to protect his body after he died.



They were set up just as if they were real soldiers in battle, but underground. Forbidden Gardens had a recreation of his gravesite, and authentic replicas of the soldiers, at one-third scale.



Elizabeth said that some of the soldiers had lost their heads because vandals had broken them. The soldiers originally had wooden spears, too, but many of them had been broken or stolen, so the rest were removed.



After a short tour of the Weapons Room, we got to see the Forbidden City. It was under a big shed roof.



Elizabeth said there were very few trees in the Forbidden City, because the emperors were afraid of assassins, and assassins could hide in trees.



In the Architecture Room, she told us the emperor's dream about a watchtower. He called seven architects, but killed six because he didn't like their designs. The seventh got the watchtower right, because he got help from a friend who built cages for crickets.



After the tour, I found some more buildings sitting in crates, out on the grass. Another tour guide told me they were for exhibits that hadn't been set up yet. They looked like they had been sitting out for some time.



Behind the crates and over a wall was a new subdivision.



On my way out, I discovered why it was called Forbidden Gardens.



A month or so later, I went to the Alamo.



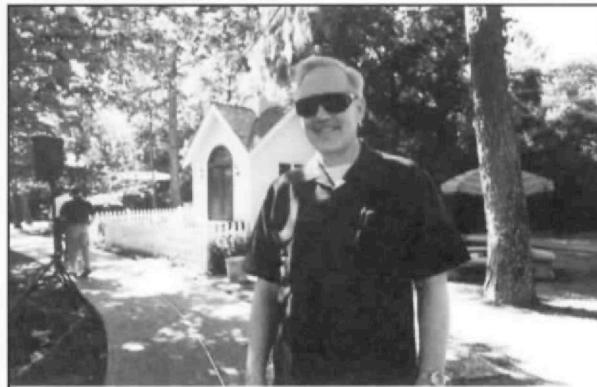
This Alamo was part of Northwest Forest, a conference center in Cypress run by the company that sells Kwik Kopy franchises. They hold sales meetings there, but also rent it out to people.



Inside, guests were arriving for a wedding the next day.



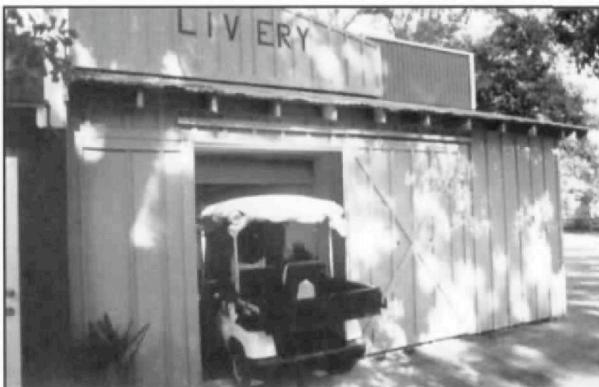
Along the balconies on each side were guest suites, where people could stay overnight. Each one was named after someone who had been killed at the real Alamo.



Outside, a barbershop quartet was rehearsing. I met Jim, who said he would be officiating at the wedding. He said he was a minister in Ukraine, but he flew in for the weekend because he's known the bride since she was little.



Behind the Alamo was a string of small, cartoony storefronts. There was a general store, a town hall, a saloon, a barber shop, and even a print shoppe. Something about them looked strange.



As I was looking at the stores, a woman named Rose drove up in a golf cart. She opened up a sliding door on the side of the storefront building and started to drive in. I asked her if I could go inside, too.



It was a laundry room.



On my way out, I took more pictures of some of the signs they had.



I thought the signs were funny, but I knew they meant business, because I had already seen this center off Highway 290, closer to town.



There were a lot more Alamoes here.



And a lot more garage doors, too.



It was a huge amount of space for lease, but most of it was empty. A brochure in a box by a sales trailer listed only two tenants so far: Ford and Kikkoman.



Behind Alamo Crossing I found three buildings of townhomes under construction. The one on the left was just wood. The one in the middle was covered with Styrofoam. The one on the right was covered with brick. It was like the Three Little Pigs.



I wandered inside the Styrofoam house. Behind, the sun was setting, and it made the wall glow a brilliant blue.



In Sugarland, along the Southwest Freeway, there's a bank that was built to look just like Thomas Jefferson's home, Monticello.



There's a copy shop right next door to it, too.



This is the front porch, but you can't go in that way. It's paved with grass.



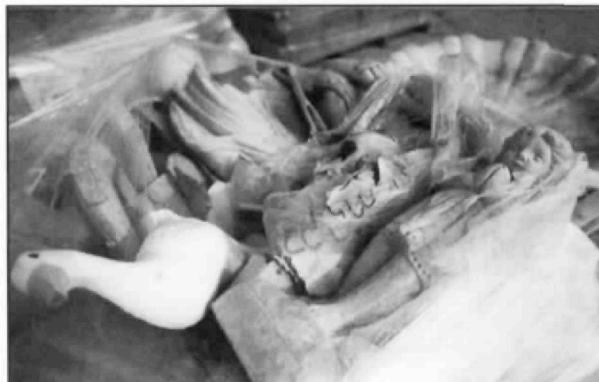
Later, I went back to the bank and used the ATM in the drive-thru. It was nice, but nothing like the ATM in this gas station off 290. You've got to get out of your car to use it, but it speaks to you in a British accent.



In a Wal-Mart parking lot nearby, I found some statues for sale.



They seemed to have some problems keeping their heads too.



More statues were wrapped up in crates, waiting to be sold.



It reminded me a lot of Forbidden Gardens, except there wasn't any garden, just a parking lot.



The parking lot looked like it had some history to it. Lines had been painted and covered over and then moved and painted again. But people could still figure out where to put their cars. ■