

The high life in Houston

HOUSTON — A stretched limo pulled up, a welcome glass of vodka was thrust into my hand and off I was whisked into Houston's sultry night.

My delight at being in the heart of Texas turned to sheer horror, however, when I was informed we were on the way to see the debut of Madonna's new North American tour. For nearly two tortured hours, I squirmed and scowled as the screechy pop singer gyrated through what seemed an endless series of near-identical songs that sounded like they had been made by some new Japanese music machine.

As Madonna undulated through scenes of mock coitus, throngs of fevered pre-pubescent girls shrieked and wiggled in brainless ecstasy. All this, incredibly, while James Brown ... the great James Brown ... was being barred from singing by his parole board. Is there no justice?

But then life suddenly smiled. An antidote of Margaritas and enchiladas purged my sombre mood. Then, off we went to the home of Baron and Baroness Enrico di Portanova. Home is really the wrong word. I've been in smaller Third World nations.

The Portanovas are the reigning royalty of Houston and Acapulco, where their other palatial home is about as close as Mexico has to an imperial palace. Charming, witty and full of fun, the Portanovas kept me laughing late into the night as we sat by their indoor pool under a vast glass atrium, surrounded by trees lit by hundreds of tiny lights.

The next day, off to the famous River Oaks Country Club, fabled as a place where more big oil deals have been made than in all of Arabia. That afternoon, and for the two following evenings, I hopped and nobbed with some of the most delightful people I have met in a long time — and understood why Houston has become one of the world's leading gathering places for international high society.

At first glimpse, one wouldn't think Houston

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could be a mecca for the bon ton. There's no real city to speak of, just occasional skyscrapers sticking out of a treed plain. Like Los Angeles, but with more shrubbery.

There are no sidewalks and no pedestrians. People live in frigidly air conditioned houses, behind closed drapes and shades, shunning the volcanic heat and steam-bath humidity that blankets Houston for most of the year.

Fortunately, we escaped the torrential rains further to the north that last week produced the worst floods since 1908. Instead of hip waders, we slipped into black tie and limoed our way into the night to drink deep of Houston's social life.

The high point of this cultural safari was a dinner given by noted international hostess Susan Glesby in her magnificent home filled with African art and Persian carpets. There will be no more jokes by me about backwoods Texas.

On my right was Princess Luciana Pignatelli, one of the world's most beautiful women, visiting from her home in London. We discussed the Ethiopian highlands, the magical city of Gondar and Eastern mysticism.

To my left was the charming Joanne Davis, one of Houston's leading ladies, friend of Secretary of State James Baker, assorted monarchs and Pakistan's late leader, Zia-ul-Haq.

I got severe neck strain trying to talk at once to these two most fascinating ladies.

Across from me sat Gianfranco Regis, an immensely entertaining Italian industrialist, munitions magnate and art collector. We chatted happily about anti-aircraft missiles and swapped gossip about our favorite African dictators.

Next, another long talk with Baron Portanova, an heir to the famous Cullen oil fortune, one of America's wealthiest men — and one who knows how to deploy his riches with great panache. We traded stories about Egypt's King Farouk and Albania's King Zog and compared notes about India and Ceylon, where the Baron had worked as a jewel trader before coming into wealth.

All this talk was well lubricated, of course, by splendid Bordeaux and Dom Perignon.

Meeting close friends of Texans James Baker and Commerce Secretary Robert Mosbacher made me think about these two most powerful men in Washington after President Bush. It's almost certain that they will vie for the Republican nomination for president when Bush retires after what looks like a shoo-in second term.

My bet is on the canny Baker, but the hard-driving Mosbacher and his accomplished wife Georgette cannot be discounted. This will be a Texas-style showdown with lots of smoke and flames. Either way, Houstonians will be happy. It looks like the White House is going to be run by Texas boys for a long time.

And here I thought Houston was nothing but hoe-downs, hootenannies and cowboy boots.



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