



FLEA MARKET **FIND \$**

*Investigating Houston's thriving **underground economy.***

by Marianne Do

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This seemingly arbitrary list is a small glimpse into the unusual findings at Houston's indoor flea markets. Generally, they are perceived as shady places to buy shoddy, illegitimate merchandise. The reality, however, is one of the city's most fascinating subcultures. While a first impression of the flea markets may render them unremarkable, it doesn't take long to discover that they are not only loaded with unexpected things to buy and do, but all vary exceptionally, one from the next.

To separate themselves from other avenues of retail, indoor flea markets have gone beyond simply advertising their merchandise as a way to get people's attention. The International Common Market, off of U.S. 59 and Little York, is one of Houston's busiest indoor flea markets. Jewelry is its dominant consumer product, but in order to attract a broader group of people, the building's entrance vestibule is lent out to various organizations on a rotating weekly basis. Frequent occupants range from clinics offering free blood sugar tests, to banks with special promotions, to Mormons handing out religious tracts.

Another marketplace, the Armadillo Flea Market Mall on Airtex Drive in North Houston, boasts on its Web site that it is "Better than a flea market, more than a mall." Aside from having a food court and Wi-Fi internet access, it has hosted automobile shows, holiday toy drives, Dynamo soccer clinics, and more. An especially unique recurring attraction there is Lucha Libre, a Mexican wrestling establishment made popular by its participants' flamboyant face masks and ballet-rivaling choreography. Other flea markets across the city similarly play host to temporary attractions. The Trading Fair II, a few exits east of the old Astroworld on the South Loop, has a 6,000-person capacity arena on its second floor—though one would never know it from the predominant fluorescent-lit hallways and dark booths throughout. The arena has held gun shows, as well as concerts by radio regulars like Paul Wall, Slim Thug, Yolanda Adams, Mike Jones, and Queen Latifah.

Along with having traveling carnivals occasionally fill the parking lot, the Pasadena Indoor Flea Market is investing in more permanent fixtures. The site hosted a Montgomery Ward department store before its current incarnation, and now there are plans to add a restaurant, as well as develop the previously unused second floor into a series of rental storage units. The most unexpected part of this flea market, however, is a ballroom that has its own entrance and parking lot area. With a shiny

hardwood dance floor, tables draped in burgundy cloth, and a fabric draped ceiling throughout, it's easy to forget that the room is just a few doors away from a series of closed-up half-empty booths with merchandise in haphazard piles for anyone to view.

These booths are a familiar sight among all of the flea markets. No real effort is made to disguise the transitory state of the stores. But instead of seeming dirty, there is a benign sense of carelessness, like being invited into a friend's messy home. It is a reminder of the loose nature of the flea market. Vendors are usually not required by the managers to show up at particular times; instead, they govern their own schedules. At a few of the flea markets, individual booths are in charge of their own advertising. Some bear handmade paint and poster board signs; others have their own special clipart-laden coupons on heavy paper handed out to passersby. Hanging merchandise dangles freely into the walkways.

The vendors themselves come from various walks of life. For some, the flea market business is a way to segue into retirement from nine-to-five weekday jobs. For others, the business has carried them to pay off college loans and support families. High school students often pick up jobs at the flea markets in order to gain business experience and learn how to deal with people, as well as avoid the usual teenage fate of working the McDonald's drive-thru.

My own experience at the indoor flea markets was soured when I got kicked out of the first one I visited because my camera and notebook aroused suspicion. My fear then was that the stereotypical view held, that all flea markets were unfriendly places with something to hide. Instead they have proved to be places of constant surprise. As vendors change, shows come and go, and new projects develop, the flea markets have found their own distinct quirks that keep people coming back weekend after weekend. ☞