
This metropolis with 2.2 million residents is the biggest city in Texas and fourth-largest in the United States. At 655 sq. mi., Houston could contain the cities of New York, Washington, Boston, San Francisco, Seattle, Minneapolis and Miami. And within its increasingly diverse boundaries, more than 90 different languages are spoken.

When putting “big” and “Houston” in the same sentence, of course, you instantly think of the oil industry (or, as they say in Texas, “awl”). As the epicenter of the energy industry, Houston's prominent families, companies and foundations have given so generously that the city is now a national leader in the arts, ranking as one of only a few U.S. cities with resident professional companies in ballet, opera, symphony and theater. Houston's wealth of generosity also benefits business, medicine, aerospace and commerce. (Its port is one of the busiest in the nation.)

Oil has certainly helped to make Houston what it is today. Home to 26 Fortune 500 companies, it has evolved into one of the most dynamic and exciting cities in America.

And like all great cities, Houston is constantly transforming itself. The oil industry is one of the prime movers and shakers in this ongoing transformation.
Mega Meeting Options

Houston is bisected by Buffalo Bayou, a rather slow-moving river that was never really a commercial artery until it was dredged and widened to help create the busy port of Houston, some 50 miles southeast. But the city sitting on Buffalo Bayou has never been slow-moving.

The mix of Texas culture and Southern charm is what makes Houston unique. The city brings together cultures from all over the world, creating a melting pot that’s a great big gumbo of diversity, making for fascinating local arts and culinary scenes, among others.

"Houston is blessed to have two major convention facilities," says Dawn Ullrich, president and CEO of Houston First Corporation, the parent organization of the Greater Houston Convention & Visitors Bureau. "And we have a growing array of other venues, from world-class museums and theaters to unique restaurants and sports arenas, along with our great meeting hotels."

“We’re seeing tremendous investment in the city, particularly downtown.”

-Dawn Ullrich, Houston First Corporation

George R. Brown Convention Center boasts more than 1.8 million sq. ft. of meeting space in the heart of downtown. NRG Park includes NRG Center, with 700,000 sq. ft., in addition to NRG Stadium.
HOUSTON'S PASSIONATE NAMESAKE

"Texas has yet to learn submission to any oppression, come from what source it may."

Those immortal words were uttered by Sam Houston, who was elected the first president of the Republic of Texas in 1836 and re-elected in 1841.

Samuel Houston was born on March 2, 1793, in Virginia, a long way from the state he came to love. He later moved to Tennessee, where he was elected to Congress and then served as governor. In 1832, Houston moved again, this time to the Mexican territory of Texas, where a movement to secede from Mexico was rapidly reaching a boiling-point with the flow of incoming Americans. He was soon a prominent voice in pushing for secession. Although Houston had limited military experience and none as a commander, he received and accepted an appointment to command a ragtag Texan army of irregulars against the disciplined Mexican forces.

Houston proved to be a brilliant military leader. Fresh off the loss of the Alamo by the Americans, and badly outnumbered and outgunned by Mexican Gen. Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna, Houston’s forces nonetheless gained a decisive victory at San Jacinto on April 21, 1836. As a result, Texas won its independence.

The city of Houston was named in his honor in 1836, and that same year, he was elected president of the new republic. Texas joined the United States in 1845, and Houston served as a U.S. senator until 1859.

Houston was a very colorful character, with an eye for women and a taste for liquor. He owned slaves, but was against the introduction of slavery in any new U.S. territories or states. When the Civil War broke out, he refused to pledge his allegiance to the Confederate States of America, and subsequently the Texas legislature discharged him of his duties.

Houston retired from politics. He died at his home in Huntsville, Texas, just north of Houston, on July 26, 1863.

Ullrich says the entire city is fired up to host its third Super Bowl in February 2017 at NRG Stadium, home to the NFL’s Houston Texans, major concerts and rodeos. NRG, a Fortune 250 company, is the largest solar power developer in the nation in addition to supporting sustainable energy options to consumers.

“We’re seeing tremendous investment in the city, particularly downtown,” Ullrich says. “In our convention district in east downtown, projects totaling more than $1.5 billion are going up, including a new 1,000-room Marriott Marquis, the 70,000-square-foot Nau Center for Texas Cultural Heritage and a major renovation of the George R. Brown Convention Center. And all of this will come online by late-2016, just in time for the Super Bowl.”

Civic Consciousness

Many of the city’s exiting new projects have received substantial funding from the energy industry, but that’s hardly a new development. Major oil and energy companies have always been integral to Houston’s cultural and civic life.

Just a few months ago, The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston announced a dramatic $450 million expansion, a large part of which will be funded from foundations and organizations with ties to the energy sector. For instance, the Kinder Foundation..."
(founded by the CEO of Kinder Morgan, an energy-infrastructure company) is contributing $50 million to that effort. When the project is completed, the museum will have an additional 164,000-square-foot building for 20th- and 21st-century art, a new 80,000-square-foot home for the Glassell School of Art, a 30,000-square-foot conservation center and two new public plazas.

The renowned Houston Ballet Company opened its state-of-the-art Center for Dance in 2011, with help from energy-industry donors including Phoebe and Bobby Tudor, the latter of whom is the CEO of Tudor Pickering Holt & Co., an energy-investment and merchant banking firm.

**Asia Society Texas Center**, an intriguing marriage of East and West, opened in April 2012. Among the Houston-area philanthropists, foundations and corporations who helped raise $48.4 million to build the center were Chevron, ConocoPhillips, BP America and Baker Hughes.

**Weiss Energy Hall at Houston Museum of Natural Science** lists sponsors such as BP America, Chevron, ConocoPhillips and ExxonMobil, among many others. And many of the same companies also contributed to 2012 opening of the museum's Morian Hall of Paleontology.

These four institutions are just the tip of the iceberg, as far as oil-industry philanthropy.
Galveston and The Woodlands

Galveston Island and The Woodlands are great alternatives to Houston, whether you are looking for pre- or post-convention vacation options or affordable meeting space near the big city.

The Gulf of Mexico town of Galveston has carefully preserved its buildings and neighborhoods, creating a relaxing beach getaway with historic panache.

“Galveston is an affordable beach destination that offers a beautiful tropical environment, world-class facilities, historic charm and plenty of tourist attractions,” says Meg Winchester, CMP, director of the Galveston Island Convention & Visitors Bureau. “And as a result, it allows meeting attendees to truly mix business with pleasure.”

Once the second-busiest port for immigration in America, Galveston’s 36-block Historic Downtown Strand District includes more than 100 shops, restaurants, attractions and galleries. Visitors can take a ride in a horse-drawn carriage. One of America’s top amusement parks, Schlitterbahn Galveston Island Waterpark, overlooks the Gulf of Mexico.

The Woodlands Resort & Conference Center is a popular meeting venue for many oil and energy companies since it features two golf courses and is only 30 minutes from downtown Houston.

The beauty of The Woodlands Resort is that it can easily accommodate conferences, with 406 guest rooms and 60,000 sq. ft. of meeting space. Amid the Pinney Woods eco-region, the resort also serves as a world-class destination, replete with a spa, expansive pool areas and access to 194 miles of hiking and biking trails. There are hundreds of upscale shops and galleries at The Woodlands Town Center.

From top: Schlitterbahn Galveston Island Waterpark, Woodlands Resort and Conference Center
ater, in the midst of a $46.5 million renovation of its downtown building, lists contributors such as Chevron, ConocoPhillips and Schlumberger. Centennial Gardens at Hermann Park was completed last fall to celebrate the park's 100th anniversary, at a cost of $31 million, with substantial contributions from the oil industry. Ditto for the redevelopment of Buffalo Bayou Park, scheduled to be unveiled this summer.

If something big is happening in Houston, it’s a pretty safe bet the energy industry is involved.

Meeting Destination
As you might expect, Houston knows how to put on a pretty good energy industry meeting. The largest of the many industry meetings is the Offshore Technology Conference May 4-7. Last year this conference drew more than 100,000 attendees to NRG Park, delivering a tremendous economic benefit to the city. Other energy conferences include the annual NAPE Summit, one of the industry’s prime deal-making extravaganzas, which brought 17,000 attendees to the convention center in February. One of the newer events that takes place at the convention center is Total Energy USA.

Getting There
Houston boasts the fourth-largest airport system in the United States, with service to 190 cities worldwide thanks to two major airports. George Bush Intercontinental Airport (IAH) ranks third among U.S. airports for scheduled nonstop domestic and international service and eighth for total passengers.

As a hub for international travel, especially to Mexico and Latin America, Houston is also a popular meeting destination thanks to its exceptional airlift. There are more than 700 daily departures from IAH and the new $440 million Terminal E and Federal Inspection Services can process more than 4,500 passengers per hour. William P. Hobby Airport (HOU) features one of Southwest Airlines' biggest hubs. Houston Airport Marriott at George Bush Intercontinental, located inside the airport grounds, is undergoing a multimillion dollar renovation that will be complete in the fall. Upgrades are scheduled for all 573 guest rooms, 30,000 sq. ft. of meeting space and common areas.

Always Thinking Big
Houston’s skyline, already one of the most impressive in America, seems to be changing almost weekly. And the changes will become even more dramatic as the 2017 Super Bowl nears.

This city has always thought big. That’s why it’s one of America’s busiest seaports, even though it’s 50 miles from the Gulf of Mexico. That’s also why its population speaks nearly 100 different languages, it’s a world-class center for culture and the arts and Houston was picked to host the Super Bowl for a third time.

Energy, it turns out, is an industry with a pretty big heart. Just ask the people of Houston.

Steve Winston has traveled extensively and writes for national and international magazines.

RESOURCES
• Galveston Island Convention & Visitors Bureau
galveston.com
• Houston First Corporation
visitHouston.com
• The Woodlands Convention & Visitors Bureau
thewoodlandschamber.com
MAJOR MEETING VENUES

Galveston

Ashton Villa
Ashton Villa was built in 1859 by a wealthy Galveston family; it was the first palace on Broadway and the first brick house in Texas; seats 300 for cocktails, 200 for dinner.

Hotel Galvez & Spa
This majestic AAA Four Diamond property across from the Gulf of Mexico is a local landmark: 224 guest rooms; more than 13,000 sq. ft. of meeting space; great seafood at Galvez Bar & Grill.

Moody Gardens Hotel, Spa and Convention Center
Amenities include a championship golf course and a spa; 418 guest rooms; convention center with 103,000 sq. ft.

Texas Seaport Museum
The tall ship Elissa, built in Scotland in 1877, is a key feature of the museum; the ship is a floating National Historic Landmark; space for 500 at the museum; 300 can be seated on the pier.

The San Luis Resort, Spa & Conference Center
On the Gulf of Mexico; full-service resort and meeting center; 700 guest rooms; 200,000 sq. ft. of meeting space, including 140,000-square-foot Galveston Island Convention Center; AAA Four Diamond; lighted tennis courts.

Houston

Brennan’s of Houston
Houston icon was rebuilt after a fire during Hurricane Ike in 2008; 10 meeting rooms that hold up to 160 for a seated dinner.

Courtyard Houston Downtown/Convention Center
Originally built in 1921 as Humble Oil Building; 191 guest rooms; 2,760 sq. ft. of meeting space; complimentary Wi-Fi in guest rooms, lobby and public areas; short walk to convention center.

Four Seasons Houston
In the heart of the downtown business district; convenient to cultural attractions; 404 guest rooms; 16,522 sq. ft. of meeting space; fourth-floor resort-style pool; spa.

George R. Brown Convention Center
The 1.8 million-square-foot convention center is one of the largest in the nation; distinctive nautical theme; recognized for its green practices.

Hilton Americas-Houston
1,200 guest rooms; 91,500 sq. ft. of event space; connected to the George R. Brown Convention Center; four dining/lounge options; Skyline Spa & Health Club.

Hilton Houston NASA Clear Lake
All 243 guest rooms have water view; NASA Space Center is nearby; 15,792 sq. ft. of meeting space; 24/7 business center; fully equipped fitness center.

Hyatt Regency Houston
947 guest rooms; 71,300 sq. ft. of meeting space; four dining options include Spindletop revolving rooftop restaurant; heated outdoor pool; 24/7 fitness center.

JW Marriott Houston Downtown
Artfully designed hotel; 328 guest rooms; 16,000 sq. ft. of meeting space; direct connection to the underground tunnel system from the lobby; light rail connection to George R. Brown Convention Center.

Lancaster Houston Hotel
Luxurious hotel first opened as the Auditorium Hotel in 1926; 93 guest rooms, 1,250 sq. ft. of space; located in the Theater District; extensive renovation in 2013; Bistro Lancaster.

NRG Park
With 350 acres and four meeting facilities: NRG Center has 706,000 sq. ft.; NRG Stadium can hold 71,500 and has 125,000 sq. ft. for meetings; NRG Arena has 5,800 seats and 25,000 sq. ft. of floor space; NRG Astrodome seats 65,000.

Royal Sonesta Houston
$25 million renovation to guest rooms and meeting spaces completed in 2013; 485 guest rooms; 50,000 sq. ft. of meeting space; fitness center; business center; ARA Restaurant.

Space Center Houston
120,000 sq. ft. of space in plaza; 9,961 sq. ft. in the Astronaut Gallery; 9,961 in the Starship Gallery; dining for 500 in the Zero-G Diner.

The Sam Houston Hotel
Opened in 1924; listed on the National Register of Historic Places; 100 guest rooms; more than 3,000 sq. ft. of meeting space; renovated in 2013.

The St. Regis Houston
232 guest rooms; 10,000 sq. ft. of space; near The Galleria shops and restaurants; Remington Restaurant is one of Houston’s best; River Oaks Spa.

The Westin Houston Downtown
Convenient to a variety of cultural, entertainment and sports attractions; 200 guest rooms; more than 5,000 sq. ft. of meeting space, fitness studio, business center; free downtown shuttle.

The Woodlands

Hyatt Place Houston/The Woodlands
All 146 guest rooms offer separate living and working areas; 6,144 sq. ft. of event space; free Wi-Fi; 24-hour gym; pet-friendly.

The Woodlands Resort & Conference Center
Located 30 minutes from downtown Houston; 406 guest rooms; more than 80,000 sq. ft. of space spread out among 33 meeting rooms; two golf courses; elegant restaurant; Forest Oasis Water-scape offers fun for the entire family.

The Woodlands Waterway Marriott Hotel & Convention Center
Forbes Four Star-rated; connected via sky bridge to Cynthia Woods Mitchell Pavilion; 343 guest rooms and suites; 70,000 sq. ft. of meeting space; commitment to sustainable practices.