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Houston

Lone Star Legend

by Jeff Heilman



As Texas is marketed as "like a whole other country," Houston enjoys a distinct place on the Lone Star State map. For first-time visitors, making sense of H-Town, America's sixth-largest metropolis, can prove elusive. While its globally

recognized skyline suggests a city you can wrap your arms around, Houston goes far and wide in an ensemble of neighborhoods and districts.

Therein lies Houston's intrinsic appeal: Described by one writer as "the most entrepreneurial of cities—a place where zoning is regarded as conspiracy against capitalism," Houston is not a quick digest. Rather, it is the sum of its surprises and discoveries, threaded through by a standing invitation to explore, and then come back to explore some more. How fitting, then, that the 12-acre park opened in downtown Houston in 2008 is called Discovery Green; fulfilling a shared civic and private vision to create and preserve green space within Houston's core, this event-capable oasis is a standout among the city's many refreshing outdoor retreats.

Return visitors will not find Houston resting on its many laurels.

"We are reintroducing Houston to many of our clients," says Greg Ortale, president and CEO of the Greater Houston CVB. "If you have not been here for five or so years, you'll find a brand new city."

With a growing residential base softening downtown's corporate edges and giving the city a new dynamism, Houston's expanding variety of quality hotels is giving planners and groups more choices.

"We are stepping up to meet the higher expectations of our customers," Ortale says.

With the majority of its meetings and conference business closely aligned with its core business demographics, namely energy, medicine, technology, education and commerce associated with the Port of Houston, Houston is also diversifying its group appeal.

"One major shift in strategy we have made is to pursue more international meetings," Ortale says. "Another is focused on making it easy for our key demographic players to create opportunities around new annual conventions, meetings and trade shows."

Measuring Up

Houston, like Texas, does things on a grand scale. Headquartered here and now with 49 institutions under its umbrella, the Texas Medical Center, counting over 100,000 affiliated medical professionals, educators and researchers, is the world's largest medical complex.

Also scaled up is Reliant Park, the versatile multivenue complex that includes the 1.4 million-square-foot Reliant Center and the 71,500-seat Reliant Stadium, home of the NFL's Houston Texans and the thrilling annual Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo. With direct service on Houston's expanding light rail system, the 7.5-mile journey from downtown to this event megaplex is now a breeze.

Downtown Houston is home to the city's other event colossus, the 1.5 million-square-foot George R. Brown Convention Center. Supported by 15 hotels and more than 5,000 hotel rooms within a one-mile radius, the center is close to an array of convention-ready diversions, including

the event-capable Toyota Center arena, home to the NBA's Houston Rockets, and Houston's flourishing Theater District.

Connected to the center by a double-deck pedestrian skybridge, the 1,200-room Hilton Americas-Houston headquarters hotel ushered in a growth wave that has more than doubled downtown's room inventory since 2001. Sleek boutique makeovers of historic properties led the surge, with the 314-room Magnolia (boasting Houston's only rooftop pool), the 97-room Alden Houston and the 135-room Hotel Icon all now well-established business, leisure and event draws. In keeping with Houston's fast-rising culinary scene, many hotels are also dining hot spots, such as 17 at the Alden and Voice at the Icon.

Other downtown favorites include the Hyatt Regency, the Four Seasons, The Lancaster, the Doubletree and two Marriott properties. Across the street from Minute Maid Park, home to the Houston Astros, the luxurious, baseball-themed, 200-room Inn at the Ballpark is a unique meetings option.

Houston's second-largest business district, the Galleria area, or Uptown, offers more than 6,200 rooms in distinctive properties such as the boutique Hotel Granduca. Offering two "smart" conference rooms and the elegant Salone Rialto ballroom, the all-suites Benchmark Hospitality-managed Granduca is reminiscent of an elegant Tuscan villa.

The buzzing Galleria is also home to the 131-room, boutique-style Hotel Indigo, with four stylish function rooms; the upscale, 448-room Hilton Houston Post Oak, offering more than 30,000 square feet of flexible function space; and

the smart, 485-room InterContinental Houston, with more than 50,000 square feet of versatile spaces across 21 meeting rooms—and for international arrivals, a jet lag recovery kit.

Houston's crown jewel is also in Uptown: The recently renovated Houstonian Hotel, Club & Spa, with 32,000 square feet of meeting space and a prized fitness club (open to hotel guests), ranks among the world's finest hotels.

Venue Variety

Fetching, too, are Houston's many distinctive gathering spaces, comprising a colorful catalog of local favorites.

As characteristically Houstonian as they come, the circa-1947 Petroleum Club of Houston is an elegant, 43rd-floor aerie offering 10 meeting rooms and spectacular city views. Completed in 1905, the neoclassical Corinthian is a Historic District gem that continues to sparkle as a special event venue accommodating up to 2,000 for grand galas, weddings and corporate events. Another downtown dazzler is the Crystal Ballroom at the circa-1913 Rice Hotel, lavishly restored along with the hotel's lobby. The ballroom enjoys a long and colorful legacy as a Houston party palace; reserve at least six months in advance for special events.

History is also served at the event-capable Saint Arnold Brewing Company, Texas' oldest craft brewer. As part of its recent move into a three-story, historic brick warehouse facility, the company brought in beer-making equipment from a defunct Bavarian monastery. Daily tours of the new

biergarten-inspired space are available, and the Saturday open house is a local draw.

Exemplifying "surprising" Houston is the city's burgeoning EaDo (East Downtown Houston) neighborhood. Located behind the convention center, this inviting district feels like a whole other Houston, with its eclectic mix of local and ethnic eateries, art galleries, lofts and businesses. Planners have an excellent stage for parties and events at Warehouse Live, a repurposed, 1920s-era warehouse with two fully independent spaces accommodating up to 1,500 people and ample parking.

In Houston's historic Midtown District, some 20 blocks from the convention center, the House of Dereon Media Center is a 4,300-square-foot special events venue designed by Tina Knowles, mother of Houston's own Beyonce Knowles. Within its Art Deco trappings, this hip venue can accommodate from 100 to 1,000 revelers and comes with a distinctive upper-level VIP area.

Situated in Houston's storied and now lovingly transformed Hermann Park, the Houston Zoo offers nine unique event venues, hosting intimate dinners for 10 all the way up to galas for 2,500. Memorable spaces include the award-winning Natural Encounters building and the serene Reflection Pool, and animal experiences can be added to any event. For aquatic escapes, the Downtown Aquarium is a 500,000-gallon underwater adventure concept featuring an aquatic carousel, Shark Voyage, a white tiger exhibit and a third-floor, 6,000-square-foot ballroom overlooking the downtown skyline.

Still feel like you don't know Houston? Then just "Ask Veronica," the Greater Houston CVB's new online concierge service, featuring Veronica Nielsen, the agency's longtime visitor information manager and former concierge manager for Enron Corp.

Houston Environs

Surrounding Houston are myriad other event options and meeting locales, starting with Space Center Houston in nearby Bay Area Houston. Redefining the concept of meeting "space," this national icon's multifunctional venues include the 35-person Board Room, the 100-person Saturn Club and the galactic Plaza, accommodating up to 5,000 guests.

Along the Interstate 45 corridor south of Houston is League City, home to the 240-room South Shore Harbour Resort and Conference Center, featuring 25 meeting rooms. The highway's terminus some 30 miles beyond lands you on Galveston Island, the Victorian-era Gulf Coast home of preeminent hotel, spa and conference destinations such as Moody Gardens and the San Luis Resort. In nearby Santa Fe, the 12-acre Haak Vineyards & Winery is a popular choice for weddings and weekend events.

Southwest of Houston in Richmond, the George Ranch Historical Park has a Texas ambience all its own, offering an array of rental facilities.

Head north of Houston on Interstate 45 for the leafy community of The Woodlands, home to founding IACC member and perennial corporate retreat favorite, the 440-room Woodlands Resort & Conference Center. Another 30

or so miles beyond is glittering Lake Conroe, where the recently renamed and steadily improving lakefront La Torretta Lake Resort & Spa features an expansive conference center, waterpark, 17,000-square-foot spa and nine restaurants, including the signature Chez Roux.

Frequent Meetings South contributor Jeff Heilman regularly covers the Texas business and travel scene.