

Houston & East Texas



It's not the Southwest, it's not Tex-Mex and it's not really the Deep South, either. A holy trifacta of the three, perhaps? The easternmost notch on the nation's Bible Belt? This part of Texas is a bit of an enigma and it likes it that way. Now throw in some piney woods, the world's largest cypress forest, red-hot Houston and a little Cajun seasoning to spice things up, and you've got east Texas. When you hear 'Y'all come back now,' people actually mean it.

And then there's H-town. More country than Dallas, too conservative for Austin, Houston reeks of both money and poverty, and this city turns on a dime: bourgeois and backwards, businesslike and bohemian. Picture more than two million residents spread over an ever-swelling region that takes up twice as much land as Chicago, crank up the heat, throw plenty of stellar restaurants, culture and entertainment into the mix, and send in a torrid hurricane or two. This is one edgy place.

Outside Houston, you'll see a whole lot of churches among the pine trees. Heavily evangelical, east Texas was once known for its 'dry' counties, meaning the sale of alcohol to the public was – at least theoretically – prohibited. To the dismay of some, these counties are again drying up. Consider it a nostalgic throwback, then, if you find yourself in an east Texas 'private club' that sells booze only to 'members,' while they might charge you a few bucks for a 'temporary membership,' these days they'll likely just look the other way. Now that's the Texas spirit.

HIGHLIGHTS

Best Free Art

Form some opinions on postmodern art at Houston's Menil Collection (p199)

Best Place to Get Spooked

Tiny Jefferson (p221) is rife with ghosts and haunted hotels, but the locals are friendly as all get out

Best Place to Ditch the Sunscreen

Wander the shady trails through fragrant piney woods at the Big Thicket National Preserve (p219)

Best Drink to Chill Out

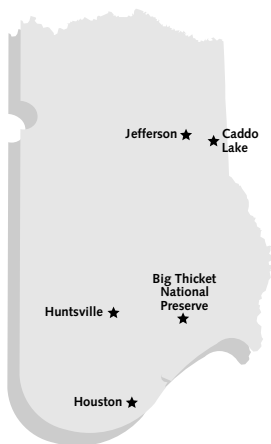
On a scorcher of a Houston afternoon, we cooled down right quick with the frozen mimosa at Onion Creek Café (p209)

Best Place to Get Lost

Glide among the mysterious cypress trees on the labyrinthine Caddo Lake (p###)

Best Place to Savor Your Freedom

Surrounded by maximum-security prisons, it's easy to feel like a free (wo)man in Huntsville (p217)



Climate

The word 'hot' doesn't really begin to describe this part of Texas in the summer, but you get the picture. Neither does 'humid,' and the nearer you get to the Gulf, the more intense the humidity. 'Scorching' – yeah, that's more like it, but you need to say it as you run, screaming, into air-conditioning. After all, that's what locals do. That's right, if you plan on walking more than a block or two during the summer months, be prepared for those 'Hey, crazy!' looks. The average July high in that notorious hotbox – Houston – is 94°F (34°C); a few hours north, in Nacogdoches, it's just as sweltering.

Getting There & Around

The proverb 'the car is king in Texas' applies here. Luckily, it means that all roads in these here parts do lead to Houston, and even the smaller towns are generally easy to reach. Houston is the most convenient major airport for locales south of Lufkin, while Dallas best serves places north. Bus service primarily serves cities along the interstates. Amtrak service can be described in two words: limited and slow.

If you're driving, your trip will be much more scenic and enjoyable if you get off the interstate onto the secondary roads – either the US highways or, better yet, the bucolic Farm to Market (FM) roads.

HOUSTON

pop 2.26 million

In a state known for its outsized personality, ego and geography, Houston is the biggest bad boy on the block. Big, brash, hazy Houston may be the fourth-largest city in the US (and Houstonians are rooting for it to edge in at number three), but it's hardly one of the most celebrated – even in Texas.

Sure, Houston's got issues, but could this city be just a tad bit *underrated*? The proud locals would stop their cowboy boots (or their Jimmy Choos) and said say, 'Heck yes.' Celebrated for its arts and international flair, maligned for its air pollution, sprawl and Enron-sized scandals, Houston is a cosmopolitan metropolis to some and a big hot mess to others. An entrepreneurial business-first spirit combined with a Wild West mentality toward city planning means that Houston's stupen-

dous growth has been largely unfettered by zoning and other planning restrictions. The result? A surreal hodgepodge of strip malls, diverse residential areas and 'downtown' areas in addition to the traditional center. Yet delights abound: with a map, a little curiosity and plenty of friendly locals to give advice, you'll find that Houston's cultural scene is as rich as its oil industry.

Visitors and even residents find Houston to be a confusing sprawl. However, most of the areas of interest lie in the 6 miles between the Galleria mall and downtown. While Houston's major sights could be seen in a weekend, this city pays off to those who stop and meander through its laid-back, eclectic and downright pretty central neighborhoods.

The beauty of Houston lies in its dual personality: laid-back pickup-truck-and-boots town meets high-powered, high-cultured metropolis. During the day, chill out in your flip-flops, take in museums and shopping, and hit happy hour under a palm-shaded patio. By night, revel in culinary or operatic bliss – the burgeoning foodie scene and the Houston Grand Opera are nationally renowned.

HISTORY

The most important two words in Houston's history are not 'oil' and 'cattle' – although they have been extremely important. Rather, the two words critical to the city's spectacular growth are 'air' and 'conditioning.'

Until the 1930s, Houston was a sleepy regional center with a population under 100,000. Office workers grumpily plugged away at their desks in sweatshop conditions; during summer months, Houstonians fled the city in search of cooler coastal breezes. When air-conditioning became available on

DRIVING DISTANCES

Big Thicket Preserve to Nacogdoches 87 miles, 1¼ hours

Dallas to Jefferson 164 miles, 3 hours

Houston to Austin 161 miles, 3 hours

Houston to College Station 98 miles, 1¼ hours

Houston to Dallas 242 miles, 4 hours

Houston to Nacogdoches 145 miles, 2¾ hours

Houston to Sam Houston National Forest 58 miles, 1½ hours

Houston to Tyler 200 miles, 3¾ hours