

A Paradise Just East of the Beaten Bath

People familiar with other parts of Texas are always taken aback—in a WOW! sort of way—when they visit the state’s Piney Woods region. Encompassing a chunk of the far eastern reaches of the state, this spectacular area is awash in natural beauty, from woodlands packed with pine and oak trees to glittering lakes and rushing rivers. The Piney Woods’ stunning verdancy stands in contrast to other, equally beautiful but in a drier sort of way, regions of the Lone Star State.

With several nicely sized, host cities to choose from, including Tyler, Longview, and Nacogdoches, and various regional airports just a hop away from the state’s big hubs, planners will find no shortage of conveniences offered by the Piney Woods. Attendees will find plenty of activities and entertainment to keep them busy, both in the cities and out in natural areas.

The Piney Woods is perfect for an event that wants to offer its attendees a taste of off-the-beaten-path Southern hospitality with a Texas-sized side of natural beauty. Many event-goers tack on a day or two to their East Texas stay to enjoy the breathtaking gifts Mother Nature offers visitors.

Tyler: A Modern New Conference Center

One of the biggest cities in the Piney Woods, Tyler has plenty to offer meeting planners, and its W.T. Brookshire Conference Center is among the newest and shiniest. With 23,000 square feet of meeting space, a built-in stage, an equipped finishing kitchen, and a modern design, the Brookshire facility is well-suited for a variety of gatherings.

But as beautiful as the indoor spaces are, what really makes Brookshire shine is its adjacency to greenspaces. There’s a huge front lawn out front, where attendees can plop down with a snack. The center is also right next door to Tyler’s beloved municipal rose garden, the largest public collection of roses in the United States. There’s also a huge grove of trees nearby, for breaktime nature walks, perhaps.

“We’re so thrilled to have the conference facility so close to other attractions that people can enjoy when they’re not in meetings,” says Diann Bayes, President of Visit Tyler. The city’s rose museum is nearby, too, for visitors wanting to learn more about the fragrant and storied flower.

Bayes is also excited about the nearby Mayfair Building, which is scheduled to open in late 2023. This historic building has a beautiful stage that accommodates performers, but also, conference speakers. “Meeting organizers can put breakouts in other buildings,” she suggests.

One of the more unusual small-conference spaces is at the city's Caldwell Zoo, which is known for its breeding of threatened and endangered animals, including the Texas horned lizard.

"When planners are looking for meeting spaces, they have a variety of different options in Tyler," she says.

Tyler offers plenty of hotels, some with conference facilities attached, says Bayes. There's a Baptist church with 24,000 square feet of space, and the Cascades Country Club has 15,000 square feet of space that might be perfect for the sports market, Bayes says.

Visitors to Tyler are surprised by the diversity of dining options the city offers, Bayes says. "We have all kinds of cuisines: Mexican, barbeque, Asian," she says, "and lots of great soul food."

Meeting attendees who want to stick around Tyler for a couple extra days might enjoy visiting Tyler State Park, or picking berries at any of the area farms. "You don't get those opportunities in the big cities," says Bayes. Visitors can also enjoy wine and spirits tastings, she adds.

"When conferences get out where it's less populated," Bayes says, "they get a different experience. There's a natural beauty that people are missing out in the larger cities."

Longview

Longview is the kind of place travelers like to visit when they're looking for a less-crowded vibe, says CJ Clayton, tourism manager for the city. "People come here to get away from traffic and big-city craziness," she says. "We have a slower pace of life here" that meeting attendees love to soak up when they visit, she adds.

Planners might want to consider the Longview Convention Complex, a flexible, 40,000-square-foot space that is made up of several facilities and rental spaces. Longview is also home to several hotels with varying amounts of space.

For something a little different, planners might consider the Longview Arboretum and Nature Center, which is "devoted to revealing the unique ecosystem of East Texas in a beautiful and thoughtful manner," according to the entity's website. In addition to numerous indoor meeting rooms, the facility offers planners a chance to think outside the box, literally, with an outdoor stage, a meditation garden, and a hilltop pavilion, each of which can accommodate small groups in a spectacularly beautiful setting.

Even if the meetings aren't held at the arboretum, the Arboretum is definitely a place attendees will definitely want to stroll through on their own time.

Another potential excursion for attendees is Longview's historic downtown, which has undergone a transformation in recent years, with many buildings being renovated into beautiful new spaces housing restaurants and museums. "Our downtown has grown exponentially," says Clayton. "It's really changed, and it's a great place to visit and hang out." She says visitors shouldn't miss the many examples of public art in the downtown area.

Nearby wineries and antiquing opportunities, too, make Longview a special place to visit.

Nacogdoches: A Small City with a Lot to Offer

Nacogdoches makes up for its small size with its outsized creativity when it comes to hosting events. “We think outside the box to provide unique experiences for events,” says Ashley Morgan, interim director for the Nacogdoches Convention and Visitors’ Bureau. “We offer something (planners) can’t get anywhere else.”

“Meeting planners can take advantage of plentiful space at Stephen F. Austin,” a public university in Nacogdoches, says Morgan. “Others have opted to hold events outside, at the town’s covered amphitheater at Pecan Acres Park,” or other outdoor spots around town, she adds.

Morgan says the city offers plenty of hotel space; the recently renovated Fredonia Hotel and Convention Center—in the city’s historic downtown—sports an authentic mid-century modern vibe and offers fantastic restaurants.

Nac, as the city is affectionately known, is billed as the oldest city in Texas. While indigenous people had been in the area for millenia, Spanish explorers established permanent settlements in the area in the early 18th century. Younger than the Spaniards’ time in Texas, but nevertheless historic and intriguing, are the charming, 1920s red brick streets found in Nac’s downtown district. “Visitors love our brick streets,” says Morgan. They also love the antiques and specialty shops that can be found downtown, and history buffs will want to check out the numerous historic landmarks in the downtown area. There’s also the Fire Museum and the Railroad Depot and Museum.

When meetings are finished for the day, attendees might choose to wander Nacogdoches’ spectacular Ruby M. Mize Azalea Garden, the largest and most diverse collection of azaleas in the state. There are also hiking trails nearby and two lakes offering recreational activities. Davy Crockett National Forest is nearby for nature lovers.

Spectacular Encounters with Nature

Event attendees will almost certainly want to take advantage of the Piney Woods’ spectacular natural attractions, whether interwoven into official sessions (an excursion keynote under the tree canopy, perhaps?) or personal travel tacked on before or after the conference.

The Piney Woods are home to four national forests: Angelina National Forest, Sabine National Forest, Davy Crockett National Forest, and Sam Houston National Forest. In addition to the area’s expanse of the namesake loblolly, shortleaf, and longleaf pine trees, the ecoregion is populated by hardwood trees such as oak and red maple.

Under-canopy flora typical of the area include sphagnum mosses, ferns, pitcher plants, sundews, pipeworts, and orchids. Plants such as American beautyberry, blackberry, dewberry, wild plums, and persimmons provide food for the abundant wildlife that call the region home. Animal lovers might spot foxes, rabbits, deer, squirrels, voles, gophers, and bullfrogs.

Lucky birdwatchers may spot the federally endangered red-cockaded woodpecker, which sleeps and nests in cavities only in cavities of live pine trees in the Piney Woods—and nowhere else on Earth.

In addition to birdwatching, outdoor enthusiasts might enjoy biking, hiking, horseback riding, and fishing. Fans of water recreation will enjoy swimming, canoeing, and kayaking on area rivers and lakes. And speaking of lakes, Caddo lake, Texas' only natural lake, straddles the Texas-Louisiana border and is beloved by visitors to the Piney Woods.

More Can't-Miss Spots

For a true taste of small-town East Texas, meeting planners might want to consider Palestine, a burg that oozes charm, with more than 1,800 historic homes and buildings. Don't miss the attractive Main Street district, packed with shopping and dining. Schedule a visit to Palestine in springtime and enjoy the Dogwood Trails celebration, when the native trees burst into spectacular bloom. Also plan a trip on the Texas State Railroad, which offers scenic Piney Woods excursions on beautifully refurbished train cars. Palestine offers plenty of hotel rooms, and the Lakeview Conference Center can accommodate 1,200 people.

And there's more! Planners looking to host golf events will find plenty of stunning courses in the Piney Woods: Links at Land's End and Piney Woods Country Club, for starters. Smaller groups might want to visit the town of Jefferson, the "Bed and Breakfast Capital of East Texas," where there's also a *Gone With the Wind* museum. Also consider a visit to the East Texas Oil Museum in Kilgore, a small town that also boasts numerous oil derricks. Finally, don't forget lovely little Lufkin, a small town with a lot of animals—800 exotic and wild animals, in fact, on display at the Ellen Trout Zoo.