

Surprises in the Texas Panhandle

The winds of change have arrived in the northernmost region of Texas **BY AMY DURHAM**

» IF TEXAS WERE A FRYING PAN, the handle would be a rectangular-shaped area on the north side of the state. Thus, the region's name: the Texas Panhandle. Cities and towns in the Panhandle vary in size and local flavor, but most have a distinctly Texas feel, a Western flair that shows up in myriad ways. For meetings, conferences, and conventions, the Panhandle offers sunny skies, Southern hospitality, and an increasing number of versatile venues suitable for any group size.

As the northernmost geographical region of Texas, the Panhandle is bordered by New Mexico and Oklahoma. Rolling plains on the east end suddenly as they reach the 200-mile edge of the Llano Estacado, one of the largest mesas in the country. Drive from Abilene to Lubbock, and you will leave the rolling plains and drive 300 feet up the Caprock Escarpment, a long stretch of canyon wall that marks the start of the Llano Estacado. Lubbock and Amarillo are the biggest Texas cities on the mesa. The flat, arid region can experience high winds that carry the occasional dust storm and tumbleweeds with them. But with 26 Texas counties situated in this region, people from all walks of life find the surprising beauty and modern amenities in this Texas region to be worthy as gathering spots.

WESTERN FLAIR IN THE ROLLING HILLS

In the south and east portions of the Panhandle, rolling plains are the backdrop for cities like Abilene, San Angelo, and Wichita Falls, where Western culture injects its character into venues. Such cultural host cities are ideal for the continuing Western trend in meeting planning themes. Delaney Lovelace, DMCP, director of sales at Ultimate Ventures in Addison near Dallas-Fort Worth, suggests adding a modern twist to traditional Texas themes. "From Boho chic to Neon Cowboy, the Western theme has been elevated," she says.

Abilene, home to Dyess Air Force Base, is centrally located near Interstate 20, making it accessible for attendees from various parts of the state. Cowboy culture is alive and well in this city built on the cattle and oil businesses.

The Abilene Convention Center is a 40,000-square-foot facility equipped to host conferences, conventions, and trade shows. The 2,100-seat performing arts center and its five spacious meeting rooms ensure flexibility for a varied agenda all in one location. **The new 200-room DoubleTree by Hilton Downtown Abilene Convention Center offers 23,000 square feet of flexible meeting space for up to 1,340 attendees.**

For smaller gatherings with a distinctive atmosphere, The Mill Wine Bar and Event Center, located in an old mill and grain elevator building, has both outdoor space with fire pits and indoor space planners can combine to fit 330 attendees. Or, gather at the Paramount Theater for performances and lectures.

San Angelo, home to Goodfellow Air Force Base, is nestled along the Concho River where attendees can stroll walkways and enjoy time outdoors at multiple city parks. San Angelo is home to the International Waterlily Collection, featuring a stunning display of

PHOTOS (CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE) Abilene Convention Center, Abilene Convention and Visitors Bureau, Rest Yourself River Ranch, Boutique Hotel & Convention Center

water lilies from around the world. The scenery extends into the charming downtown, with a vibrant public art scene of murals and sculptures dotted among boutiques, art galleries, and historic buildings.

The McNease Convention Center boasts 24,000 square feet of exhibit space, along with banquet and classroom space for 700 attendees. The domed Foster Communications Coliseum offers 5,000 seats and 20,000 square feet of exhibit space on the arena floor. Popular hotels within walking distance of the convention center include Pearl on the Concho SureStay Collection by Best Western with 120 rooms and 5,000 square feet of flexible space and Clarion Hotel San Angelo Near Convention Center with 148 guest rooms and a 4,125-square-foot event space.

Fort Concho, established in 1867, is a National Historic Landmark and museum. For rustic themes, the venues at Fort Concho include the commissary with space for up to 150 attendees and the stables with space for up to 600 attendees.

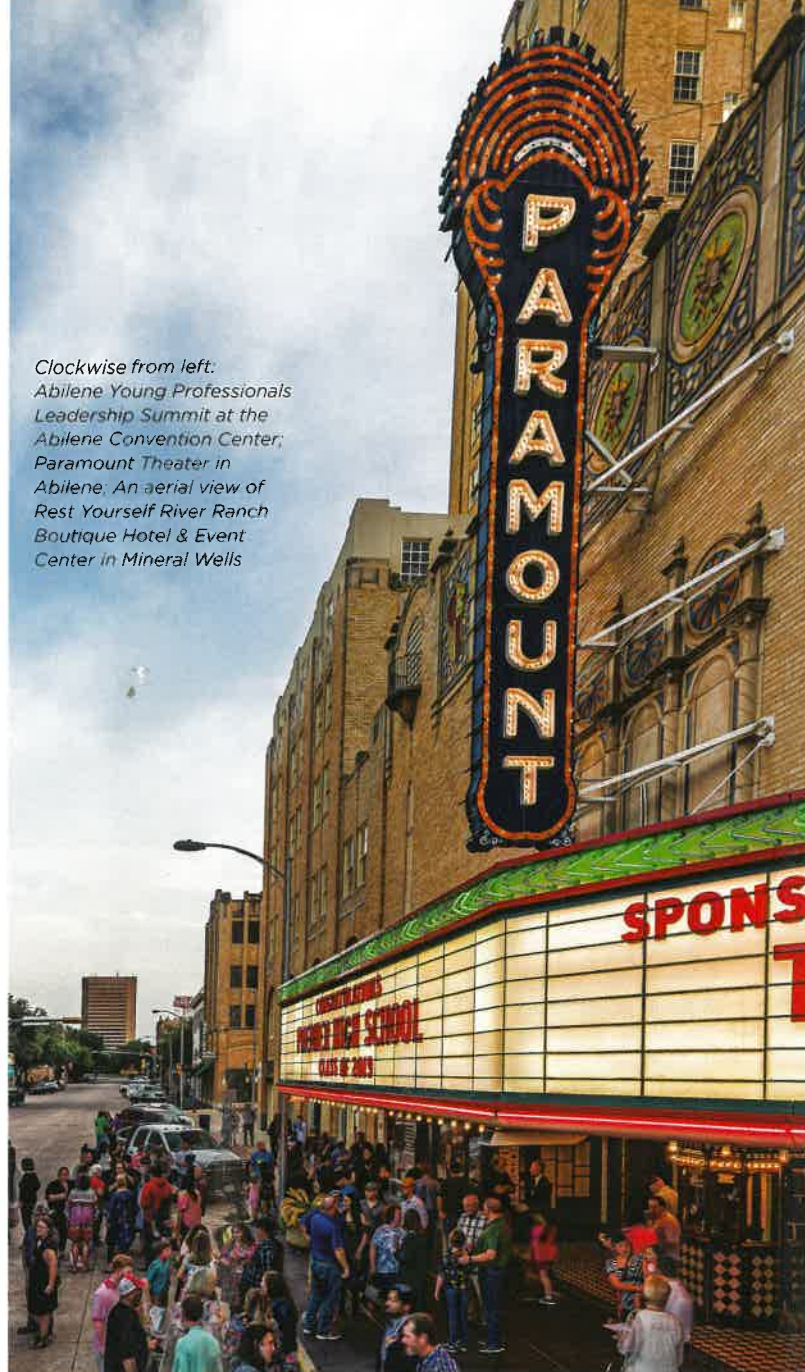
On the northern border near Oklahoma, Wichita Falls is home to Sheppard Air Force Base, one of the largest and most diversified training bases in the U.S. Air Force. The city derives its name from the Wichita River's waterfalls, which were unfortunately destroyed in the late 1800s by a flood. The re-created falls are on the south bank of the Wichita River and are a popular spot for photos and hiking.

The Wichita Falls Multi-Purpose Events Center (MPEC) is a 57,000-square-foot venue that includes a convention center, an exhibit hall, auditorium, and the 6,500-seat Kay Yeager Coliseum. Green space is available at the MPEC for outdoor events or food trucks. Alternately, the nearby Delta Hotels by Marriott Wichita Falls Convention Center boasts 40,000 square feet of flexible event space and a capacity of 1,640 attendees in the largest ballroom.

For outdoor events, consider the J.S. Birdwell Terrace at the River Bend Nature Center. Set in front of the butterfly and nature conservancy's large glass structure, the terrace has seating for 200 attendees along with surrounding nature trails and wetlands for breaktime exploration.

BIG-CITY AMENITIES ON THE MESA

In the higher elevation of the Llano Estacado, Lubbock is often referred to as the "Hub City" due to its central location within the region, which has contributed to its role as a cultural and economic hub for the surrounding areas. The city is a major player in the cotton industry, and the area is known for its rows and rows of cotton fields. The Lubbock Preston Smith International Airport offers convenient flights for attendees, and Texas Tech University creates a vibrant college-town atmosphere.



*Clockwise from left:
Abilene Young Professionals
Leadership Summit at the
Abilene Convention Center;
Paramount Theater in
Abilene; An aerial view of
Rest Yourself River Ranch
Boutique Hotel & Event
Center in Mineral Wells*



DESTINATION Texas Panhandle

Lubbock is the hometown of rock 'n' roll legend Buddy Holly. The city celebrates its musical heritage with attractions like the Buddy Holly Center, which pays tribute to the influential musician, and the West Texas Walk of Fame, which honors individuals who made significant contributions to the region's music scene, including Waylon Jennings and Roy Orbison.

The Buddy Holly Hall of Performing Arts and Sciences is a multipurpose, 30,000-square-foot venue that includes an 841-seat theater and versatile meeting spaces for 747 reception eventgoers or 352 banquet attendees. For conventions, the Lubbock Memorial Civic Center is a centrally located 100,000-square-foot facility. The venue includes a 40,000-square-foot exhibit hall, 16 versatile meeting rooms, and a 28,000-square-foot pedestrian mall. Nearby, the Valencia Hotel Group's Cotton Court Hotel is styled after the region's cotton industry and Western heritage, with 165 rooms and reception capacity for 200 meeting-goers.

Texas Tech University's athletics program, particularly the Red Raiders football team, contributes to the city's sports culture. Across from Jones AT&T Stadium, The Overton Hotel & Conference Center features 20,000 square feet of flexible meeting and event space, including ballrooms and boardrooms, along with 303 rooms and suites. Shannon Baker, director of sales and marketing, says the Overton is a local favorite thanks to its "stylish accommodations and close proximity to Texas Tech's main campus and athletic facilities." The hotel recently updated its screen and projector system and enhanced the sound system for the ballroom.



Clockwise from below: A musical performance at Hook & Ladder Coffee Co. in Wichita Falls; Cadillac Ranch in Amarillo; Buddy Holly Hall of Performing Arts and Sciences in Lubbock; Pool at DoubleTree by Hilton Abilene Downtown Convention Center

The Texas High Plains region, including the Lubbock area, has become known for producing quality grapes. For a distinctive setting where vineyards meet cotton fields, Llano Estacado Winery can accommodate up to 200 seated attendees.

HONORING ROUTE 66

When they think of Amarillo, most people think of Route 66 or the 72-ounce steak challenge at the Big Texan Steak Ranch. Once attendees have put down their forks, the city does feature numerous Route 66 landmarks, diners, and attractions. Amarillo's proximity to destinations like Palo Duro Canyon State Park—the second-largest canyon in the United States—and Cadillac Ranch, a public art installation featuring a row of 10 Cadillac cars buried nose-first in the ground, gives it an artistic vibe mixed with Western culture.



PHOTOS (CLOCKWISE FROM BELOW LEFT) Hook & Ladder Coffee Co., Adobe/Nick Fox, Buddy Holly Hall of Performing Arts and Sciences, Hilton Hotels



The Amarillo Civic Center Complex is a 340,000-square-foot facility with multiple meeting spaces, including the 2,300-seat Civic Center Auditorium, the 4,870-seat Cal Farley Coliseum, two exhibit spaces, and two ballrooms. Attendees can fly into Rick Husband Amarillo International Airport.

Within walking distance to the Civic Center Complex, the Embassy Suites Amarillo Downtown provides 226 guest rooms and over 14,000 square feet of flexible meeting space. For luxury accommodations, The Barfield, Autograph Collection, offers boutique style in a modern hotel with 112 guest rooms.

The stylish Derrick Event Center is a 1940s art deco building with space for meetings. All three gallery floors with fine art are available, as well as space for up to 320 seated attendees. Outdoor events will benefit from the fragrant gardens of the Amarillo Botanical Gardens, with 5,600 square feet of indoor and outdoor spaces over 4 acres.

CLOSE-KNIT COMMUNITIES

Along Interstate 20, small towns dot the landscape. These close-knit communities offer meeting space for smaller gatherings with authentic, down-home hospitality. In Big Spring, Hotel Settles provides a grand ballroom with restored 1930s style, including gold inlaid ceilings and crystal chandeliers. The largest of several meeting spaces seats 60 attendees, and the Judge's Chamber offers up to 20 attendees a poker/gaming table and cigar smoke evacuation system. Nearby, Sweetwater is home to extensive wind farms and is often referred to as the "Wind Energy Capital of North America." Corporate retreats for up to 75 people will find a picturesque setting at Mulberry Manor Bed & Breakfast.

Close to the Oklahoma border, Mineral Wells is known for its mineral springs, which have drawn visitors seeking the purported



health benefits for over a century. Rest Yourself River Ranch Boutique Hotel & Event Center sits just outside of town on a hill overlooking a bend in the Brazos River. Six event spaces with landscape views and sleeping accommodations for up to 85 attendees makes this a quiet location for leadership retreats.

To the south, Brownwood has begun construction on a multi-purpose event center. Rather than a ground-up project, the center will be housed in revitalized and redeveloped buildings in the Historic Depot Civic and Cultural Complex. In addition to a spacious event center, venues will include green space with room for 7,500 standing and an outdoor pavilion for 462 seated attendees.

For meetings in the rolling hills or wide expanse of the Texas Panhandle, modern and creative venues will host attendees with a Western welcome. **m+e**

- abilenevisitors.com
- discoversanangelo.com
- discoverwichitafalls.com
- sweetwatertx.gov
- visitamarillo.com

- visitbigspring.com
- visitbrownwood.com
- visitlubbock.org
- visitmineralwells.org