

The Best Convention Centers in the U.S.

In a Wall Street Journal ranking of 30 centers, the ones in Las Vegas and Chicago take the top two spots

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What makes for a successful convention? Road warriors say a venue that facilitates networking and deal making is essential. But almost as important is a city with robust—and affordable—options for those who want to mix business and pleasure.

Not everyone has a choice about which conventions to attend—some people have to go regardless of where the event is being held. But knowing what to expect and how to navigate the destination can help shape the overall experience.

To that end, The Wall Street Journal ranked 30 of the largest convention centers in the U.S., weighing the quality of each exhibition space alongside the vibrancy and affordability of the city that surrounds it. A convention center had to be in a top-100 city in terms of population to be included in the ranking.

The Las Vegas Convention Center, which hosts the annual Consumer Electronics Show, known as CES, topped the Journal's list. The facility's 2.5 million square feet of exhibition space sits minutes from the Las Vegas Strip and just over 3 miles from Harry Reid International Airport.

The Las Vegas facility alone generated 6,490 jobs, \$356.1 million in wages and \$1.3 billion in direct economic output from the 56 conventions it hosted in 2022, according to a spokeswoman for the Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority, a government agency that promotes tourism in Las Vegas. That includes spending at restaurants, casinos and shopping centers by attendees, the organization says.

Sheefra Brisbin, an Ottawa, Ontario-based entrepreneur, attended this year's CES in Las Vegas in January. Brisbin, who is developing a bracelet that she hopes will help people with dementia live more independently, struck a deal with a manufacturer whom she met on the exhibition floor. During her downtime, she enjoyed dining at the Wynn Las Vegas hotel and listening to actor Seth Rogen speak at a workshop.

“Primarily I go to Vegas for sunshine; secondly, for the show and third, for the food,” she says.

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How 30 of the largest venues across the U.S. stack up

OVERALL RANK	NAME	LOCATION	OVERALL SCORE	SPACE, AMENITIES AND CONVENIENCE RANK	CITY AND SURROUNDINGS RANK
1	Las Vegas Convention Center	Las Vegas	80.06	2	21
2	McCormick Place	Chicago	76.17	1	27
3	The Venetian Convention & Expo Center	Las Vegas	72.13	3	26
4	San Diego Convention Center	San Diego	62.54	8	1
5	Orange County Convention Center	Orlando	58.97	5	8
6	Georgia World Congress Center	Atlanta	52.98	6	14
7	Mandalay Bay Convention Center	Las Vegas	51.01	4	25
8	Phoenix Convention Center	Phoenix	50.47	12	4
9	Seattle Convention Center	Seattle	49.07	7	22
10	Kay Bailey Hutchison Convention Center	Dallas	46.50	11	16
11	Greater Columbus Convention Center	Columbus	45.91	13	15
12	Kentucky Exposition Center	Louisville	44.72	10	20
13	Walter E. Washington Convention Center	Washington, D.C.	44.50	9	24

OVERALL RANK	NAME	LOCATION	OVERALL SCORE	SPACE, AMENITIES AND CONVENIENCE RANK	CITY AND SURROUNDINGS RANK
14	Salt Palace Convention Center	Salt Lake City	44.49	15	6
15	George R. Brown Convention Center	Houston	42.51	18	7
16	Indiana Convention Center	Indianapolis	42.24	14	18
17	Pennsylvania Convention Center	Philadelphia	39.93	22	5
18	Ernest N. Morial Convention Center	New Orleans	39.35	25	3
19	Huntington Place	Detroit	39.28	21	9
20	Jacob K. Javits Convention Center	New York	38.87	17	19
21	Los Angeles Convention Center	Los Angeles	38.59	23	10
22	America's Center	St. Louis	37.84	20	13
23	Henry B. Gonzalez Convention Center	San Antonio	36.80	26	2
24	Boston Convention and Exhibition Center	Boston	35.79	19	23
25	Moscone Convention Center	San Francisco	35.44	24	12
26	Miami Beach Convention Center	Miami Beach	30.15	27	11
27	Colorado Convention Center	Denver	27.77	28	17
28	Anaheim Convention	Anaheim	21.24	16	30

OVERALL RANK	NAME	LOCATION	OVERALL SCORE	SPACE, AMENITIES AND CONVENIENCE RANK	CITY AND SURROUNDINGS RANK
Center					
29	NRG Center	Houston	3.25	29	29
30	International Exposition Center (I-X Center)	Cleveland	2.94	30	28

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Methodology: Each convention center was scored on 12 factors related to the venue's space, amenities and convenience, as well as the venue's city and area. The space, amenities and convenience score makes up 70% of a venue's overall score, while the city and surroundings score makes up the other 30%. The factors within each score were all weighted equally, and were standardized and scaled to create overall scores. The space, amenities and convenience score is composed of data about the total area, the exhibit space and the number of meeting rooms at each venue. It also includes data about the time it takes to drive to an airport, the distance to the nearest dry cleaner and whether the venue has amenities such as outdoor space and an on-site ATM.

The city and surroundings score is composed of data about the density of food-service establishments and arts-and-entertainment venues relative to the local population of the area; the walkability of the area surrounding the convention center; the average cost of a meal in the city; and the number of pleasant days in the city in 2022, defined as the number of days where the average temperature was between 55 and 85 degrees Fahrenheit and there was negligible precipitation. Also included is a measure of the relative availability of hotel rooms. Eligibility for the ranking was determined by the total exhibition space at each convention center, not including space for stables. Venues that weren't located in one of the 100 largest U.S. cities by population were excluded due to data availability.

Sources: Convention centers and convention-center online materials; CoStar; Business Travel News' Corporate Travel Index 2023; Walk Score; NOAA; Google Maps.

Is the airport nearby?

In terms of space, the Las Vegas Convention Center ranks second only to McCormick Place in Chicago, the runner-up in the Journal's overall ranking. The Chicago center fell short of the top spot because it has fewer meeting rooms, is farther from the airport and lacks the sweeping entertainment opportunities that shape Sin City. (Its total space, though, is so much higher than any other venue's that the Chicago center still took the top spot in the space, amenities and convenience score.)

The Journal's rankings are weighted 70% toward the size and quality of the convention center and 30% toward factors from the surrounding city. The facilities are ranked by square footage of exhibition space and total space, the number of meeting rooms they offer, plus how close they are to a dry cleaner and an airport, and whether they have such amenities as an on-site nursing room and an ATM.

Cities are judged by how walkable they are and the number of nice-weather days they have a year, as well as the average meal price and the relative abundance of restaurants, entertainment venues and high-end hotel rooms.



Chicago's McCormick Place was home to the 2023 Sweets and Snacks Expo. PHOTO: VINCENT D. JOHNSON/XINHUA/ZUMA PRESS

Places like Denver and Miami rank high as cities but their convention centers rank low on the Journal's list because the venues lack the vast space and amenities of others. Some, like Cleveland's International Exposition Center, or the I-X Center, scored low in both categories.

Coming in at No. 30 on the list, the I-X Center has more exhibition space than seven of the other venues in the ranking, but it has the fewest meeting rooms overall. The surrounding neighborhood also scored the lowest in terms of walkability.

Still, some local residents have a soft spot for the venue, which has been around for nearly four decades and recently underwent a renovation that shrunk the exhibition area.

"With the general space being condensed, it allowed for a little bit more of an intimate setting," says 39-year-old Chris Grunau, who attended the Cleveland Auto Show this year, as he has most years over the past decade. The I-X Center, which hosted the show, is a 15-minute drive from his home.

A spokesperson for the I-X Center declined to comment.

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How 30 of the largest venues across the U.S. stack up in key ranking categories

OVERALL RANK	NAME	EXHIBITION SPACE RANK	TOTAL SPACE RANK	MEETING ROOMS RANK	CLOSEST DRY CLEANER RANK	DISTANCE FROM AIRPORT RANK	HOTEL AVAILABILITY RANK	MEAL PRICE RANK	ARTS/ ENTERTAINMENT RANK	FOOD AVAILAB RANK
1	Las Vegas Convention Center	2	3	2	24	5	28	14	2	2
2	McCormick Place	1	1	3	6	24	20	24	28	26
3	The Venetian Convention & Expo Center	4	3	1	16	7	24	14	27	28
4	San Diego Convention Center	17	8	23	6	5	11	2	19	19
5	Orange County Convention Center	3	2	22	30	12	15	10	9	16
6	Georgia World Congress Center	5	4	12	24	22	18	17	21	21
7	Mandalay Bay Convention Center	6	3	4	16	3	13	14	23	25
8	Phoenix Convention Center	19	28	10	19	2	8	11	6	7
9	Seattle Convention Center	29	22	6	2	10	6	29	17	12
10	Kay Bailey Hutchison Convention Center	9	26	21	13	12	12	21	13	4
11	Greater Columbus Convention Center	30	17	14	13	8	14	9	14	18
12	Kentucky Exposition Center	8	25	29	16	3	29	5	7	10

OVERALL RANK	NAME	EXHIBITION SPACE RANK	TOTAL SPACE RANK	MEETING ROOMS RANK	CLOSEST DRY CLEANER RANK	DISTANCE FROM AIRPORT RANK	HOTEL AVAILABILITY RANK	MEAL PRICE RANK	ARTS/ ENTERTAINMENT RANK	FOOD AVAILAB RANK
13	Walter E. Washington Convention Center	16	10	26	13	16	1	28	26	23
14	Salt Palace Convention Center	25	28	19	4	10	21	1	5	9
15	George R. Brown Convention Center	22	17	14	19	21	3	18	4	3
16	Indiana Convention Center	21	20	24	9	12	23	4	25	22
17	Pennsylvania Convention Center	9	16	17	1	24	19	8	20	11
18	Ernest N. Morial Convention Center	6	6	5	21	26	25	13	8	6
19	Huntington Place	13	9	9	9	30	22	6	12	5
20	Jacob K. Javits Convention Center	12	5	8	9	29	2	30	3	14
21	Los Angeles Convention Center	14	30	27	2	26	5	25	15	24
22	America's Center	27	7	13	6	12	17	12	22	15
23	Henry B. Gonzalez Convention Center	26	20	25	28	8	16	3	1	1
24	Boston Convention and Exhibition Center	24	14	17	22	18	4	27	11	8
25	Moscone Convention Center	18	27	7	4	16	10	23	18	20
26	Miami Beach Convention	28	24	16	9	19	27	26	10	17

OVERALL RANK	NAME	EXHIBITION SPACE RANK	TOTAL SPACE RANK	MEETING ROOMS RANK	CLOSEST DRY CLEANER RANK	DISTANCE FROM AIRPORT RANK	HOTEL AVAILABILITY RANK	MEAL PRICE RANK	ARTS/ ENTERTAINMENT RANK	FOOD AVAILAB RANK
	Center									
27	Colorado Convention Center	20	12	28	22	28	9	22	16	13
28	Anaheim Convention Center	9	17	10	27	19	30	20	29	27
29	NRG Center	15	17	19	24	23	7	18	30	29
30	International Exposition Center (I-X Center)	23	12	30	29	1	26	6	24	30

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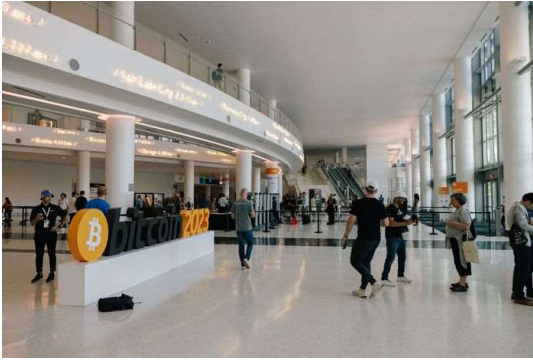
Business and pleasure

The Events Industry Council, a trade group, says that in 2022, spending on business events ranging from conventions to large-scale corporate meetings was about 81% of what it was in 2019, before the pandemic hit.

But one trend that is accelerating, according to executives in the travel industry, is demand for dual-purpose trips that combine business and pleasure.

Airline woes have played a major role in a growing reluctance to travel for business alone. “If you’re going to go through that inconvenience and invest that time in air travel, you want to make the most of it when you land,” says Donna Quadri-Felitti, director of the School of Hospitality Management at Penn State University.

As a result, she says, more people are taking their families along to conventions. That might mean catching an Inter Miami soccer game after a full day at the Miami Beach Convention Center, or taking an extra day to tour the San Diego Zoo after Comic-Con wraps up across town.



Bitcoin 2023 attendees exploring the Miami Beach Convention Center. PHOTO: JAMES JACKMAN FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Convention brochures and programs now are doing more to promote the attractions in their cities, and more hotels are offering travelers the ability to extend their stay for a lower rate than the one their companies paid for initially, says Chekitan Dev, a distinguished professor at Cornell University’s Peter and Stephanie Nolan School of Hotel Administration.

“If I’m going to go to Nashville for a convention, I want to make sure that I’m able to experience some of the other features of the destination, other than just meeting colleagues, doing deals, learning about new products and all the stuff you do at a convention,” he says.

Another thing that makes a convention space successful, experts say, is the way it facilitates interaction between people.

That often requires a friendly and well-prepared customer-service staff, says Jay Kandampully, a professor of service management and hospitality at Ohio State University’s College of Education and Human Ecology.

“We don’t remember the room that we slept in,” he says. “But we remember people who created an experience.”

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