

Visiting NASA: Johnson Space Center and Houston Space Center

by Bernie Edwards, PassPorter Guest Contributor

"Houston" is officially the first word spoken from the Moon back to Earth. The city is the home of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration's (NASA's) human spaceflight program. While the Space Shuttle launches out of Florida, the astronauts live and do most of their training at NASA's Johnson Space Center (JSC) in Houston, Texas. The center is also the home of Mission Control, which directs all Space Shuttle missions. The Mission Control Center also manages all activity onboard the International Space Station, a United States-led collaborative effort of 16 nations.

As you can probably imagine, NASA and the Johnson Space Center have a great story to tell. Unfortunately, for many years they didn't have a good place to tell the story, with many priceless artifacts and models simply placed in the offices, hallways, conference rooms, and the auditorium at the space center. However, with the help of Walt Disney Imagineering in developing the concept and design for a world class visitor center, Space Center Houston was created. The goal was to build a visitor center that would appeal to guests on both an emotional and intellectual level! [Space Center Houston](#) is the official visitor center for the Johnson Space Center.

At the visitor center, guests can see "Faith 7," the Mercury 9 capsule flown by astronaut Gordon Cooper. Mercury was the overall name given to America's first human spacecraft, capable of carrying a single astronaut. The visitor center also has the Gemini V capsule flown by astronauts Pete Conrad and Gordon Cooper; Gemini spacecraft followed Mercury and carried two astronauts into space. A "must see" artifact is "America" the Crew Module for Apollo 17, which was the last manned flight to the Moon. Apollo 17 was also the longest mission to the Moon, with astronauts Ron Evans and Harrison Schmitt under the command of astronaut Gene Cernan; astronauts Cernan and Schmitt spent over 3 days exploring the lunar surface. Guests can also see a Lunar Module, the spacecraft capable of landing on the Moon, hanging from the ceiling and a Lunar Rover that was used for training. The Astronaut Gallery features one of the world's best collection of spacesuits, with portraits and crew photos of every NASA astronaut who has flown in space.

The visitor center also has an IMAX theater that shows movies such as "To Be An Astronaut" and "Inside the Space Station". In addition, a

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popular attraction is the Blast Off Theater where you can experience the thrill of launching into space. Afterwards, stop by the Mission Status Center, where you can get an update on current space flights and astronaut training activities. During actual Space Shuttle missions, the Mission Status Center shares communications between the Mission Control Center at Johnson Space Center and the astronauts onboard the orbiter. Finally, there is a large food hall and a very large gift shop with lots of NASA souvenirs.

However, in my opinion, the best part of a visit is going on a tram tour of the Johnson Space Center. The tram tour takes guests to either the old Mission Control Center that has been restored to look like it did during the Apollo Moon landings, or the new Mission Control Center that supports the Space Shuttle and International Space Station today. Tours also visit the Space Vehicle Mockup Facility, a real working area of Johnson Space Center with Space Shuttle and International Space Station training mockups, and Rocket Park, which contains one of the last surviving Saturn V rockets that carried astronauts to the Moon.

There are even special tours, called "Level Nine Tours," that take guests to other areas of Johnson Space Center such as the Neutral Buoyancy Lab, basically a large pool where astronauts train for working outside in space. The pool is so large that NASA can put a full-size replica of the Space Shuttle and parts of the International Space Station in it. Level Nine Tours also include dining in the main cafeteria at Johnson Space Center; you can usually find some astronauts eating lunch there. Only 12 Level Nine admissions are available each day, so be sure to make an advance reservation; also all Level Nine guests have to be 14 years old or older.

Most of the exhibits and tours have specific start times. So to get the most out of your day, be sure to look at the map and brochure provided upon entering; it contains the start times for various attractions. I can't stress enough that all guests should look closely at the map! Even though the general layout was designed in consultation with Walt Disney Imagineering, it's a little confusing in my opinion. Some families spend all their time in the main hall and never make it to the nooks and crannies that hold the more educational and interesting material, such as the Starship Gallery. I've talked to many families who only saw the main hall and, as you can imagine, left disappointed.

My personal recommendation is to visit the Starship Gallery first to get a feel of what NASA and the Johnson Space Center do, and then go on the tram tour. However, sometimes there are school groups that can make the morning lines for the tram tour very long; in that case save the tour for the afternoon. On busy days there will generally be two

types of tours, with only one visiting Mission Control; I recommend going on a tour that includes Mission Control, especially the historic Mission Control used for the Apollo Moon landings.

Unfortunately, Space Center Houston is also filled with what I would describe as "playground activities" for very young guests, such as a ball pit. I recommend avoiding those things until after you see everything you want to see first. That may be hard to do because those activities are located in the main hall, and easily catch the attention of young guests. Some families spend all of their time at the "playground activities" and miss seeing the amazing space artifacts, moon rocks, tram tour, and movies; they usually walk away very disappointed.

If you are visiting the Houston area and interested in space exploration, then you should definitely make it a point to visit NASA's Johnson Space Center and [Space Center Houston](#). It's an excellent way to spend a day. Just keep in mind that while both are technically in Houston, they are about 45 minutes by car south of downtown Houston. Afterwards, you can visit the [Boardwalk in Kemah](#), about 15 minutes away, for some great food, including gulf seafood. There's also a small amusement park and shopping there right on the water. If you live in the Houston area, Space Center Houston also offers Summer Day Camps and camp-ins for Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts.

Also, the next time you visit Walt Disney World, consider visiting NASA's [Kennedy Space Center](#), on the Atlantic Ocean, a little over an hour away from Walt Disney World. It has the most spectacular visitor center of any NASA facility across the country. If you have any interest in space exploration, I think it would be worth the visit. You can easily spend a whole day at the Kennedy Space Center. With only two more Space Shuttle flights scheduled before the program is retired forever, now is a great time to visit a NASA center.

About The Author: Bernie Edwards lives in Maryland with his wife and two children. He is an engineer for the National Aeronautics and Space Administration and a member of the Walt Disney World Moms Panel.

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