Queens is the easternmost of the five boroughs of New York City, the largest in area, and the second-largest in population. The borough of Queens has been coterminous with Queens County since 1899. The county is now the second most populous county in New York State (behind neighboring Kings County [the borough of Brooklyn]), as well as the fourth-most densely populated county in the United States. Queens (and Brooklyn) sit on the west end of geographic Long Island. Queens is the most ethnically diverse urban area in the world with a population of over 2.2 million, 48% of whom are foreign-born, representing over 100 different nations and speaking over 138 different languages.

If each New York City borough were an independent city, Queens would be America's fourth most populous city, after Los Angeles, Chicago, and Brooklyn. Queens has the second-largest and most diversified economy of all the five boroughs of New York City.

The differing character in the neighborhoods of Queens is reflected by its diverse housing stock ranging from high-density apartment buildings, especially prominent in the more urban areas of central and western Queens, such as Astoria, Long Island City, and Ridgewood, to large free-standing single-family homes, common in the eastern part of the borough, in neighborhoods that have a more suburban layout like neighboring Nassau County, such as Little Neck, Douglaston, and Bayside.

Queens is home to two of the three major New York City area airports (and both major airports in New York City proper), JFK International Airport and LaGuardia Airport. These airports are among the busiest in the world, causing the airspace above Queens to be the most congested in the country. Attractions in Queens include Flushing Meadows Park—home to the New York Mets baseball team and the US Open tennis tournament—Kaufman Astoria Studios, Silver Cup Studios, and Aqueduct Racetrack.

Queens was established in 1683 as one of the original 12 counties of New York and was named for the Portuguese princess Catherine of Braganza (1638–1705), who was at the time queen of England, Scotland, and Ireland. Queens became a borough of New York City in 1898. From 1683 until 1899, the County of Queens included what is now Nassau County.

European colonization brought Dutch and English settlers, as a part of the New Netherlands colony. First settlements occurred in 1635 followed by early colonization’s at Maspeth in 1642, and Vlissingen (now Flushing) in 1643. Other early settlements included Newtown (now Elmhurst) and Jamaica. However, these towns were mostly inhabited by English settlers from New England via eastern Long Island (Suffolk County) subject to Dutch law. After the capture of the colony by the English and its renaming as New York in 1664, the area (and all of Long Island) became known as Yorkshire.

The Flushing Remonstrance signed by colonists in 1657 is considered a precursor to the United States Constitution's provision on freedom of religion in the Bill of Rights. The signers protested the Dutch colonial authorities' persecution of Quakers in what is today the borough of Queens.

Originally, Queens County included the adjacent area now comprising Nassau County. It was an original county of New York State, one of twelve created on November 1, 1683. It is believed that the county was named after Catherine of Braganza, since she was queen of England at the time. The county was founded alongside Kings County (Brooklyn, which was named after her husband, King Charles II), and Richmond County (Staten Island, named after his illegitimate son, the 1st Duke of Richmond). On October 7, 1691, all counties in the Colony of New York were redefined. Queens gained North Brother Island, South Brother Island, and Huletts Island (today known as Rikers Island). On December 3, 1768, Queens gained other islands in Long Island Sound that were not already assigned to a county but that did not abut on Westchester County (today's Bronx County).

Queens played a minor role in the American Revolution, as compared to Brooklyn where the Battle of Long Island was largely fought. Queens, like the rest of Long Island, remained under British occupation after the Battle of Long Island in 1776 and was occupied throughout most of the rest of the war. Under the Quartering Act, British soldiers used, as barracks, the public inns and uninhabited buildings belonging to Queens residents. Even though many local people were against unannounced quartering, sentiment throughout the county remained in favor of the British crown. The quartering of soldiers in private homes, except in times of war, was banned by the Third Amendment to the United States Constitution. Nathan Hale was captured by the British on the shore of Flushing Bay in Queens before being executed by hanging in Manhattan for gathering intelligence.

From 1683 until 1784, Queens County consisted of five towns: Flushing, Hempstead, Jamaica, Newtown, and Oyster Bay. On April 6, 1784, a sixth town, the Town of North Hempstead, was formed through secession by the northern portions of the Town of Hempstead.

The seat of the county government was located first in Jamaica, but the courthouse was torn down by the British during the American Revolution to use the materials to build barracks. After the war, various buildings in Jamaica temporarily served as courthouse and jail until a new building was erected about 1787 (and later completed) in an area near Mineola (now in Nassau County) known then as Clowesville. The 1850 census was the first in which the population of the three western towns exceeded that of the three eastern towns that are now part of Nassau County. Concerns were raised about the condition and distance of the old courthouse, and several sites were in contention for the construction of a new one. In 1870, Long Island City split from the Town of Newtown, incorporating itself as a city, consisting of what had been the Village of Astoria and some unincorporated areas within the Town of Newtown. Around 1874, the seat of county government was moved to Long Island City from Mineola.

On March 1, 1860, the eastern border between Queens County (later Nassau County) and Suffolk County was redefined with no discernible change. On June 8, 1881, North Brother Island was transferred to New York County. On May 8, 1884, Rikers Island was transferred to New York County. In 1885, Lloyd Neck, which was part of the Town of Oyster Bay and was earlier known as Queens Village, seceded from Queens and became part of the Town of Huntington in Suffolk County. On April 16, 1964, South Brother Island was transferred to Bronx County.

The New York City Borough of Queens was authorized on May 4, 1897, by a vote of the New York State Legislature after an 1894 referendum on consolidation. The eastern 280 square miles (730 km2) of Queens that became Nassau County was partitioned on January 1, 1899.

Queens Borough was established on January 1, 1898. Long Island City, the towns of Newtown, Flushing, and Jamaica, and the Rockaway Peninsula portion of the Town of Hempstead were merged to form the new borough, dissolving all former municipal governments (Long Island City, the county government, all towns, and all villages) within the new borough. The areas of Queens County that were not part of the consolidation plan, consisting of the towns of North Hempstead and Oyster Bay, and the major remaining portion of the Town of Hempstead, remained part of Queens County until they seceded to form the new Nassau County on January 1, 1899. At this point, the boundaries of Queens County and the Borough of Queens became coterminous. With consolidation, Jamaica once again became the county seat, though county offices now extend to nearby Kew Gardens also.

The boroughs administrative and court buildings are presently located in Kew Gardens and downtown Jamaica respectively, two neighborhoods that were villages of the former Town of Jamaica.

From 1905 to 1908 the Long Island Rail Road in Queens became electrified. Transportation to and from Manhattan, previously by ferry or via bridges in Brooklyn, opened up with the Queens borough Bridge finished in 1909, and with railway tunnels under the East River in 1910. From 1915 onward, much of Queens was connected to the New York City subway system. With the 1915 construction of the Steinway Tunnel carrying the IRT Flushing Line between Queens and Manhattan, and the emergent expansion of the use of the automobile, the population of Queens more than doubled in the 1920s, from 469,042 in 1920 to 1,079,129 in 1930. Queens was the site of the 1939 New York World's Fair and the 1964 New York World's Fair. LaGuardia Airport, in northern Queens, opened in 1939. Idlewild Airport, in southern Queens and now called JFK Airport, opened in 1948. American Airlines Flight 587 took off from the latter airport on November 12, 2001, but ended up crashing in Queens' Belle Harbor area, killing 265 people.

In late-October, 2012, much of Queens' Breezy Point area was destroyed by a massive six-alarm fire caused by Hurricane Sandy.

Queens is on the far west section of geographic Long Island and includes a few smaller islands, most of which are in Jamaica Bay forming part of the Gateway National Recreation Area which in turn is one of the National Parks of New York Harbor.

Brooklyn, the only other New York City borough on geographic Long Island, lies just south and west of Queens, with Newtown Creek, an estuary that flows into the East River, forming part of the border. To the west and north is the East River, across which is Manhattan to the west and The Bronx to the north. Nassau County is east of Queens on Long Island. Staten Island is southwest of Brooklyn, and shares only a 3-mile-long water border (in the Outer Bay) with Queens.

The Rockaway Peninsula, the most southernly part of all of Long Island, sits between Jamaica Bay and the Atlantic Ocean, featuring the most prominent public beaches in Queens. Flushing Bay and the Flushing River are in the north, connecting to the East River. The East River opens into Long Island Sound. The midsection of Queens is crossed by the Long Island straddling terminal moraine created by the Wisconsin Glacier.