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SUMMER IN THE MED

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PLUS: BOTSWANA | TORONTO | EXPERT-LED TOURS
MEMPHIS | SUMMER IN SWEDEN | ART IN CAPE TOWN



CLOCKWISE Deak Harp's music store in Clarksdale; the crossroads where Robert Johnson made his mythical pact with the Devil; Jerry Lee Lewis's Café and Honky Tonk



SINGING THE BLUES ON HIGHWAY 61

Donna Dailey steps back through history to the birth of the blues in the Deep South



AS THE SUN sets over the Mississippi River, the neon flashes on along Beale Street. This historic spot in Memphis, Tennessee, may be only a few blocks long and a shinier, whiter reincarnation of its edgy past, but for music lovers like me, it's still a magnet, drawing us in as surely as it once pulled the great blues musicians along the Blues Highway.

Today, the Blues Highway is one of America's great road trips. Officially known as Highway 61, it winds through the Mississippi Delta where the blues were born in the cotton fields and juke joints of the Deep South. From the early 1900s, black musicians such as Muddy Waters and BB King took this road north to the clubs of Beale Street and



beyond, where their music spread round the world.

“Memphis was almost like going to California,” Muddy Waters once said. “Beale Street was the black man’s street.”

This laid-back music city is the perfect beginning to my blues odyssey. I leave the Peabody Hotel and nearly every step I take falls in the footsteps of a music legend – literally, as musical notes with the names of blues stars are embedded in the pavement, a Beale Street Walk of Fame.

I peek into the tiny shotgun house that was home to ‘Father of the Blues’ WC Handy, then follow the notes past storied brick shopfronts to the Lansky Building, site of the original clothing store that dressed Elvis Presley and other stars. Upstairs is the Memphis Music Hall of Fame, full of stage costumes, instruments and possessions, from Rufus Thomas’s outlandish funky chicken suit to two-thirds of Jerry Lee Lewis’s customised 1983

THE BLUES HALL OF FAME HAS THOUSANDS OF RARE RECORDINGS FROM NEARLY 400 INDUCTEES

Cadillac El Ballero. (The rest of it is down the street at his Café and Honky Tonk live music venue.)

Memphis is a place of music and stories. It has a wealth of music history, but the Rock ‘n’ Soul Museum, more than any other, shows the evolution of the Memphis sound from early blues through the birth of rock ‘n’ roll to American soul.

From the weathered porch of a replica sharecropper’s shack, I listen to scratchy recordings of “Mule Boogie”, “Bo Weevil Blues” and other gritty, homespun tunes. Sepia-toned murals of cotton fields, a battery-operated radio and other artefacts depict the poverty of the rural South. My audio guide is a virtual jukebox and I select a backing

track of illustrative songs as I move up the scale and through the stories of blues artists, rock ‘n’ rollers, soul singers, radio stations and recording studios.

A few blocks away, there’s an even more amazing treasure trove of music at the Blues Hall of Fame, which opened last year on South Main Street. Its 10 mini galleries feature fascinating artworks, memorabilia and performers that illustrate different blues genres. And there’s an unparalleled database with thousands of rare recordings and videos from its nearly 400 inductees. I could easily disappear into a listening booth for hours.

Memphis has been the perfect prelude to my Delta journey. But it’s



FROM LEFT Ground Zero Blues Club; Dockery gas station



FROM LEFT Stay at the Shack Up Inn; The BB King Museum





ABOVE Ground Zero Blues Club, a Clarksdale juke joint owned by actor Morgan Freeman

SURROUNDED BY COTTON FIELDS, CLARKSDALE IS A BLUES VORTEX

time to hit the Blues Highway. As I head out on Highway 61, I pass the ghosts of those old blues singers, battered guitar cases in hand, making their way up to Beale Street.

My first stop is Clarksdale, some 75 miles south. Surrounded by cotton fields, this small Mississippi town is a blues vortex. On the outskirts, the intersection of highways 61 and 49 is said to be the legendary crossroads where Robert Johnson sold his soul to the Devil in exchange for his lightning guitar skills. Blues pianist Pinetop Perkins, the oldest ever Grammy winner at age 97, worked as a tractor driver on the Hopson Plantation, where you can now spend the night in old sharecroppers' shacks at the Shack Up Inn.

A browse through the Delta Blues Museum in the old train

depot highlights the many famous bluesmen who hailed from Clarksdale: Son House, Muddy Waters, Ike Turner and John Lee Hooker among them. Then I wander the sleepy streets, admiring the weathered brick buildings with their music murals and quirky shops, and lingering in Cat Head Records.

Battered old sofas and a pot-bellied stove line the porch of the Ground Zero Blues Club. Co-owned by actor and local resident Morgan Freeman, this is Clarksdale's biggest juke joint. Within its graffiti-covered walls, you can hear live music most nights from some of the best Delta Blues bands.

The next day, I head down the road to Dockery Farms Plantation outside Cleveland. If it weren't for the bright vintage petrol station on the roadside, it would be easy to sail on

BEYOND BEALE STREET

There's even more to see in Memphis



SUN STUDIO

The tiny studio founded by Sam Phillips in 1950 became the birthplace of rock 'n' roll when it recorded Elvis Presley, Jerry Lee Lewis and more.



STAX MUSEUM OF AMERICAN SOUL MUSIC

The story of Stax Records and its contribution to music features some of soul's biggest stars.



GRACELAND

Elvis Presley's extravagant estate, which includes a car museum, is one of the top visitor attractions in the country.



NATIONAL CIVIL RIGHTS MUSEUM

The moving story of the civil rights movement unfolds at the Lorraine Motel where Dr Martin Luther King Jr was assassinated.

MEMPHIS & MISSISSIPPI

LAND OF THE AMERICAN

Memphis & Mississippi are like nowhere else in the USA and are recognised worldwide as the **Land of the American Kings...**

Of musical kings such as BB King, the Blues legend; the king of country music, Jimmie Rodgers; the King of the blues, Robert Johnson; and the greatest king of them all, Elvis Presley, the "King of Rock'n'Roll".

Of literary kings such as William Faulkner, Tennessee Williams and John Grisham who made Memphis & Mississippi the backdrop for so many of their prize-winning works.

Of king cotton, the white gold of the South that brought great wealth, slavery, secession and civil war.

Of the mighty Mississippi, king of rivers, winding 2,320 miles through the heart of America.

Of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., the slain Civil Rights leader and activist who inspired millions to defy racism and segregation peacefully and non-violently to transform America.

For an American experience like no other, explore the Land of the American Kings...

visit Memphis & Mississippi!

Kings



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FROM LEFT The Memphis Music Hall of Fame;; Dockery Farms;



by. But this, BB King once declared, was the place where it all started.

In 1915, Dockery, which spanned 28,000 acres of alluvial forest, including a deep ravine crossed by a footbridge, was home to 4,000 workers. One of them was Charley Patton, the most important musician of the early Delta blues.

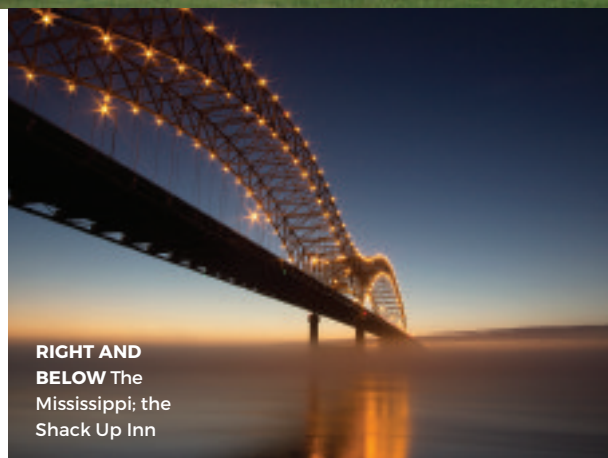
“So much of the blues was written here,” William Lester, director of the historic site, tells me. “Blues singers would come here to play, and they had a captive audience. The workers were paid in Dockery money, and 1,000 grown men would cross that bridge and pay their 25 cents to hear them. Nobody could go to the ‘frolicking house’ [a shack converted into an early live music venue] until they were 15. But hundreds of children would line that bridge and listen to the blues singers play.”

Lester pushes a red button and the gravelly blues of Charley Patton playing his metal guitar ring out over the plantation yard. As the sound travels across the ravine,

now overgrown with kudzu vines and woodland, the long-gone bridge seems to reappear and, for a moment, I’m transported back to the birthplace of the Delta blues.

Here in the heart of the Delta, I soak up the atmosphere of charming small towns such as Greenwood, Greenville and Cleveland, which is home to the stunning new Grammy Museum. The first of its kind outside of Los Angeles, it highlights the region’s songwriters and musicians, and has brilliant interactive exhibits. In Indianola, I follow the incredible life and career of one of the greatest bluesmen at the impressive BB King Museum.

From Memphis, you can follow the Blues Highway north all the way to Duluth, Minnesota, birthplace of Bob Dylan, who paid homage to it with his classic album Highway 61 Revisited. I keep heading south, following the road along the Mississippi River to its end. It brings me to another great music city, New Orleans. But that’s another song. 📍



RIGHT AND BELOW The Mississippi; the Shack Up Inn



Battered Suitcase offers a 14-day tour of America’s Deep South from £3,346 including flights (0800 689 1586, battered-suitcase.com). **Round The World Experts** offers several Deep South tours, among them the 15-day ‘Cajun Cowboys’, including flights, from £2,669 (0808 252 4735, roundtheworldexperts.co.uk). **Memphis** information: memphistravel.com.