

Chapter 15

The Natchez Trace: Natchez, MS, to Nashville, TN

In This Chapter

- ▶ Walking the original trace
- ▶ Sampling deep-fried dill pickles
- ▶ Tracking down Elvis
- ▶ Playing sports announcer

Consider leaving the clogged arteries of crowded interstates behind to enter a shaded, curved, rural highway that doesn't allow commercial traffic or speeding — 50 mph is the limit. Along the way, you find campgrounds, craft shops, picnic tables, and nature trails to explore, including a boardwalk through an eerie swamp with lime-green water and sunken trees.

In spring and summer, the route is green with thick, lush grass and plenty of hardwood trees, with occasional glimpses of small farms and villages through the foliage. The highway is easy and undulating but not wide. Most but not all overlook turnoffs, however, are spacious enough for large motorhomes or vehicles pulling trailers.

The Natchez Trace meanders nearly 500 miles from a point northeast of **Natchez, Mississippi**, to a point southwest of **Nashville, Tennessee**, passing the places where TV megastar Oprah Winfrey, rock idol Elvis Presley, and blues musician W.C. Handy were born, and where Meriwether Lewis of Lewis and Clark fame died under mysterious circumstances.

Following an 8,000-year-old Indian trail, the *trace* — an old-fashioned term for a path or roadway — was turned into a scenic highway drive in the 1930s. The route preserves some 300 segments of the old trace that was commissioned in 1806 by Thomas Jefferson. And don't worry about the speed limit — it's so peaceful and scenic along the way that you won't even be tempted to rev up the RV.

Getting There

Our Natchez Trace drive begins in **Natchez** and goes north to **Nashville**, but it's just as simple to begin in Nashville and drive south to Natchez. (For the route, see "The Natchez Trace" map in this chapter.) If you're driving from Nashville to Natchez and have extra time, check out the Gulf Coast drive between New Orleans and Tallahassee in Chapter 14.

The trace is unfinished at a couple of spots. It begins 8 miles northeast of Natchez, so you travel on U.S. 60 from Natchez to the marked beginning. Again near Jackson, you need to leave the parkway at the junction of I-20, follow I-20 to I-220 north, and then continue on I-55 to Exit 105, which reconnects you to the parkway.

Similar to the Skyline Drive and Blue Ridge Parkway drive described in Chapter 13, the Natchez Trace has well-marked entrances and exits that take you onto commercial highways and in and out of towns and villages. And the trace has numbered mileposts that double as addresses for sites along the route. The route begins at milepost 8 near Natchez, and finishes past milepost 440 near Nashville.

At the end of the parkway, you exit by a recently completed dramatic bridge past milepost 440 that swoops you down onto Route 100 about 10 miles west of Nashville. The total drive runs around **500 miles**.

Planning Ahead

Although the parkway is comfortable to drive year-round, the best times are in **early spring and fall** when the weather is mild, the flowers are in bloom, and the pilgrimage tours through antebellum homes are on the agenda. (See "More cool things to see and do," later in this chapter.) Winter usually is mild but can be rainy and sometimes chilly; summers are hot.

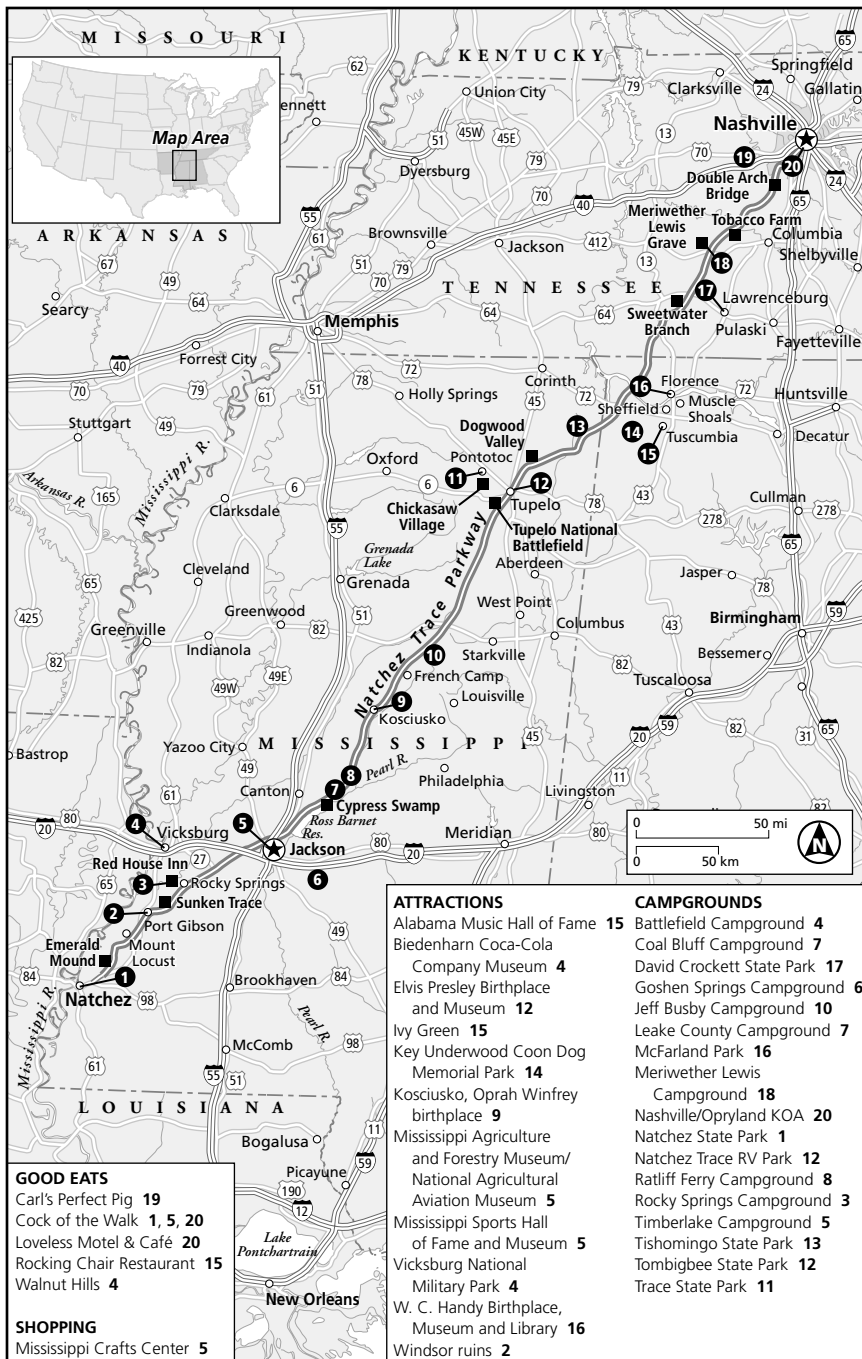
You don't need **campground reservations** for any of the places in this chapter except for Ratliff Ferry and the Ross Barnett Reservoir campgrounds in summer. You also need reservations for the Opryland KOA, Nashville, in June when Fan Fair, a gathering of country music fans from around the world, takes place. (See "Our favorite campgrounds" later in this chapter.)

Allow three to seven days for the drive.

Stocking the Pantry

You won't find food outlets, restaurants, or stores along the Natchez Trace, but this itinerary frequently detours off the trace through a

The Natchez Trace



number of towns and villages. The major southern supermarket chains include **Winn-Dixie**, **Kroger**, **Piggly Wiggly**, and **IGA**, the Independent Grocers Association.



Keep your eyes open as you pass through small towns in the South during spring, summer, and fall; vegetable and fruit growers often put out produce stands in their farmyards or even on their front lawns during harvest time. The prices always are very low.

Driving the Natchez Trace

The Natchez Trace Parkway, like the Blue Ridge Parkway and Skyline Drive described in Chapter 13, is a federally designated scenic drive along a two-lane highway with a **50 mph speed limit** where no commercial traffic is permitted. Frequent turnouts are indicated with half-mile warning signs shaped like **arrowheads** that tell you whether the spot ahead is of historic interest, a trailhead, or a segment of the original roadway.

Plan on spending a day or two exploring the Natchez area before you set out on the trace itself. Historic homes are open all year with hoop-skirted hostesses to show you around.

When you're ready to hit the road, drive northeast from Natchez on U.S. 60 about 8 miles to the designated entrance of the **Natchez Trace**. Just before the entrance to the parkway, stop at the Mississippi Welcome Center and pick up an official Natchez Trace map and guide, handy materials to keep with you. Almost immediately after entering the park, you come to the spot where a **section of the original trace** can be seen; look for the arrowhead-shaped sign. At mile 10.3 is **Emerald Mound**, the second largest Indian mound in the United States. The ancestors of the Natchez tribe built the mound around A.D. 1400. It covers some eight acres; you can walk to the top if you want.

At mile 15.5, you come to **Mount Locust**, a restored historical house that served as a "stand" or overnight stop for travelers along the trace. Jefferson had encouraged innkeepers to open these primitive lodging establishments to care for travelers; more than 20 were in operation by 1820, when the trace was at its peak.



Exit on U.S. 61 near mile 37 to drive a short loop detour into **Port Gibson**. General Ulysses S. Grant reportedly said this town was "too pretty to burn" and so Port Gibson survived the Civil War intact and was the first town in Mississippi to be designated a National Historic District. What strikes visitors initially today is the huge golden hand atop the 1859 First Presbyterian Church at Walnut and Church Streets, the index finger pointing heavenward. Southwest of town are the haunting **ruins of Windsor**, the largest antebellum house ever built in Mississippi, used in a memorable scene with Alec Baldwin in *Ghosts of Mississippi*. (See "More cool things to see and do.")

Jefferson's road: A 19th-century trade, mail, and military route

In 1806, Thomas Jefferson ordered a roadway “12 feet in width and passable for a wagon” to be built along the trade routes originally used by flatboat men returning upriver from delivering their furs, tobacco, pork, and farm products in Natchez and New Orleans.

Although traveling downriver was easy, the Kaintucks, as they were called, were unable to row or pole upstream against the current. After selling their goods, and maybe their rafts too, they had to walk or ride horseback to return home. The traders had little enough remaining from their profits after the gamblers, cutthroats, and prostitutes of Natchez-Under-the-Hill had finished with them, but the toughest part of the trip was yet to come — to protect themselves and their money from the highwaymen who lurked along the trace. Jefferson was thinking not only about the traders but also the postal service riders who would use the roadway to deliver mail and the military troops who might need the wide clear pathway for wagons and cannons.

Ladies and gentlemen of fashion, circuit-riding preachers, frontier prostitutes, pioneer families, medicine peddlers, and flatboat men — everybody used the Natchez Trace. A despondent Meriwether Lewis died mysteriously along the trail in 1809, and in 1815, a triumphant Major General Andrew Jackson, better known as “Old Hickory,” marched his Tennessee militia along the trace back from the Battle of New Orleans.

But in 1812, the first steamboat arrived in Natchez, and by 1820, the boats dominated the rivers. Eventually, except for a brief period during the Civil War, the little-used Natchez Trace reverted to woods again. Only in the 1930s, under the administration of Franklin D. Roosevelt, did restoration of the trace begin; today's road closely follows the contours of the original.

Back on the Natchez Trace at mile 41.5 is the **Sunken Trace** section, a five-minute walk along a deeply eroded section of the original trace. A designated parking turnout is nearby. In the right light, this is one of the spookiest parts of the trace.

At mile 54.8, you come to **Rocky Springs ghost town**, formerly a thriving metropolis with a population of 2,616. Take a short uphill trail from the upper parking area to the site of the notorious **Red House Inn**, where highwaymen sized up travelers and then robbed them later. The town fell into decline during the Civil War, when first the war, then the boll weevil, yellow fever, and soil erosion wiped it out. A campground without hookups (see “Runner-up campgrounds” later in this chapter for more on Rocky Springs Campground) and a foot trail are located along a section of the old road.

Around milepost 67 is the exit to **Vicksburg**, SR 27. You can also go to Vicksburg from Port Gibson at milepost 37, but you'd miss the points of interest on the parkway.



The Civil War seems to be the main preoccupation of Vicksburg, with the **Vicksburg National Military Park** on its northern boundary. Comparable to Gettysburg in scope, Vicksburg is known not only for its fine old houses but also for the bravery and endurance of its citizens during a 47-day siege in 1863, when General Grant's troops bombarded the city almost constantly. As if to add insult to injury, the Mississippi River itself abandoned Vicksburg in 1876, changing its route to cut across the neck of land that Grant had worked so hard to take. Years later, the waters of the Yazoo River were diverted into the Mississippi's old channel so Vicksburg could have its harbor back.

Vicksburg is famous for two beverages. It was the first city to bottle Coca-Cola; the **Biedenharn Coca-Cola Company Museum** displays replicas of the original bottling equipment and still sells 5¢ bottles of Coke. (See "More cool things to see and do.") And the mint julep was invented in Vicksburg.

A family-style restaurant in Vicksburg called **Walnut Hills** is the epitome of Southern home cooking with help-yourself bowls and platters filled with fried chicken, pork chops, a dozen vegetables, salads, corn muffins, biscuits, and iced tea. (See "Good eats.")

Back on the Natchez Trace, the drive is interrupted just past milepost 90 on the outskirts of **Jackson**. To return immediately to the trace, follow the parkway detour signage along I-20 to I-220, then to I-55, rejoining the trace at milepost 102.



If you have a few hours, however, spend some time in Jackson, the state capital. The expansive and excellent **Mississippi Agriculture and Forestry Museum** — much more interesting than it sounds for adults and children — features a 1920s town with costumed inhabitants and craftsmen (and hand-pumped gas for 15¢ a gallon), a crop-dusting museum, and an entire working farm that was moved here from southern Mississippi. (See "Must-see attractions.")



The **Mississippi Sports Hall of Fame and Museum** (see "Must-see attractions") also is in Jackson, sharing the same big parking lot. Here you can broadcast play-by-play action from a replica press booth that's stocked with videos of outstanding game highlights; walk through a museum salute to Dizzy Dean, Mississippi's own baseball great; stroll into a locker room housing uniforms and equipment used by sports heroes; and try your skills in golf, baseball, soccer, or football.

When you reenter the parkway at milepost 101.5, look for the sign for the **Mississippi Crafts Center**, a marvelous collection of hand-woven Choctaw baskets, pottery, weavings, jewelry, books, and carved wooden

toys, to mention only a few of the treasures. (See “Shopping along the Way,” later in this chapter.)

At 105.6, a road from a turnoff to the **Ross Barnett Reservoir** follows the Pearl River and parallels the parkway for 8 miles, accessing four campgrounds with hookups. (See “Runner-up campgrounds.”)

One of the prettiest spots along the route is a **tupelo and bald cypress swamp** at milepost 122 with board walkways leading across yellow-green, algae-covered water so smooth it looks like a chartreuse mirror that you could walk on. The nature trail takes about 20 minutes to walk: first across the swamp, then along the other side through the woods, and back across the swamp on a second walkway.

When you drive past **Kosciusko** (pronounced koz-e-esk-ko) at milepost 159.7, take a moment to remember that this is where TV diva **Oprah Winfrey** was born January 29, 1954. Liberty Presbyterian Church has a sign outside pointing out that “she said her first piece here,” in other words, made her first public appearance. (See “More cool things to see and do.”)

French Camp at milepost 180.7 comes to life every fall when its time to demonstrate the making of sorghum molasses from sugar cane. The parkway’s only bed and breakfast is here, along with a crafts shop, exhibits, and a lunch cafe.

One mile east of milepost 259.7 is **Tupelo National Battlefield**, site of a major Civil War battle in 1864. On this site, Union General A.J. Smith trapped Confederate General Nathan Bedford Forrest, famous for quick strikes and tough fights. General William Tecumseh Sherman ordered Smith to “follow Forrest to his death.”

Louisiana Purchase: The deal of the century

In the annals of real estate coups, few can match the 1803 Louisiana Purchase, ordered by Thomas Jefferson and negotiated by future president James Monroe. Three years earlier, Napoleon had traded with Spain, swapping the Italian kingdom of Parma, home of Parmesan cheese, for the territory of Louisiana — in those days it stretched from the west banks of Mississippi River westward to the Rocky Mountains and from Canada in the north to the Gulf of Mexico in the south.

Monroe paid Napoleon around \$15 million, or 4¢ an acre. Ironically, all Jefferson had wanted was to regain the port of New Orleans and the land along the Mississippi so Americans could continue to use the river for trade.

Turn off the Natchez Trace on SR 6 for the Tupelo Battlefield and for the **Elvis Presley Birthplace and Museum** in downtown **Tupelo**. The rock icon was born in a simple two-room house that his father built; sometimes a relative or friend of Elvis is on hand to share personal memories. (See “Must-see attractions.”) **Tombigbee State Park** with RV camping is just east of Tupelo. (See “Our favorite campgrounds.”)

Return to the parkway by the same route you took to go off into Tupelo, so you don’t miss any of the highlights.

A **Chickasaw village site** at mile 261.8 presents exhibits on Indian life, and a nature trail displays plants that were used in daily life for foods and medicine. The park headquarters at **Tupelo Visitor Center**, mile 266, also offers a 20-minute nature walk showing forest regrowth. At milepost 269.4, a short walk along the old trace leads to the graves of 13 unknown Confederate soldiers. A nature trail at 275.2 into **Dogwood Valley** takes about 15 minutes to explore a grove of dogwood trees.

Tishomingo State Park at milepost 302.8, shortly before the parkway crosses from Mississippi into Alabama, offers camping, swimming, canoeing, and picnicking. (See “Our favorite campgrounds.”) At milepost 310, the parkway crosses into **Alabama**.

Although the parkway traverses only a 38-mile corner of northwestern Alabama on its way north, this little stretch of land is full of fascinating discoveries. Just past milepost 320, turn east on U.S. 72 to **Tuscumbia**, which, with its nearby sister towns of **Sheffield**, **Muscle Shoals**, and **Florence**, offers a great place to eat down-home Southern cooking and four not-to-be-missed attractions.

Plan to spend a day in lively northwestern Alabama, where attractions include:

- ✔ **Ivy Green**, birthplace of **Helen Keller**, immortalized in the play and film *The Miracle Worker*. Here you find the world’s most famous backyard pump where she learned the word “Water!” (See “More cool things to see and do.”)
- ✔ **Alabama Music Hall of Fame**, a splendid museum saluting Alabamians from Jimmie Rodgers and Tammy Wynette to Nat King Cole and Jimmy Buffett. (See “Must-see attractions.”)
- ✔ **W.C. Handy Birthplace, Museum, and Library**, celebrating the blues composer and musician who wrote “St. Louis Blues,” “Memphis Blues,” and other classics. (See “More cool things to see and do.”)
- ✔ **Key Underwood Coon Dog Memorial Park**, the only cemetery in the world dedicated solely to coon hounds, dating from 1937. (See “More cool things to see and do.”)

- ✓ **Rocking Chair Restaurant** where staff serves meat specials, such as roast turkey, fried chicken, or pork roast, accompanied by your choice of any three vegetables from the lengthy menu, and hot biscuits and cornbread, all for around \$5 or \$6. (See “Good eats.”)

At milepost 341.8, the parkway crosses the border from Alabama into **Tennessee**. Another section of the sunken trace is open for walking at milepost 350.5, and a nature trail along **Sweetwater Branch** crosses a section of brilliant wildflowers in spring and early summer. The walk takes 20 minutes.

You find the **grave of Meriwether Lewis** of Lewis and Clark fame at milepost 385.9, along with a campground, picnic area, ranger station, restrooms, and a reconstruction of the log inn called Grinder’s Stand, where Lewis died. The famous explorer, only 35 years old, was on his way back to Washington, D.C., on government business when he died mysteriously here on the night of October 11, 1809, of gunshot wounds in an incident that history never has decided whether it was suicide or murder.

At milepost 401.4 is a **tobacco farm** with a barn and field on exhibit, and a 2-mile drive along the old trace.

The Natchez Trace ends with a dramatic soaring **double-arch bridge** at SR 100 some 10 miles southwest of **Nashville**.

Must-see attractions



Alabama Music Hall of Fame **Tuscumbia, Alabama**

From the first touring motorhome used by the band Alabama to artifacts from jazz innovator Sun Ra, this modern, interactive museum salutes the great musicians who were born in or lived in Alabama. The list includes Hank Williams, Nat King Cole, Jimmie Rodgers, Jimmy Buffett, Tammy Wynette, Emmylou Harris, Big Mama Willie Mae Thornton, Odetta, Martha Reeves, Bobby Goldsboro, Dinah Washington, Lionel Richie, Toni Tennille, and Wilson Pickett.

The museum was built here instead of in a major Alabama city because nearby Muscle Shoals in the 1960s and 1970s housed popular recording studios where Percy Sledge recorded the rhythm-and-blues classic “When A Man Loves A Woman,” Aretha Franklin cut early soul records, and a young Duane Allman was a studio guitarist. Listening on individual earphones, kids of all ages groove to original music tracks performed by artists spanning decades.

U.S. 72 West. ☎ 800-239-2643, 256-381-4417. www.alamhof.org. RV parking: Large parking lot. Admission: \$6 adults, \$5 seniors and students, \$3 ages 12 and younger. Open: Mon–Sat 9 a.m.–5 p.m., Sun 1–5 p.m. Closed major holidays. Allow 2–3 hours.

Elvis Presley Birthplace and Museum

Tupelo, Mississippi

This little two-room cottage was built by Elvis's father Vernon, who borrowed \$180 and had the house finished in time for the birth of Elvis Aron and his stillborn twin brother Jesse Garon. They were evicted two years later when they couldn't repay the loan. Besides the birthplace, you can see a small memorial chapel and pick up the map for a **local driving tour** that takes you past other Elvis shrines, such as the local Tupelo Hardware, where his mother bought him his first guitar for \$12.98. Some Tupelo relatives say Elvis really wanted a BB rifle instead.

306 Elvis Presley Dr. (Exit U.S. 78 at Elvis Presley Drive and follow the signs.) ☎ 662-841-1245. www.tupelo.net/welcome.html?main-elvis.html. RV parking: Small parking lot, adequate street parking. Admission: A combination house and museum ticket is \$7.50 adults, \$3.50 ages 17 and younger. Open: Mon–Sat 9 a.m.–5 p.m., Sun 1–5 p.m. Closed Thanksgiving and Christmas. Allow 1–2 hours.



Mississippi Agriculture and Forestry Museum

Jackson, Mississippi

Far more fun than it sounds, this sprawling complex includes a 1920s rural Mississippi town, complete with craftsmen and shopkeepers; a working farm (moved here in its entirety from southern Mississippi) that includes several Mississippi mules, a breed famous for its stubbornness. Kids enjoy wandering about the area and experiencing “the olden days” and then ending up at a general store that sells cold soft drinks and a staple of southern snack fare, the Moon Pie.

Inside the main building is a well-arranged historical museum, and around the complex in separate buildings are the Mississippi Crafts Guild display area and shop, the museum cafe, and the National Agricultural Aviation Museum and Hall of Fame, saluting crop-dusters. All these can be entered on the same ticket. The adjacent Mississippi Sports Hall of Fame and Museum (see next listing) requires a separate admission ticket.

1150 Lakeland Dr. (Take Exit 98B from I-55.) ☎ 800-844-8681, 601-713-3365. RV parking: Large parking lot. Admission: \$4 adults, \$3 seniors, \$2 ages 6–12, 50¢ ages 5 and younger. Open: Memorial Day to Labor Day Mon–Sat 9 a.m.–5 p.m., Sun 1–5 p.m.; rest of the year Mon–Sat 9 a.m.–5 p.m. Closed major holidays. Allow 3 hours.



Mississippi Sports Hall of Fame and Museum **Jackson, Mississippi**

This museum salutes sports heroes of Mississippi and automatically makes every fan, young and old, who enters a hero, too. With interactive machines, visitors can play golf, check the speed and impact of their baseball pitch, or take penalty kicks against a soccer goalie. A “press box” mockup lets wannabe sports announcers call the play-by-play for a game, and the locker room displays uniforms and equipment that famous players have used. A special second-floor museum salutes Mississippi baseball great **Dizzy Dean**, and touch-screen kiosks let visitors look up archival sports information and interviews.

1152 Lakeland Dr. (Take Exit 98B or 98C off I-55 to Cool Papa Bell Drive.) ☎ **800-280-FAME**, 601-982-8264. www.ms-fame.com. RV parking: Large parking lot adjacent. Admission: \$5 adults, \$3.50 seniors and children. Open: Mon–Sat 10 a.m.–4 p.m., Sun 1:30–4:30 p.m. Allow 3 hours.

Vicksburg National Military Park **Vicksburg, Mississippi**

The battlefield commemorates one of the most decisive battles of the Civil War. General Ulysses S. Grant and 50,000 men held the city under siege for 47 days. The national cemetery contains the graves of some 17,000 Union soldiers. A 16-mile auto tour around the park passes markers, monuments, and recreated breastworks. In the museum, you can see the gunboat *Cairo* pulled up from the Yazoo River 100 years after it sank in 1862.

3201 Clay St. ☎ **601-636-0583**. www.nps.gov/vick. RV parking: Visitor lot at center, turnouts along Park Road. Admission: \$5 per motor vehicle. Open: Park daily dawn to dusk, visitor center daily 8 a.m.–5 p.m.

More cool things to see and do

Culturally rich and sometimes quirky attractions line the Natchez Trace from antebellum ruins to a coon dog cemetery and the hometown of a well-known TV diva.



- ✓ **Swig down a cheap Coca-Cola.** You can see the original bottling machinery from the world’s first Coca-Cola bottling plant, used from 1894 to 1924 in Vicksburg at **Biedenharn Coca-Cola Company Museum** and buy a bottled Coke for a nickel.

1107 Washington St., Vicksburg, Mississippi. ☎ **601-638-6514**. RV parking: Street parking. Admission: \$2.25 adults, \$1.75 ages 6–12. Open: Mon–Sat 9 a.m.–5 p.m., Sun 1:30–4:30 p.m. Allow 1 hour.

- ✓ **Meet Helen Keller.** **Ivy Green**, the birthplace and childhood home of Helen Keller, a lecturer and essayist who lost her sight



and hearing in infancy, has been restored to the way it looked during her childhood. A production of *The Miracle Worker*, depicting how she overcame her handicaps, is presented here every summer. In the backyard is the famous water pump where the child first made the connection with language.

300 W. North Commons, Tuscumbia, Alabama. (From U.S. 72, follow Woodmount Drive to Commons.) ☎ **256-383-4066**. RV parking: Large parking lot and street parking. Admission: \$6 adults. Open: Daily 8:30 a.m.–4 p.m. Allow 2 hours.

- ✓ **Howl with the hounds. Key Underwood Coon Dog Memorial Park** is the only cemetery in the world dedicated to the raccoon-hunting hound. More than 160 champions are buried here, some with elaborately carved granite tombstones such as that of Doctor Doom, listing his awards. Others have simple wooden markers with handwritten sentiments like, “He wasn’t the best coon dog there ever was, but he was the best I ever had.”

From Tuscumbia, Alabama, take U.S. 72 west for 7 miles, then turn left on CR 247 for about 12 miles, and then turn right at sign and follow signs to park. Plenty of parking space, always open, no telephone. Admission: Free. For information, call Tuscumbia Tourism Bureau ☎ **800-344-0783** or 256-383-0783. Allow at least 30 minutes.

- ✓ **Tune into a TV diva.** The little town named **Kosciusko** (pronounced koz-e-esk-ko), named for a Polish general in the American Revolutionary war, was the birthplace and early childhood home of **Oprah Winfrey**, and a road named for her goes past her first church, her family cemetery, and the site of her birthplace.

Kosciusko Tourist Promotion Council, P.O. Box 696, Kosciusko, Mississippi. ☎ **601-289-2981**. www.kosciuskotourism.com. RV parking: Street parking. Admission: Free. Open: Roadway always open. Allow 1 hour.

- ✓ **Sing the blues and all that jazz.** Florence, Alabama, is home of the **W.C. Handy Birthplace, Museum and Library**. The blues genius, a trained musician with his own brass band, wrote a campaign song for Memphis political boss Edward R. Crump that introduced jazz breaks into a composed piece for the first time. Retitled “Memphis Blues,” it’s the first composition recognized as jazz.

620 W. College St., Florence, Alabama. (Downtown Florence just off U.S. 72.) ☎ **256-760-6434**. RV parking: Street parking. Admission: \$2 adults, 50¢ ages 17 and younger. Open: Tues–Sat 10 a.m.–4 p.m. Allow 2 hours.

- ✓ **Revisit *Gone with the Wind*.** The 23 Corinthian columns are all that’s left of a formerly grand Greek Revival mansion, now the **Windsor ruins**. The mansion still evokes the ghost of the antebellum South. It survived the Civil War but succumbed to a fire in 1890 caused by a cigarette, a newly fashionable way to use tobacco at that time.

Rodney Road, Port Gibson, Mississippi. (Take U.S. 61 south from Port Gibson, turn right on SR 552 and follow the signs.) RV parking: Plenty of open area at the site, but a short, narrow dirt road with bushes leads to it. Admission: Free. Open: Dawn to dusk. Allow 30 minutes; photographers may want more time.

Weekend wonder

The easiest way to make a shorter version of the Natchez Trace drive is simply to **drive the 444-mile trace**, overnighing at one of the campgrounds along the way, without turning off to see the attractions in Port Gibson, Vicksburg, Jackson, and Nashville, or the state of Alabama.

Sleeping and Eating on the Road

The Natchez Trace provides plentiful overnight camping all along the route, either directly on the parkway or a few miles off on a side road. Few public campgrounds accept reservations, so if you're making the trip during a busy season, such as spring, plan to stop earlier in the day than usual to be sure that you'll have an overnight spot, or reserve a day or two in advance at privately owned campgrounds near the parkway.

The same convenience isn't true for eating on the road, so you'll be happy to have a stocked refrigerator and operating kitchen. Even where a town is near the parkway, that doesn't mean any special eating treats await; some of the small communities in Mississippi, for instance, don't have even the most common fast-food places. A grocery store or small-town drugstore may be the only place to find something already prepared for lunch. To help you find tasty food to eat in or take out, we guide you to some simple, homey places in the "Good eats" section, later in this chapter.

All campgrounds listed below are open year-round and have public flush toilets, showers, and sanitary dump stations unless designated otherwise. Toll-free numbers, where listed, are for reservations only. The only campground with RV hookups is at Ratliff Ferry. See Chapter 9 for more information on how we select our favorite campgrounds.

Our favorite campgrounds

Battlefield Kampground

\$\$ Vicksburg, Mississippi

Located within walking distance of the Vicksburg National Military Park, this campground provides free narrated cassette tours of the park. Sites are fairly large, with concrete pads.

4407 I-20 N. Frontage Rd., Vicksburg, MS 39183 (From junction of I-20 and Clay St., Exit 4B, go north 0.5 mile to Frontage Road, then east 0.5 mile to the campground on the left.) ☎ **601-636-2025**. Total of 65 sites with water and 30-amp electric, 33 full hookups, 28 pull-throughs. CATV, dataport, laundry. Rates: \$15–\$19 per site. MC, V.

David Crockett State Park

\$\$ Lawrenceburg, Tennessee

Davy Crockett lived in this area, and his cabin and a museum are open free of charge in town. At the 987-acre park, you find a water-powered gristmill and an interpretive center that reveals Crockett's interest in water-powered machinery. Sites are paved but fairly narrow, and some hookups are side by side.

From junction of U.S. 45 and U.S. 64, go west 1.5 miles on 64 to the campground on the right. ☎ **931-762-9408**. Total of 107 sites with water and 30-amp electric, no full hookups, no pull-throughs. Handicap access, pool. Rates: \$17 per site. DISC, MC, V. No reservations.



Nashville/Opryland KOA

\$\$\$\$–\$\$\$\$\$ Nashville, Tennessee

We've been staying in this well-run, conveniently located park for years. A concierge arranges tickets and transportation for shows and events, and a coordinator offers daily tours — you won't miss a thing. Another bonus is free, live entertainment in the park's own theater from May to October. A branch of Cock of the Walk catfish restaurant is next door, and within walking distance are additional eateries, the Opryland Hotel, and other Opryland area attractions. Playgrounds, pool, and entertainment give kids plenty to do.

2626 Music Valley Dr., Nashville, TN 37214. (From junction of I-65 and Briley Parkway, take Exit 90B southbound or Exit 90 northbound, go south 4.5 miles on Briley to McGavock Park, then west 0.2 mile to Music Valley Drive and north 2 miles to campground on the left.) ☎ **800-562-7789**, 615-889-0286. www.koa.com. Total of 402 sites with water and 30- and 50-amp electric, 291 full hookups, 125 pull-throughs. Dataport, handicap access, laundry, pool. Rates: \$35–\$42 per site. AE, DISC, MC, V.

Tishomingo State Park

\$\$ Tishomingo, Mississippi

The CCC (Civilian Conservation Corps) built this park in the 1930s, using rock quarried on-site. Over Bear Creek, note the swinging bridge, which dates from those days. Sites are paved and mostly shaded. Haynes Lake provides freshwater fishing and boating; ramp, dock, and boat rentals are available. A fishing license is required; the state tourism board can tell you how to get one. (See "Fast Facts" at the end of this chapter for the board's contact info.)

From junction of Natchez Trace Parkway and SR 25, go north 0.5 mile on 25 to park road (CR 90) then east 1.6 miles to campground. ☎ **662-438-6914**. Total of 62 sites with water and 30- and 50-amp electric, no full hookups, no pull-throughs. Rates: \$13 per site. MC, V. 14-day maximum stay.

Tombigbee State Park

\$\$ Tupelo, Mississippi

At this state park, you're near the Elvis birthplace and the famous battlefield if you want to go sightseeing. The campground provides medium-size paved sites with patios, some with shade, and freshwater fishing, boating, ramp, dock, and boat rentals on Lake Lee.

From Natchez Trace, take SR 6 to Veterans Boulevard, then drive southeast 3.3 miles to park access road, and follow signs east 2.8 miles to campground on the right. ☎ **662-842-7669**. Total of 20 sites with water and 20- and 30-amp electric, 6 full hookups, no pull-throughs. Rates: \$14 per site. MC, V.



Trace State Park

\$\$ Pontotoc, Mississippi

Large sites, most of them shaded and paved, are conveniently near Tupelo and the Natchez Trace. Freshwater fishing, boating, boat ramp, dock, and boat rentals are available for would-be sailors. Elvis fans can drive into Tupelo instead and look at The Birthplace.

From the Natchez Trace, take SR 6 west of Tupelo, drive 7.8 miles southwest to Faulkner Road, then northwest 2.1 miles to campground on the left. ☎ **662-489-2958**. Total of 52 sites with water and 30- and 50-amp electric, no full hookups, 3 pull-throughs. Rates \$13 per site. MC, V.

Runner-up campgrounds



McFarland Park

\$ Florence, Alabama A public park with large sites and paved patios on the Tennessee River, McFarland provides freshwater fishing, boating, boat ramp, and dock. The area is subject to flooding in heavy rains, so check before arriving if they've had recent rainstorms. From junction of U.S. 43 and SR 20, go west 0.2 mile on SR 20 to the campground on the left. ☎ **256-740-8817**. Total of 38 paved sites with water and 30-amp electric, no full hookups, 12 pull-throughs. Rates \$1–\$6 per site. MC, V.

Natchez State Park

\$\$ Natchez, Mississippi Reservations are suggested in summer for this park with its popular, stocked fishing lake. A fishing license is required. (See "Fast Facts" for the number of the state tourism board, which can tell you how to get this license.) Paved RV sites with patios

are fairly wide, many of them shaded. *From north junction of U.S. 61/U.S. 98, and U.S.84, go north 5.1 miles on 61 to Stanton Road, and then east 0.3 mile to Wickliff and 0.3 mile to campground on the left.* ☎ **601-442-2658**. Total of 50 sites with water and 30- and 50-amp electric, 6 full hookups, 2 pull-throughs. Rates: \$13 per site. MC, V.

Natchez Trace RV Park

\$\$ Tupelo, Mississippi This Good Sam Park can handle big rigs, and sites throughout are comfortably wide. Amenities include a pond with freshwater fishing and tackle for rent. 189 CR 506, Shannon, MS 38868. (From junction Natchez Trace Parkway and SR 6, go southwest 8.5 miles on the Parkway to CR 506 between mileposts 251 and 252, then east 400 feet to the campground on the right.) ☎ **662-767-8609**. Total of 22 sites with water and 30- and 50-amp electric, 10 full hookups, 15 pull-throughs. Dataport, laundry. Rates: \$20 per site. No credit cards.



Natchez Trace Parkway National Park Campgrounds: Jeff Busby, Meriwether Lewis, and Rocky Springs

\$ Along the Natchez Trace These national park campgrounds are free, operate on a first-come, first-served basis, and have a 15-day maximum stay. None have hookups, and sites are mostly shaded. Flush toilets are available but not showers. *To get to each location, follow signs from the milepost. For information on all three, call* ☎ **800-305-7417** *or go online to* www.nps.gov/natr. **Jeff Busby Campground**, milepost 183.1; total of 18 sites, all pull-throughs, all paved. **Meriwether Lewis Campground**, milepost 385.9; total of 32 sites, some pull-throughs. **Rocky Springs Campground**, milepost 54.8; total of 22 sites, 12 pull-throughs.

Ratliff Ferry Campground

\$\$ Ratliff Ferry, Mississippi This is the only campground right on the parkway with hookups, but don't expect anything fancy. Besides freshwater fishing and boating, you find only the basics — a grassy spot to back into, an outlet for your electrical connections, and a hookup for your water hose. Your neighbor will be very nearby. *From the junction of Natchez Trace Parkway and Ratliff Ferry Road. (Exit milepost 123.5; go southeast 0.5 mile on Ratliff to the campground.)* ☎ **601-859-1810**. Total of 16 sites with water and 30-amp electric, no full hookups, 7 pull-throughs. Dataport. Rates: \$15 per site. AE, DISC, MC, V.

Ross Barnett Reservoir: Coal Bluff, Goshen Springs, Leake County, Timberlake

\$\$ Greater Jackson, Mississippi The Ross Barnett Reservoir has four campgrounds around its perimeter; we suggest making reservations for weekends. All offer hookups, all are back-ins with no pull throughs, and all provide access to freshwater fishing. Rates are \$20 per site. MC, V. **Coal Bluff**, Ludlow, Mississippi (take Coal Bluff Road north off SR 25 for 10.3 miles, then turn west on Riverbend Road for 1.5 miles; ☎ **601-654-7726**), total of 39 sites with

water and 30- and 50-amp electric, 11 with full hookups, no pull throughs. **Goshen Springs**, Brandon, Mississippi (take Natchez Trace exit SR 43, 3 miles to campground; ☎ **601-829-2751**), total of 33 full hookups with 30- and 50-amp electric, no pull throughs; laundry. **Leake County**, Ludlow, Mississippi (from SR 25, take Utah Road exit to campground; ☎ **601-654-9359**), total of 28 full hookups with 30- and 50-amp electric, no pull throughs. **Timberlake**, Jackson, Mississippi (from junction of I-55 and Lakeland Drive [also SR 25], go east on Lakeland to Old Fanin Road, and then north 3.7 miles to the campground on the left; ☎ **601-992-9100**), total of 108 sites with 30- and 50-amp electric, all full hookups, no pull-throughs; dataport, laundry.

Good eats

You find plenty of vegetables in this part of the world, but don't expect them to be cooked *al dente*. Southern vegetables are cooked until very well done as a rule and made tastier by the addition of outside seasonings, often butter, bacon fat, pot juices, even sugar. You mustn't expect to find fresh herbs and olive oil or a judicious sprinkle of balsamic vinegar, but if you're willing to be open-minded, you may find some unfamiliar side dishes that please you. Take a chance and order fried green tomatoes, corn pudding, collard or turnip greens, yams, hominy, black-eyed peas or field peas, okra, squash, lima beans, or green beans, often called snap beans, cooked in water with a little chopped bacon or bacon fat until tender and succulent.



You can always find a wedge of lemon to squeeze over everything because lemon is an essential accessory in this land of iced tea. By the way, iced tea usually comes sweetened here; if you don't want sugar, ask for unsweetened tea. When ordering tea at breakfast, be sure to specify *hot* tea, or you'll get iced tea. Don't ask for a "soda"; carbonated drinks are called "pop" or "soda pop" in the South.

Hot breads, usually biscuits and/or cornbread, are the general rule as well. By the way, unlike the cornbread and corn muffins in other parts of the United States, southern cornbread rarely has sugar added. You won't find hot breads at barbecue joints; there, multiple slices of soft white bread straight from the grocery-store package come as a side dish.



Servings are large in this part of the country; we find that one takeout meal often is enough for both of us. If it seems skimpy when we open the Styrofoam box, we add a homemade green salad or a dessert.

The following restaurants and food suppliers are some of our own favorites for regional cooking at moderate prices. Many may require cash rather than credit cards. Most don't serve beer or wine with meals; even when dining out in fancy restaurants, many Southerners drink iced tea, colas, hot coffee, or even a cocktail with their meals. For information on buying the basics, see "Stocking the Pantry," earlier in this chapter.

Southern cooking, state by state

In northwestern **Alabama**, breakfasts can be feasts with grits, ham, biscuits, sausage, eggs, and gravy. Fried chicken stars at lunch and dinner (the former sometimes called “dinner” and the latter “supper” in the rural South), and you may run across dessert curiosities, such as Coca-Cola cake and mile-high meringue pies.

Mississippi cuisine is high on fried catfish — hardly unusual because the state turns out 70% of all the catfish farmed in the United States. In fact, the catfish capital of the world is **Belzoni**, a few miles west of the Natchez Trace. Fried fish of all sorts usually are served with hush puppies, which are deep-fried balls of cornbread seasoned with onions, and hot tamales. The hot tamales are a mystery; nobody is sure where they originated, but most Mississippi restaurants, especially in the delta, serve them as appetizers or side dishes. Rolled in parchment paper rather than cornhusks and ordered by the half-dozen or dozen, Mississippi hot tamales are smaller and spicier than the Mexican version.

Down-home **Tennessee** restaurants around Nashville serve what they call meat-and-three, meaning your choice of a main dish of meat and three side vegetables. Country ham on a southern menu, especially in Tennessee, describes a smoked or dry-cured ham that spends weeks in a bed of salt and turns out as a salty, densely textured, and intensely flavored meat that can be sliced and fried for breakfast or boiled whole and then baked and served cold in paper-thin slices. And don’t miss Nashville’s famous **Goo Goo Cluster** candy bars with peanuts, chocolate, marshmallow, and caramel.



- ✓ **Carl’s Perfect Pig:** U.S. 70, White Bluff, Tennessee (☎ 615-797-4020). A pretty, pink barbecue joint by the side of the road serves pulled or chopped sandwiches from pork shoulders that have been slow-cooked on a bed of hickory coals for 24 hours and then steeped in a vinegar sauce overnight. Open Wednesday and Thursday 10:30 a.m. to 5:45 p.m., Friday and Saturday until 7 p.m., Sunday until 2:30 p.m.
- ✓ **Cock of the Walk:** 2624 Music Valley Dr., Nashville, Tennessee. (☎ 615-889-1930). An easy stroll from the Opryland KOA campground, this popular and casual eatery provides sit-down and takeout service, and the latter, with its own order window, is much quicker. The fried catfish is delectable, and so are the fried shrimp and a sampler dinner that adds fried chicken. Side dishes include fried dill pickles (don’t laugh till you taste them), fried onions, and a cooking pot of beans or greens. Cocktails, beer, and wine also are served. Two locations are in Mississippi: 200 N. Broadway, Natchez

(☎ 601-446-8920), and Madison Landing, Ridgeland (☎ 601-856-5500). All locations are open Monday through Thursday from 5 a.m. to 9 p.m., Friday and Saturday from 5 a.m. to 10 p.m., and Sunday from 11 a.m. to 9 p.m.

- ✓ **Loveless Motel & Cafe:** 8400 SR 100, Nashville, Tennessee, about 10 miles southwest of town (☎ 615-646-9700). A motel by the side of the road with a neon sign that says “Loveless” in pink and green serves the world’s best breakfasts — country ham, grits, gravy, eggs, homemade biscuits, and homemade jams and jellies. Lunches and dinners are great, too, with meals built around country ham or fried chicken. (Get one of each and trade tastes.) The same generous servings of hot biscuits, butter, and homemade jams come with every meal, and they sell jars of the jam to go. Open Sunday through Thursday from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m., and Friday and Saturday until 9 p.m.



- ✓ **Rocking Chair Restaurant:** U.S. 72 West, Tuscumbia, Alabama (☎ 256-381-6105). The Sunday lunch turkey special here came with mashed potatoes and green beans, while a four-vegetable plate came crowded with black-eyed peas, candied yams, white beans with ham, fried okra, and hot biscuits and cornbread. The whole thing cost around \$10. Open Monday through Thursday from 10:30 a.m. to 9 p.m., and Friday through Sunday from 7 a.m. to 9 p.m.
- ✓ **Walnut Hills:** 1214 Adams St., Vicksburg, Mississippi (☎ 601-638-4910). We covered this restaurant for *Bon Appetit* magazine and will never forget the help-yourself bowls and platters heaped with southern fried chicken, ribs, smothered pork chops, stuffed peppers with Creole sauce, rice and gravy, green beans with potatoes, lima beans, fresh-field peas, yellow squash with onions, glazed carrots, coleslaw, corn muffins, iced tea, and blueberry cobbler. The cooks were amused when we asked for such “everyday” recipes. Open Sunday through Friday from 11 a.m. to 8:30 p.m.

Shopping along the Way

Mississippi Crafts Center, 1150 Lakeland Dr., Natchez Trace Parkway, Jackson, Mississippi (☎ 601-981-0019; www.ms craftsmensguild.org), sells handicrafts created by local artists and craftsmen, including weavers from the local Choctaw and Chickasaw people. Items are attractively arranged in this little unpainted mountain cottage. Standouts include quilt-work handbags, pottery, Choctaw baskets, and books about the region. Prices range from affordable to expensive. The center is open Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.

Fast Facts

Area Code

The following area codes are in effect along the Natchez Trace: in Alabama, **251**; in Tennessee, **931**, **615**, and **256**; in Mississippi, **601** and **662**.

Emergency

Call ☎ **911**. Mobile phone users can touch ***847** in Tennessee.

Hospitals

Major hospitals along the route are in Vicksburg and Jackson, Mississippi, and Nashville, Tennessee.

Information

Helpful sources in the individual states include: Alabama Bureau of Tourism & Travel (☎ 800-ALABAMA (800-252-2262); www.touralabama.org); Mississippi Division of Tourism (☎ 800-WARMEST (800-927-6378); www.visitmississippi.org); and in Tennessee, the Department of Tourist Development (☎ 615-741-8299; www.state.tn.us).

For information on fishing licences in Mississippi, call ☎ 800-5GO-HUNT (800-546-4868) or 601-362-9212.

Laws

In Alabama, Mississippi, and Tennessee, riders in the front seats must wear seat belts. The maximum speed limit on interstate highways in Alabama, Mississippi, and Tennessee is 70 mph. Speed limits in urban areas are lower.

Road and Weather Conditions

Contact numbers include ☎ 334-242-4128 in Alabama; ☎ 601-987-1211 for the Highway Patrol in Mississippi; and ☎ 800-858-6349 for road construction and ☎ 800-342-3258 for weather conditions in Tennessee.

Taxes

Alabama state sales tax is 4%; local taxes can raise it to 7.45%. Mississippi state sales tax is 7%. Tennessee state sales tax is 6%; local taxes can raise rates to 8.35%.

State gasoline taxes are as follows: Alabama, 18¢/gallon; Mississippi, 18¢/gallon; and Tennessee, 20¢/gallon.

Time Zone

Alabama, Mississippi, and western Tennessee are on central standard time.