

Memphis Tennessee :: Food, Fun & Nightlife

The cotton-trading capital of the Delta, MEMPHIS , perched above the Mississippi two hundred miles west of Nashville and three hundred south of St Louis, is one of the great destinations of the South. Visitors come from all over the world to celebrate the city that virtually invented blues, soul and rock 'n' roll, as well as to chow down in the unrivaled barbecue capital of the nation.

A visit to Memphis, the home of the Sun and Stax record labels, with its frequent festivals and vigorous nightlife, feels like an invitation to share in a genuine and enduring local culture. Culturally and geographically, Memphis has more in common with the deltalands of Mississippi and Arkansas than with the rest of Tennessee.

Founded in 1819 and named for Egypt's ancient Nile capital, its fortunes rose and fell with cotton . The Confederate defeat that ended the war briefly plunged it into economic chaos, and severe yellow fever epidemics didn't help, but thanks to its potential for river and rail transportation Memphis soon bounced back. The nation's second largest inland port became a major stopping-off point for migrants escaping the poverty of the Delta, and many stayed, significantly shaping the city's identity. For a couple of decades after the 1968 assassination of Dr Martin Luther King Jr, Memphis tottered on the brink of decline.

In the past decade, however, the city has regenerated itself yet again, its new self-confidence typified by the extraordinary 321ft stainless steel Pyramid that now dominates the riverfront skyline. The famous blues corridor of Beale Street is booming once more, perhaps a little ersatz but always entertaining, while Elvis Presley's Graceland a refreshing change from the usual "gracious southern home" provides an intimate and exuberant glimpse of Memphis's most famous son.

Downtown Memphis has in the last few years started to come back to life, at the cost of losing some of its old cotton-era buildings. The central streets parallel to the river are steadily acquiring new hotels, restaurants and stores. Beale Street on downtown's southern fringes is the liveliest area to stroll around, with Sun Studio nearby and the Civil Rights Museum just south. The huge Mud Island on the river itself merits half a day, while Graceland, ten miles out, should on no account be missed.

Arrival Memphis International Airport is ten miles south of downtown - a long and complicated bus trip, but just fifteen minutes by the Yellow Cabs limo/van service (\$10; tel 901/577-7777) or taxi (\$20-25). Greyhound buses stop at 203 Union Ave in downtown, while the Amtrak station at 545 S Main St is in a particularly seedy and unsafe area on the southern edge of downtown.

Slow and infrequent Memphis Area Transit Authority buses cover nearly all the city (tel 901/274-6282); more useful is the downtown trolley service (tel 901/274-6282) that runs along the Main Street Mall from the Pyramid to Beale Street and the Civil Rights Museum, until 6pm on Sundays and after midnight on all other days (60¢ flat fare; day pass \$2.50).

Carriage tours at \$30 per half-hour or \$50 per hour (for 2 people) start from the Peabody and Crowne Plaza hotels, among others (Mon-Fri 5pm-1am, Sat & Sun 1pm-1am; tel 901/834-9945).

American Dream Safari (tel 901/527-8870) offers driving tours in a 1955 Cadillac that range from a gospel service at Al Green's church (\$60 including lunch) up to week-long blues pilgrimages into the Delta.

Sternwheelers offer ninety-minute sightseeing trips of the mighty Mississippi for \$12.50, leaving Riverside Drive at Monroe Avenue (March-Nov daily 2.30pm & 5.30pm as well as dinner cruises in season; tel 901/527-5694).

The spacious and modern Tennessee Welcome Center by the Pyramid, complete with nine-foot bronze Elvis, facing Mud Island at river level at 119 N Riverside Drive and Adams Avenue is open 24 hours a day every day. For advance information on the city call 901/543-5333 or visit .

The post office is at 555 S Third St at Calhoun Avenue (Mon-Fri 8.30am-5.30pm, Sat 10am-2pm; tel 901/521-2245; zip code 38101).

Eating Memphians are fond of their food, proclaiming their city to be the pork barbecue capital of the world, with over one hundred specialty restaurants. There's also a good selection of reasonably priced soul-food cafés, and a couple of cool nouvelle Southern places. Downtown has a good selection (including some lively cafés on Beale Street); for a bit of variety, try Overton Square or Cooper-Young midtown.

Arcade 540 S Main St tel 901/526-5757. Over eighty years old, this unassuming landmark (featured in Jim Jarmusch's movie *Mystery Train*) serves up no-frills southern lunches, dinners and big breakfasts.

Automatic Slim's Tonga Club 83 S 2nd St tel 901/525-7948. Trendy Southwestern/Carribean restaurant and nightspot, complete with tumbleweed and excellent if pricey food.

Blues City Café 138 Beale St tel 901/526-3637. City branch of Mississippi soul-food specialist Doe's Eat Place , open daily 11am-4am. Join musicians from nearby clubs for tasty tamales, catfish and stew.

Buntyn 4972 Park Ave tel 901/458-8776. Hugely atmospheric old-style diner, southeast of downtown, specializing in Southern fried chicken and an irresistible array of vegetables. Daily 11am-8pm.

Café Francisco 400 N Main St tel 901/578-80020. Deli-style café, with internet access, just a block from the Pyramid. Open till 10pm Mon-Sat, to 6pm on Sun.

Café Ole 959 S Cooper Ave tel 901/274-1504. Very popular Mexican restaurant in Cooper-Young with good fajitas and vegetarian specialties such as spinach and mushroom quesadillas.

Cielo 679 Adams tel 901/524-1886. Popular, though fairly pricey (\$20+) restaurant in the Victorian Village district, serving cuisines from around the world - everything from seared foie gras to spinach-shiitake dumplings.

Interstate Bar-B-Que 2265 S 3rd St tel 901/775-2304. Legendary barbecue restaurant, south of downtown on the way to the Delta, and open daily for lunch and dinner.

Java Cabana 2170 Young Ave tel 901/272-7210. The place in Memphis to drink coffee, featuring poetry readings and

live music. Closed Mon.

Little Tea Shop 69 Monroe Ave tel 901/525-6000. Unusual downtown soul-food café, serving a health-conscious version of what is traditionally a very fatty cuisine. Mon-Fri 11.15am-2.15pm; lunches cost around \$5.

The North End 346 N Main St tel 901/526-0319. Friendly bar-cum-restaurant in the Pinch District opposite the Pyramid, specializing in wild-rice dishes, stir-fries and a killer hot fudge pie. Open until 3am.

Otherlands 641 S Cooper Ave tel 901/278-4994. Funky midtown coffee bar with its own giftshop, colorful "naïve" art works, great lattes, bagels and cakes, and a laid-back crowd. Daily 7am-8pm.

The Rendezvous General Washburn Alley, 52 S 2nd St tel 901/523-2746. Downtown Memphis's top-rated pork barbecue joint, with huge helpings and a nice atmosphere. Open Tues-Sat.

Sleep Out Louie's 88 Union Ave tel 901/527-5337. Trendy oyster bar and grill that's a popular post-theater meeting place.

Tsunami 928 S Cooper Ave tel 901/274-2556. Seafood restaurant in the Cooper-Young district with delicious pan-Asian dishes on the menu.

Nightlife and Entertainment Though live music is at its best in Memphis during the city's many festivals , such as the month-long Memphis in May (which also features the Barbecue Cookout Competition) and October's Blues Memphis Week , the blues and soul clubs of Beale Street have plenty to offer fans all year round. The best sources of listings are the free weekly Memphis Flyer, Friday's Memphis Commercial Appeal Playbook, and the community radio station (90FM).

B.B. King's Blues Club 143 Beale St tel 901/524-5464. Despite accusations from purists of having "sold out," this is justifiably Beale's most popular club. Spacious and atmospheric, with barbecue ribs, catfish and beer, and nightly blues enjoyed by a wildly enthusiastic crowd who make good use of the dance floor. B.B. himself makes an appearance or two per year.

Blues City Café 138 Beale St tel 901/526-3637. This club stays active well after the others and while the band is beating away there's a choice of well-priced ribs, catfish, tamales and gumbo to chew on.

Elvis Presley's - Memphis 126 Beale St tel 1-800/238-2000. Lansky's, the tailors where Elvis bought his sharpest suits, has been transformed into a restaurant and bar with a heavily Elvis-themed menu and the financial clout to put on some of Memphis's best bands.

Flying Saucer Draught Emporium 130 Peabody Place tel 901/523-8676. Appealingly laid-back beerhall, just north of Beale St, aimed at the grungy college crowd.

Huey's Midtown 1927 Madison Ave tel 901/726-4372. Popular Overton Square restaurant, famed for its great burgers, with live jazz on Sun afternoon, followed by an out-of-town blues band in the evening. There's also a downtown branch of this popular local chain at 77 S 2nd St tel 901/527-2700.

Kudzu's 603 Monroe Ave tel 901/525-4924. Great downtown bar with pool table and live weekend blues.

Rum Boogie Café 182 Beale St tel 901/528-0150. Usually one of Beale's most crowded venues, with resident blues bands every night 9pm-1.30am, plus Cajun cooking and ribs; \$4 cover.

W.C. Handy Performing Arts Park Third Ave and Rufus Thomas Blvd tel 901/526-0110. An outdoor amphitheater featuring live music - most nights for free.

Wild Bill's 1580 Vollintine Ave tel 901/726-5473. North Memphis jook-joint with live music Fri-Sun.

Willie Mitchell's Rhythm and Blues Club 326 Beale St tel 901/523-7444. One of Beale's smaller and less fancy clubs, owned by the daughters of legendary soul producer/songwriter Mitchell, and putting on consistently classy blues and R&B acts. Talent search Wed nights.

Since the start of the twentieth century, Memphis has been a meeting place for black musicians from the Mississippi Delta and beyond. During the Twenties, its downtown pubs, clubs and street corners were alive with the sound of the blues. Jug bands, in which singers were given a bass accompaniment by a musician blowing across the neck of a jug, were a specialty. Several songs by Gus Cannon's Jug Stompers - such as Walk Right In - became hits for white artists during the folk revival of the Sixties. Bukka White, Memphis Slim and guitarist Memphis Minnie appeared at nightspots like Mitchell's Hotel and Pee Wee's Saloon, all long since defunct.

After World War II, young musicians and radio DJs experimented by blending the traditional blues sound with jazz, adding electrical amplification to create rhythm'n'blues. Pioneers included Bobby Bland and B.B. King. White promoter Sam Phillips started Sun Records in 1953, employing Ike Turner as a scout to comb the Beale Street clubs for new talent. Among those whom Turner helped introduce to vinyl were his own girlfriend, Annie Mae Bullock (later Tina Turner), Howlin' Wolf and Little Junior Parker, whose Mystery Train was Sun's first great recording. Phillips' conviction that "If I could find a white man who had the Negro sound and the Negro feel, I could make a billion dollars" was realized in 1954, during a coffee break, when he overheard a young white man who had hired the studio to record a disc for his mother - Elvis Presley.

Phillips dropped his black artists right away, signing other white rockabilly singers like Carl Perkins and Jerry Lee Lewis to make classics such as Blue Suede Shoes and Great Balls of Fire. Elvis - who in the words of Carl Perkins had the advantage that he "didn't look like Mr Ed, like a lot of the rest of us" - was soon sold on to RCA (for just \$35,000), and didn't record in Memphis again until 1969, when, with songs like Suspicious Minds, he produced the best material of his later career.

In the Sixties and early Seventies, Memphis's Stax Records provided a rootsy alternative to the poppier sounds of Motown. This hard-edged southern soul was created by a multiracial mix of musicians, Steve Cropper's fluid guitar complementing the blaring Memphis Horns. The label's first real success was Green Onions by studio band Booker T and the MGs; further hits followed from Otis Redding (Try A Little Tenderness), Wilson Pickett (Midnight Hour), Sam and Dave (Soul Man) and Isaac Hayes (Shaft). The label eventually foundered in acrimony; the last straw for many of its veteran soulmen was the signing of the British child star Lena Zavaroni for a six-figure sum.

Memphis has been renowned for its gospel music since the Thirties, when Rev Herbert Brewster wrote Mahalia Jackson's 'Move On Up a Little Higher. Following a religious revelation, the consummate soul stylist Al Green, who achieved chart success for Hi Records with 'Let's Stay Together' and 'Tired of Being Alone', is now minister at the Full Gospel Tabernacle, at 787 Hale Rd in the leafy suburb of Whitehaven. Visitors are welcome at the 11am Sunday services, complete with four-piece rhythm section; continue a mile south of Graceland, then turn west (phone ahead to check he's in town; tel 901/396-9192).

MIDTOWN AND EAST MEMPHIS

The mile-long, heavily wooded expanse of Overton Park, three miles from downtown (#50 bus) on Poplar Avenue, holds the wide-ranging Memphis Brooks Museum of Art (Tues-Fri 10am-4pm, first Wed of each month free 10am-9pm, Sat 10am-5pm, Sun 11.30am-5pm; \$5;), and the recently modernized Memphis Zoo and Aquarium (daily 9am-6pm, last visitors allowed to enter 5pm; \$9.50).

Overton Square, the city's top suburban entertainment, dining and shopping district, is within walking distance. Just past East Parkway, the Memphis Pink Palace Museum and Planetarium at 3050 Central Ave (Mon-Thurs 9am-4pm, Fri-Sat 9am-9pm, Sun noon-6pm; \$7) centers on the pink marble mansion of Clarence Saunders, who founded America's first chain of self-service supermarkets, Piggly-Wiggly, in 1916. Saunders went bankrupt in 1923, and never actually lived here; instead the building has acquired several new wings in the process of becoming an all-embracing museum of Memphis history, holding all kinds of stuffed animals and oddities, including a miniature circus, an IMAX cinema and the Sharpe Planetarium, as well as a walk-through model of the first Piggly-Wiggly store, complete with 2¢ packets of Kellogg's Cornflakes and 8¢ cans of Campbell's Soup.

South of Overton Square, the tiny, hip Cooper-Young intersection is as yet little more than a handful of shops: vintage stores where the city's punks and hippies burrow through secondhand psychedelic Crimplene, and richer arty types muse over retro knickknacks. It's a lively place, quite different from downtown, where you're likely to stumble across poetry readings and yard sales, art exhibits and antique auctions.