

AUSTRALIA/NZ REPORT

END OF YEAR 24/25

TRAVEL
SOUTH
USA



Prepared By:

GATE 7

1/3 Harbourview Crescent,
Abbotsford NSW 2046

P+61 2 9356 2945

W gate7.com.au

Jo Palmer, *Managing Director*
jo@gate7.com.au

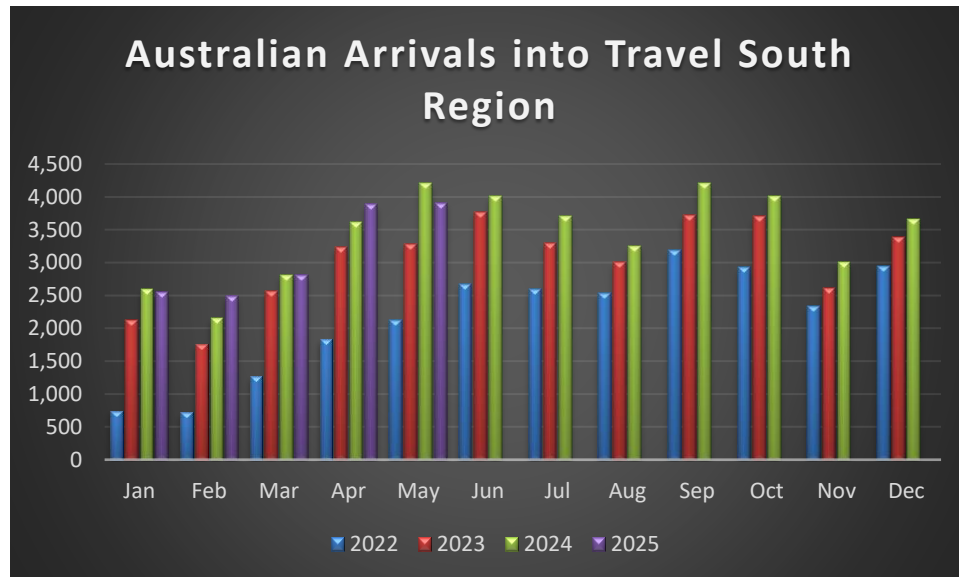
Penny Brand *Director of Tourism Development*
Penny@gate7.com.au

Jacob Annesley *Director of Public Relations*
Jacob@gate7.com.au

I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

2024 saw Travel South USA maintain strong arrivals from Australia into the region with 41,219 Australians listing one of the Travel South states as their point of arrival, a 13% increase from 2023.

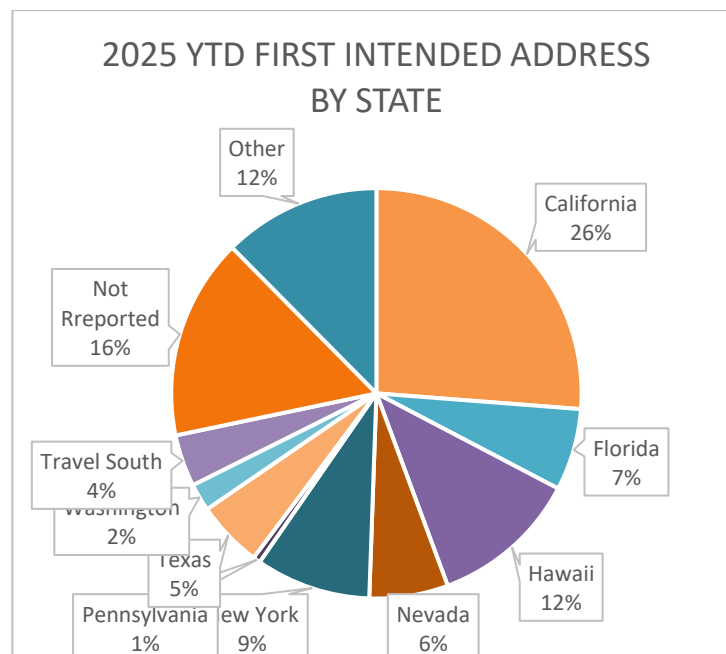
2025 May YTD is currently sitting at 15,648 arrivals a 1.8% increase from 2024.



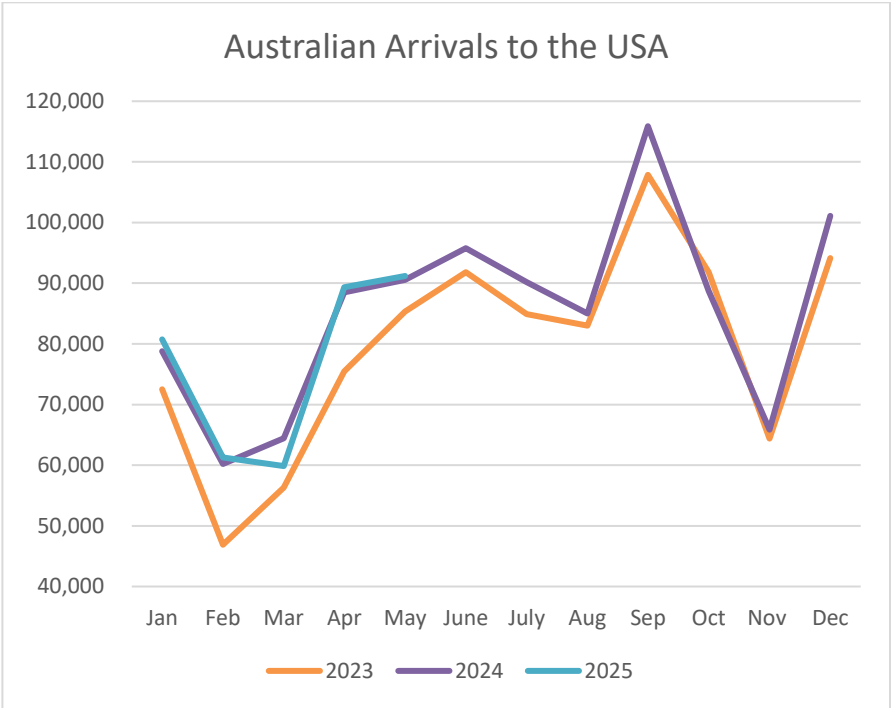
*National Travel and Tourism Office (NTTO) ADIS/I-94 Visitor Arrivals

While overall visitation to the USA remains flat year to date, certain regions are seeing growth. California has long been the primary gateway for Australians, but new direct flights to Dallas, Houston, and New York have made the South and East more accessible. As a result, more Australians are beginning their U.S. journeys in these regions. Texas, in particular, is booming. driven by increased airlift, cultural appeal, and affordability, with 4- and 5-star hotels often priced well below those in California and Hawaii.

Meanwhile, Florida continues to perform strongly thanks to the cruise market, which tends to book well in advance and is less influenced by shifts in media sentiment. These arrival and departure points, bode well for the Travel South Region with 15,648 Australians listing a Travel South State as their first intended address YTD in 2025.



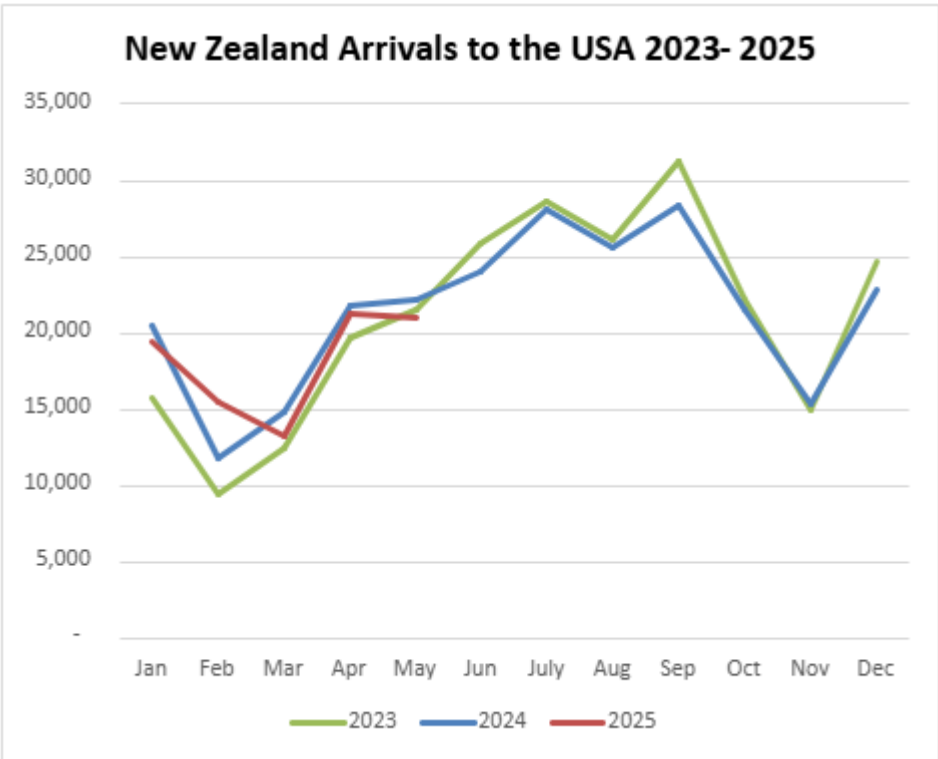
Travel to the USA from Australia



*National Travel and Tourism Office (NTTO) ADIS/I-94 Visitor Arrivals

Australian visitation to the USA held steady across Q2 2025, with a temporary dip in March (-7% YOY) attributed to the later Easter holiday, and cost sensitivity driven by a weaker AUD. Travel demand rebounded in April and May, with arrivals up 1% YOY each month. Year to date, visitation is flat compared to 2024, with Australia ranked as the 8th largest long-haul market to the USA.

Travel to the USA from New Zealand



New Zealand visitation to the USA softened in Q2, with a 10% drop in March linked to Easter timing and broader affordability concerns. April and May saw a partial recovery, though arrivals remained slightly below 2024 levels reflecting stable but cautious demand from Kiwi travellers more linked to their softening economy and price challenges.

Travel South USA 2024-25 results:

- Agents trained – 538
- Trade meetings – 274
- Newsletters published x 20
- Media meetings – 145
- Articles published - 167
- Impressions generated – 91,574,844

This document sums up the 2024-25 Year in Review for Australia and New Zealand with travel agent events, trainings, articles published, travel industry and media meetings as well we consumer activations and marketing.

II. Trade in Review

Travel South Helloworld Sales Calls:



Visit USA – Mid-Year Market Review Data Presentation:



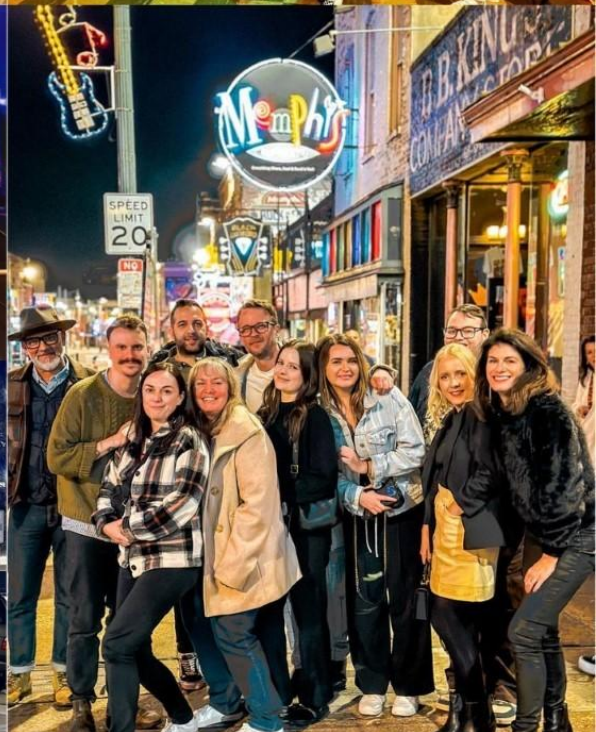
Liberty Tours Event:



Gate 7 Thanksgiving:



Delta Airlines Famil:



International Showcase:



IPW Post Fam Media Interview – Joshua Hewett Helloworld

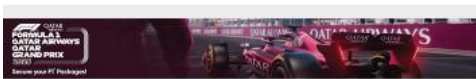
Home » Industry HQ » Travel Advisors » Travel Inspiration » Travel Deals

Southern charm: Q&A with Helloworld's Joshua Hewett on tapping into the allure of the US South

Helloworld Travel Land Contracting Manager North America Joshua Hewett attended [Travel South USA International Showcase](#) for the first time last year, enjoying the renowned Southern hospitality, exploring North Carolina on a famil and liaising with suppliers to inspire new products to bring to market in 2025.



Helloworld Travel Land Contracting Manager North America Joshua Hewett at Travel South International Showcase 2024 in Atlanta, Georgia. Images: Supplied



Fresh from his trip, he explains why the American South resonates with Australians, what travel advisors and travellers need to know and what's in the Viva Holidays product pipeline for 2025.

How was your first experience at the Travel South International Showcase?



Joshua Hewett (left) with other Australian buyers plus Gate 7's Penny Brand and Travel South USA President & CEO Lu Blitner at Travel South International Showcase 2024. Image: Travel South USA

After hearing from industry colleagues who attended in previous years, I expected lots of opportunities to connect with new partners and learn more about the great locations the South has to offer. Travel South USA and Discover Atlanta did an amazing job organising all the networking opportunities and great events with Southern hospitality on show.

Has Helloworld previously partnered with the Travel South USA 12-state collective?



Viva Holidays partnered with New Orleans on a successful campaign. Image: Zach Smith

We haven't done a campaign with Travel South USA, but we have with some of its partners. We work closely with Brand USA and through this partnership we have developed cooperative campaigns in the South, looking at driving consumer awareness, inspiration and enquiries to these destinations.

We recently undertook a very successful campaign with [New Orleans](#), which focused on both consumer advertising and trade education and we saw an uplift in destination awareness and product development. There will be more campaigns in the pipeline for Southern destinations – so watch this space.

Why do you think the US South resonates with Aussie holidaymakers?



The Travel South USA North Carolina Super Farm group in Lenoir, NC, with the iconic pig statue.

The US South resonates with Australians for several reasons. There's the famous Southern hospitality, which is a major draw – the welcoming culture in the South makes visitors feel at home and creates a sense of camaraderie with locals. Another reason is the distinct culture and history of the South. Australians are drawn to the deep historical and cultural roots of the South, along with music festivals and the natural beauty.

There is also the affordability and the value. Compared to other US destinations, the South can offer better value for money in terms of accommodation, food and activities.

How can Australian travellers experience Southern hospitality, and how can travel advisors market this as a key selling point for tours and experiences in the region?



The North Carolina Super Farm check out street art on a People's First Tourism walking tour in Raleigh.

The warmth and hospitality of Southern culture are legendary – visitors will be struck by the genuine friendliness and manners, which create a welcoming atmosphere and make the South feel unique.

By positioning Southern hospitality as an unforgettable cultural experience through tailored itineraries that include small-town charm, historical tours, music, arts and Southern cuisine, travel agents can offer Australians the chance not just to visit the US South but to feel its warmth and charm that will make their trip more than just a holiday.

What do you want more advisors and travellers to know about the US South?



Bluegrass & Bourbon Trail in Owensboro, Kentucky. Image: Brand USA

That the US South is easily accessible to Australian travellers. It often only requires one stop via the US West Coast or through Texas. Once clients are in the South, they can easily pick up a car rental booked through Viva Holidays and embark on one of our iconic US road trip itineraries, such as our 10-day Bluegrass & Bourbon Trail that starts and ends in Memphis. Clients can discover the tastes and sounds of Tennessee and Kentucky, enjoying American bourbon and Southern treats along the way.

Helloworld offers three self-drive itineraries and three escorted coach tours in the US South through our partner, American Tours International (ATI). The self-drive packages are also completely customisable through the Viva Holidays team.

What were the highlights and standout experiences of your Travel South International Super Fam in North Carolina?



I travelled on the Travel South USA 'Racing, Tasting, Celebrating and Shopping through North Carolina' three-night itinerary from Charlotte to Raleigh with stops in Lexington and Greensboro.

One of the activities I really liked was the Rydables tour in Charlotte, where we toured around the city centre on stuffed animal electric vehicles. It was something new and unique and a concept I think will appeal to leisure travellers.



The Travel South USA Super Fam group at the NASCAR Hall of Fame in Charlotte.

The NASCAR Hall of Fame in Charlotte was also a highlight. I'm not a NASCAR follower, but the Hall of Fame was so well curated and includes a simulator, so it's a great experience for visitors, whether you're a fan or not.

Lexington was another highlight: a small town with so much charm that's famous for barbecue, which was really good, and the Lexington pig statues around town.

Visit North Carolina and its partners created a great overall itinerary that was a small snapshot of what the state has to offer. It has inspired me to go back to experience more of the state at another time.

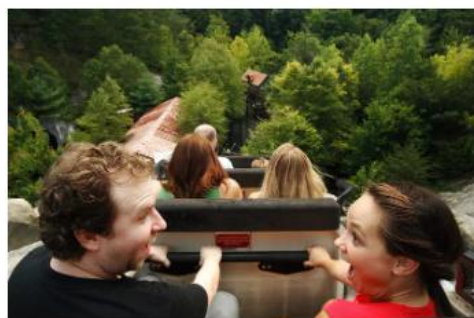
What partnerships and relationships have you gained by attending Travel South International Showcase as a buyer?



The Travel South USA Super Fam group at the North Carolina Museum of Natural Sciences in Raleigh.

The Showcase allowed me to meet with many suppliers who would not attend the larger nationwide tradeshows. I was able to secure or gain new contacts for touring and hotels in Nashville and New Orleans to help build on our directly contracted product. From discussions with the tourism boards, we will look at expanding our product range through DMC partnerships.

What Travel South USA products are you most excited to bring to market in 2025?



Big Orbits at Dollywood in Pigeon Forge, Tennessee are on the horizon for Viva Holidays. Image: Travel South USA

We've been inspired by all the partners we've met to build on our product offering across the US South, whether that's expanding product in regions we already offer, such as Nashville, Memphis and New Orleans, or the development of new regions like Alabama and other parts of Tennessee. Just to name a few, we're looking at regions like Mobile and Birmingham in Alabama and Pigeon Forge and Dollywood in Tennessee.

We look forward to adding some more experiences to really get customers excited about the US South.



Josh at the World of Coca-Cola in Atlanta, Georgia during Travel South International Showcase 2024.

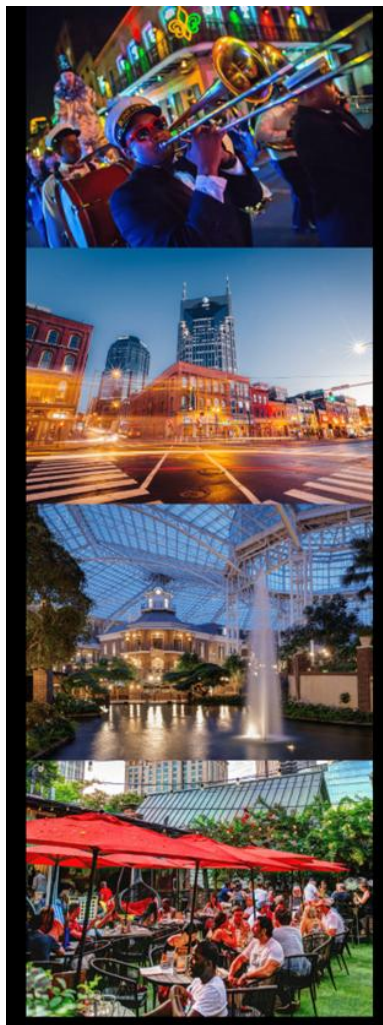
To book Viva Holidays' exciting Travel South USA packages, log in [here](#). For accommodation, sightseeing, activities and transfers, visit [readyrooms.com.au](#).


For high-value itineraries not serviceable via Mango, contact specialists@vivaholidays.com.au

Discover more info and inspo at industry.travelsouthusa.com

Urbanaught Atlanta Bright – Rhythms of the South Promotion

16,530 people viewed the competition with 3,862 entries.





Win a trip to experience the Rhythms of the South

Atlanta, Nashville & New Orleans

TRAVEL USA

To celebrate the release of Urbanaught's ATLANTA BRIGHT IPA we are giving away the road trip of our dreams!

Our new beer Atlanta Bright IPA has got us hyped and we want to share the party with you, so we're giving away a 6-day trip for two to visit the city that inspired the beer and experience the true *Rhythms of the South* in Atlanta, Nashville and New Orleans!

One lucky winner and a guest will get return flights to Atlanta, USA for the road trip of a lifetime across three states, experiencing the southern hospitality of Atlanta, Georgia, Nashville, Tennessee and New Orleans, Louisiana.

The prize includes:

- 2 x Nights in Atlanta with attractions pass
- 2 x Nights in Nashville with attractions pass
- 2 x Nights in New Orleans with attractions pass
- \$5000 NZD [Travel USA](#) Voucher towards your flights and travel costs

In Atlanta, discover the birthplace of hip-hop and soul, in Nashville, experience the legendary country music scene, and in New Orleans, soak in the soulful jazz and blues that echo through the streets. Each city offers a unique blend of live performances, historical sites, cultural experiences, and culinary treats that celebrate the South's deep-rooted musical traditions that have influenced music worldwide. Whether you're a music lover, history buff, or foodie, "Rhythms of the South" promises an engaging and soulful journey through the essence of the American South.

HOW TO ENTER:
No purchase is required to enter this competition.

- Fill in your details on the form below and click on the Enter Now button.
- Sign up to our email newsletter or be following us on [Instagram](#) or [Facebook](#).

You can get additional entries by referring others to enter using this form.

Please read the terms and conditions below for more details and conditions of entry.

☒ Sign Up for our Newsletter

Enter Now

From music to mouth-watering eats: 6 reasons to revisit the US South in 2025 & beyond

KARRYON

From music to mouth-watering eats: 6 reasons to revisit the US South in 2025 & beyond

There's lots of reasons why Australians love the US South - the music, food, culture, history and outdoors - but there's one main reason why you'll want to come back: the people. Here's why Aussies need to revisit the Southern USA in 2025.



Food, music, culture, history and the outdoors are all on the menu in the US South. Image: Travel South USA

My first trip to the US South, visiting Memphis for the 2023 Travel South USA International Showcase, instilled a strong longing to come back and explore more of the 12 states that make up the Travel South USA collective.

The US South offers a distinctly different Stateside travel experience with authentic experiences woven together by common thematic threads, many of which resonate with Australian travellers.

The music



Crowded outdoor stage at night with bright lights and a large crowd of people. Image: Travel South USA

Country and Western. Gospel and soul. Rap and hip hop. Cajun and zydeco. Jazz and ragtime. Rhythm and blues and roots. Rock and roll. The worldwide influence of Southern music culture cannot be understated.

The US South is renowned for its music forms that are uniquely Southern in style and interwoven with American culture at large. I've managed to get among hip hop and trap music in Atlanta, Georgia; gospel and soul in Alabama; jazz, Cajun and zydeco in New Orleans; and rock'n'roll and country in Tennessee on recent visits in the US South.



Blue Moon Sessions in Lafayette is famous for live music. Image: Travel South USA

If you've previously made a pilgrimage to renowned music meccas in Memphis, such as Graceland and Sun Studios, like many Australians, why not turn a single note into a song by incorporating multiple Southern states and music styles in a road trip?

A self-drive itinerary is the best way to follow the rhythm of the road like a musician - and [Brand USA](#) has curated four road trips inspired by American music, including three with stops in the South.

With the likes of the eight-state [Musical Roots of the South](#) to get you going, all you need to do is hire a car, create a playlist and drive the musical highways of the US South.

The food



Hot chicken on a biscuit? Biscuit Love in Nashville dishes up the goods. Image: Travel South USA

It's impossible to talk about the American South without mentioning the food. Soul food has historical roots right through to the Civil Rights movement.

Every Southern state has its tasty take on low'n'slow barbecue - and sometimes several styles within state boundaries. There's the Memphis-style dry rubbed ribs, Kansas City's burnt ends, Lexington's smoked pork shoulders (see [Helloworld's Joshua Hewitt](#) for more on that) and Texas brisket (try this at Buck-ee's across the US South). And don't get me started on the St Louis tomato-based sauce versus the Alabama white sauce.



Did someone say burnt ends? Arthur Bryant's Barbecue is legendary in Kansas City. Image: Travel South USA

The sides are equally enticing - think mac'n'cheese, soft scone-like biscuits (even vegan ones in Atlanta), silky grits, collard greens, fried pickles and spicy jalapeño poppers.

For dessert, the South has brought some winners to the global table, from banana pudding and pecan pies to beignets and other Mardi Gras staples in New Orleans and Mobile, Alabama such as Moon Pies. In fact, instead of the ball drop in NYC, Mobile has a Moon Pie drop on New Year's Eve, highlighting how beloved the sweet treat is.





Tasting bourbon at Lux Row Distillers in Bardonia, Kentucky. Image: Travel South USA

Be sure to add some small-town stops to your itinerary to tantalise your tastebuds. Here's some food for thought on the [Historic Route 66 - Curios, Pit Stops & Diners self-drive itinerary](#) and the [Bourbon, Bluegrass & Horse Country road trip](#).

The culture and history



Freedom Monument Sculpture Park in Montgomery, Alabama. Image: Cassie Trenchberg

Southern culture is shaped by its rich and diverse history and influenced by the people. You can really get to grips with this on the [US Civil Rights Trail](#), which includes many states, cities and sites across the US South.

You can DIY your trip or embark on a curated itinerary. In Alabama, visit pivotal landmarks, including 16th Street Baptist Church, Holt Street Baptist Church and Dexter Avenue King Memorial Baptist Church in Birmingham where Reverend Martin Luther King Jr was a pastor and the Rosa Park Museum, honouring the famous activist herself.

I also explored the new Legacy Sites in Montgomery - the Legacy Museum, National Memorial for Peace & Justice and the just-opened Freedom Monument Sculpture Park - all powerful and poignant journeys through American history.



The National Memorial for Peace & Justice is one of three Legacy Sites in Montgomery. Image: Travel South USA

There's also the National Center for Civil & Human Rights in Atlanta, National Civil Rights Museum at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis and New Orleans' Tremé neighbourhood, to name a just few more places for Civil Rights contemplation.

As always, it's the people who bring the stories to life, whether that's walking in the footsteps of those who marched across Edmund Pettus Bridge during the Selma to Montgomery protests in 1965 and hearing from an activist who was there or taking a deep dive with their descendants of the *Clotilda* slave ship and the Africatown community that sprung up in Mobile.



Africatown in Mobile, Alabama has a powerful legacy. Image: Travel South USA

You can feel it at a gospel and griot breakfast, on a city tour in Memphis and the musical legacies in New Orleans. One thing's for sure: it's an important part of the Southern experience and will leave an indelible mark, residing in your mind long after you leave.

Embark on [The Civil Rights History Trail self-drive itinerary](#) through Tennessee, Mississippi, Alabama and Georgia.

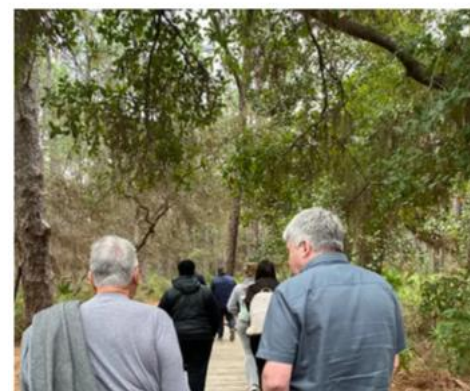
The outdoors



The Bridge Walk at River Gorge National Park in West Virginia goes below the River Gorge Bridge. Image: Travel South USA

From the Gulf States' bayous and beaches to the majestic mountains of Tennessee and everything in between, there's a lot of varied terrain to see in the US South.

A few to have on your radar are the States' newest national park - New River Gorge in West Virginia, a rugged recreational wonderland; forested Dauphin Island off Alabama's Gulf Coast, which is home to one of the top four spring bird migrations (and some gators if you can spot them), and Lafayette, Louisiana for the low-lying Bayou Country.



Even in the big cities, you'll be surprised by the greenery and scenery. On a cycling tour of Atlanta during last year's Travel South International Showcase, I discovered it's a city in a forest with 40 per cent trees, 20,000ha of green space and 483 city parks.



Cycling out of Oakland Cemetery - Atlanta's oldest public park. Image: Travel South USA

Likewise, small-town tours will yield verdant gems, like the stately 300-year-old oaks and homes in Mobile's Oakleigh neighbourhood.

Love the outdoors? Follow the Mississippi south on the Rhythms of the River road trip and check out the Coasts & Mountains of the South itinerary through Georgia, North Carolina, Tennessee and South Carolina.

The people



Serving up whiskies and craft brews at Hurtville's Straight to Ale brewery. Image: Travel South USA

There's a reason why Southern hospitality is legendary. As one frequent traveller says, nowhere else will you meet people as friendly and welcoming as in the US South.

Recent research shows small towns are trending along with rural areas, national parks and road trips as travellers overwhelmingly desire to travel to new destinations and shop at small businesses.



Australian couples at Travel South International Showcase USA. Image: Travel South USA

Travel South USA is part of Brand USA's new product tool to help travel professionals close the gap and connect travellers to the authentic experiences they seek.

Tourism Exchange USA (TXUSA) increases the availability, diversity and reach of Southern accommodations, attractions and experiences, collating them into an open digital marketplace with live inventory and rates for buyers.

Through this portal, travel buyers can access authentic and off-the-beaten-path products and destinations across the US South.

Want more inspo and info? Head to travelsouthusa.com

Auckland Travel Expo:



All Y'all are Welcome:



Travel South Product Audit

- ❖ Maintain strong relationships with key FIT wholesalers such as Infinity Holidays, Adventure World, Viva Holidays and Flight Centre's to continue to increase diversity of state product.
- ❖ Strong growth and diversity of product.
- ❖ Maintained strong product with niche operators.
- ❖ Continue to develop and create agent training opportunities to confidently promote The South with wholesalers, niche operators and agency chains.
- ❖ Focus on value and cultural experience with new product development.

State	Tour Operators 16	Listings	Touring & Road Trip Product
Alabama	14	8,478	8
Kentucky	14	4,273	4
Louisiana	16	6,052	14
Missouri	14	7,290	5
Mississippi	13	2,945	10
North Carolina	13	19,960	4
South Carolina	13	15,970	4
Tennessee	14	13,178	19
West Virginia	11	2,146	1
ROTS			
Atlanta	15	2,863	8
Nashville	15	3,693	6
New Orleans	16	3,527	8

Newsletters

Throughout 2024-25, we distributed a range of PR & Trade newsletters to our 4,041 travel agent and 369 media database contacts, evenly highlighting each GGP state throughout (through topics that tied into the GPP editorial / themed calendar).

Australia and New Zealand recipients of the newsletter highly value and save itinerary suggestions; our newsletters offer a practical way of bringing to life our Southern destinations and enables us to create a balanced share of voice across all states.

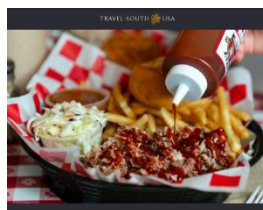
Total recipient & Open Rate

Trade – 40,410 with average open rate 23.73%

PR – 3,690 with average open rate 53.66%

Newsletter themes for the year:

- **September** – Sports – Professional and College – Games, Venues, upcoming Events
- **October** – Winter in the South – who knew?
- **November** – Girls Getaway Ideas
- **December** – Music Concerts & Festivals
- **January** – There is no time like Summer in the South!
- **February** – Avoid the crowds – Savvy Traveler Tips
- **March** – Instagram-able spots
- **April** – Eating your way thru the South – amazing dishes and restaurants you can't miss
- **May** – Luxury experiences for under \$100
- **June** – Free things to do while in the South



The South is a place where food is more than just—it's a way of life. From legendary barbecue joints and family-owned diners to award-winning restaurants and coastal gems, each stop serves up something unforgettable.

Whether it's smoky, spicy, fried or fresh, every bite reflects the stories, traditions, and creativity that define this famous-filled region. Ready to dig in? These are the dishes and destinations you won't want to miss.

Eating your way thru the South



TENNESSEE
Nashville Heat
No visit to Nashville is complete without feeling its fiery hot food culture, and there's no better place than the original Prince's Hot Chicken. The city's fiery origin story is as bold as its flavor. Founder Pete & Thornton Prince's love affair with his fried chicken cut of revenge. Instead of burning with regret, he loved it. That accidental heat sparked a culinary legend, and today, Prince's remains the gold standard for Nashville hot chicken.

Nashville Hot Chicken



SOUTH CAROLINA
Barbecue Legacy
Barbecue runs deep in South Carolina, where centuries-old traditions still fire up pits across the state. Often called the true home of American barbecue, South Carolina is known for its regional variety, mustard-based sauces, and legendary paninis. Historic spots like The Pig & Pig BBQ in Charleston, serving pulled pork since 1940, help define its legacy. South Carolina's barbecue scene remains a Southern institution with flavor, history, and passion in every bite.

Barbecue Scene



MISSISSIPPI
Coastal Elegance
Mississippi's Gulf Coast blends Southern tradition with modern culinary artistry and seafood in Gulf Shores perfected a cuisine that. The James Beard awarded restaurant offers a seasonal, ever-evolving menu inspired by Japanese and Southern flavors. Locally sourced ingredients take center stage in dishes that highlight the region's bounty. Wedge reflects Mississippi's growing reputation for innovative, thoughtful dining honoring tradition while embracing creative, contemporary cuisine.

Midwest Artistry



RHYTHMS OF THE SOUTH
Atlanta, Nashville, New Orleans
The South's top food cities serve up local flavors and various culinary uses. In Atlanta, MICHELIN starred restaurants and bustling food halls showcase a melting pot of global and Southern influences. Nashville brings the heat with hot chicken and food trucks and inventive dishes from James Beard-recognized chefs. In New Orleans, Creole classics like gumbo and po-boys meet iconic institutions like Commander's Palace, celebrating a soulful, unforgettable taste of Louisiana tradition.

Southern Eats



KENTUCKY
Bluegrass Barbecue
Kentucky barbecue isn't just food—it's a vibrant history of flavor and community. From classic pulled pork to uniquely Kentucky smoked meats, the Bluegrass State serves up a diverse culinary adventure. At Louisville's BBQ, part of the First Kentucky BBQ Fest, local smoke and ribs become table center stage. The local favorite lives up to its name with no less, big flavor because that's deeply rooted in tradition—and proudly passing Kentucky's barbecue legacy forward.



LOUISIANA
Soul in a Bowl
Louisiana's food scene is as dynamic as the state itself—rooted in bold Cajun and Creole flavors, diverse influences, and local traditions. All to heart in gumbo, our official dish. Made with a dark roux and the "holy" of onions, bell peppers, and celery, gumbo varies by region—here chicken and sausage or Commander's Palace in New Orleans or seafood at Pappas' in Lake Charles. Time it right, and you might even catch a gumbo festival.

Gumbo



West Virginia
Hearty Heritage
You can't visit West Virginia without trying their unofficial state food—the pepperoni roll. What began as a practical lunch for miners and farmers in the early 1900s has become a beloved local classic. These loquacious pepperoni rolls are soft rolls for an easy, filling meal. The roll's look-off in Farmington, where it was first sold commercially, and today pepperoni rolls are a must for comfort food rooted in Appalachian pride and tradition.

Pepperoni Roll



NORTH CAROLINA
Oyster Culture
Southern oysters roll out paradise along the coast. From the historic Outer Banks to modern oyster industry hubs, these tiny gems are served fresh at oyster bars, oyster houses, and oyster festivals. Celebrate the harvest with live music, local art, and oyster parties. It's a delicious way to support coastal communities while savoring the best of the Carolina coast.

Oyster Trail



MISSISSIPPI
Midwest Barbecue
The can't talk about food in Missouri without mentioning barbecue. In St. Louis, a style known for its slow-smoked meats and dry, sweet sauce. For a true taste, head to Jack Stack Barbecue in St. Louis, where the industrial-chic setting pairs perfectly with plates of smoky goodness. Don't miss the city's signature ribs, baked with a sticky, tangy sauce. These pieces remind us that barbecue is a Southern tradition, too. In Kansas City, BBQ is the local, and absolutely worth the hype.



ALABAMA
Southern Sizzle
When it comes to barbecue, Alabama has a unique twist. Known for its mustard-based sauce and slow-smoked meats, Alabama's barbecue scene is a blend of tradition and innovation. Try the state's famous pork chops, which are slow-smoked and served with a tangy, mustard-based sauce. This dish is a true taste of Alabama's barbecue heritage.

Mustard Sauce Pork Chops



FIND OUT MORE



CONTACT INFO

Phone: 02 9551 5714 | Email: info@ggp.com.au

III. Consumer Campaign

Where Music Was Born Campaign

The American South

WHERE MUSIC WAS BORN

WIN A TRIP TO THE USA!

ITINERARY

- Dollywood at Pigeon Forge
- Chattanooga's Choo Choo
- Nashville's Grand Ole Opry
- Graceland in Memphis
- Tupelo the birthplace of Elvis
- Clarksdale ground zero for Blues
- Greenwood Soul of the Delta
- Jackson capital of Mississippi • 12 Day Car Hire
- 11 Nights in 4 star hotels • Breakfast Daily

Embark on an unforgettable journey through Tennessee and Mississippi, the heart of Southern USA's rich musical heritage. From the soulful roots of the blues and the spirited rhythms of jazz, to the storytelling of country, this region has shaped generations of music lovers and musicians alike.

FROM \$2799
per person
twin share

Scan the QR code below for your chance to win a trip to explore the USA through 'Where Music Was Born'!

SCAN ME

SATURDAY JANUARY 18, 2025 northerndailyleader.com.au

WHEN SOMETHING GOES PAIR-SHAPED...
Courage in marriage despite the statistics
GARRY LINNELL

Summer Fun
EXTRA PUZZLES • BRAIN TEASERS

The Northern Daily LEADER

ECHOES OF THE INCA

MACHU PICCHU AND THE GENIUS OF A LOST EMPIRE

INSIDE *explore*

WEIGHT OF NUMBERS Extra officers brought in to support Oxley Command for the duration of the festival

Police beef up for festival

Ernest Downey

MORE than 150 extra police will support Oxley Area Command during the 2025 Tamworth Country Music Festival to ensure "a safe and secure event for the artists, spectators and the local community", midweek crime rates down.

The announcement was made on Friday, day one of Australia's largest 10-day music festival, which runs until Sunday, January 26, and features 700 artists and more than 1800 events.

To increase the expected huge crowds, general duties officers from Oxley Police District and Western Region will be assisted by 100 additional specialist police officers. They will represent teams from the Operations Support Group (OSG), Dog Unit, Licensing Police, and cycle Unit, and Traffic and Highway Patrol Command in a high-visibility police operation focused on anti-social behaviour and alcohol-related offences.

Acting Superintendent of the Oxley District, David Robertson, said the extra resources would be important in keeping the community safe during the festival.

"That is exactly what we are here to do for the next 10 days and make sure everyone has an enjoyable time... while ensuring to keep crime rates as low as we can," he said.

Continued page 2

ITINERARY

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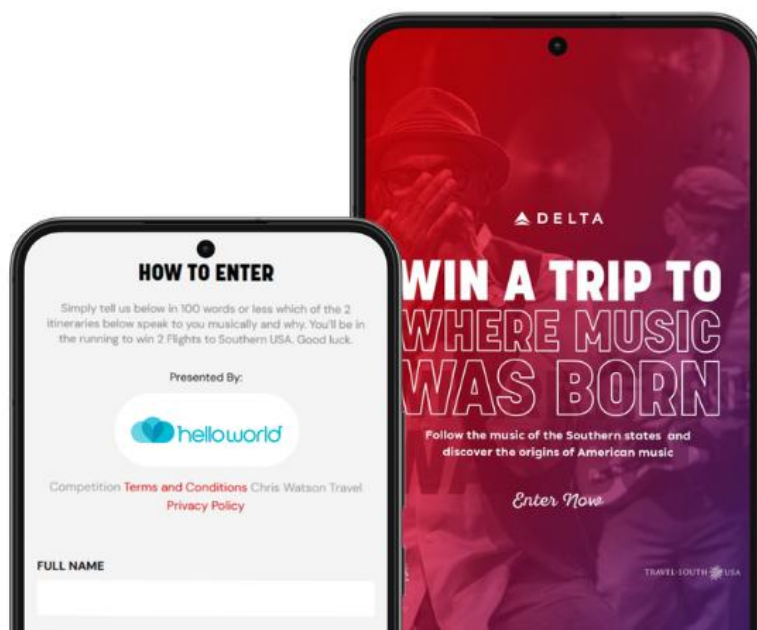
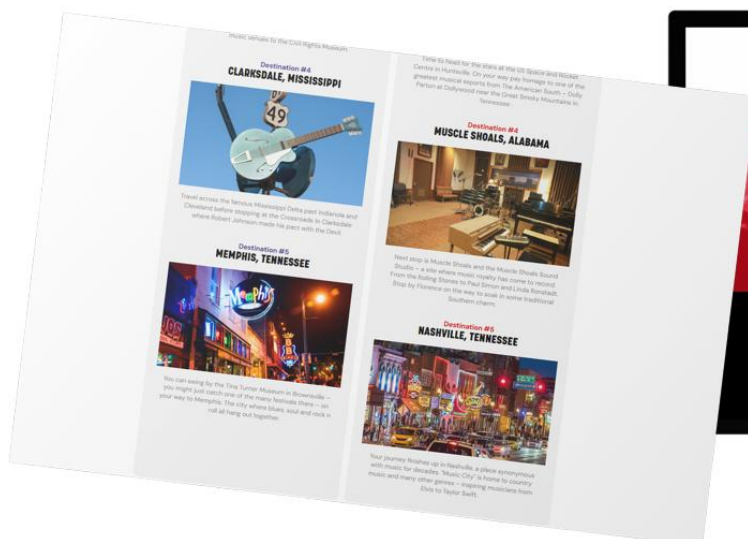
Where Music Was Born - Festival Activations:



Where Music Was Born – Digital Campaign:

Performance:

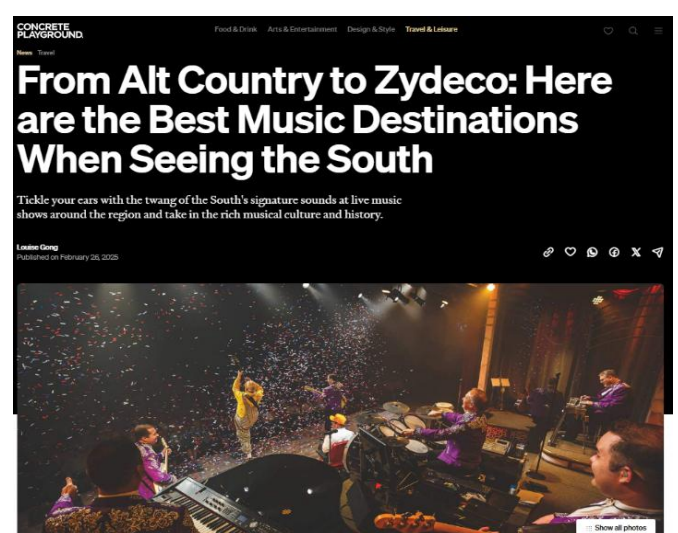
- **5.1 million impressions**
Exceeded target by 2%
- **1.29 million unique users reached**
Surpassed reach goal by 29%
- **26,852 engagements**
Achieved 7.5% above target
- **1,508 competition entries**
16% conversion rate from engaged users
- **1,016 opted-in subscribers**
Strong lead generation result



Concrete Playground:

Performance:

- **41,001 content reads**
Exceeded target by 2.5%
- **437,533 video views**
Surpassed goal by 8.4%
- **1.5 million impressions**
Achieved 75% above target
- **839,337 unique users reached**
Doubled reach goal with a 102% uplift



IV. PR YEAR IN REVIEW

Kentucky Pre-Fam



Global Week 2025:



IMM 2025:



I. TOTAL COVERAGE

TOTAL COVERAGE	
Media Meetings	139
Total number of articles published	167
Impressions	91,574,844

II. TOP COVERAGE

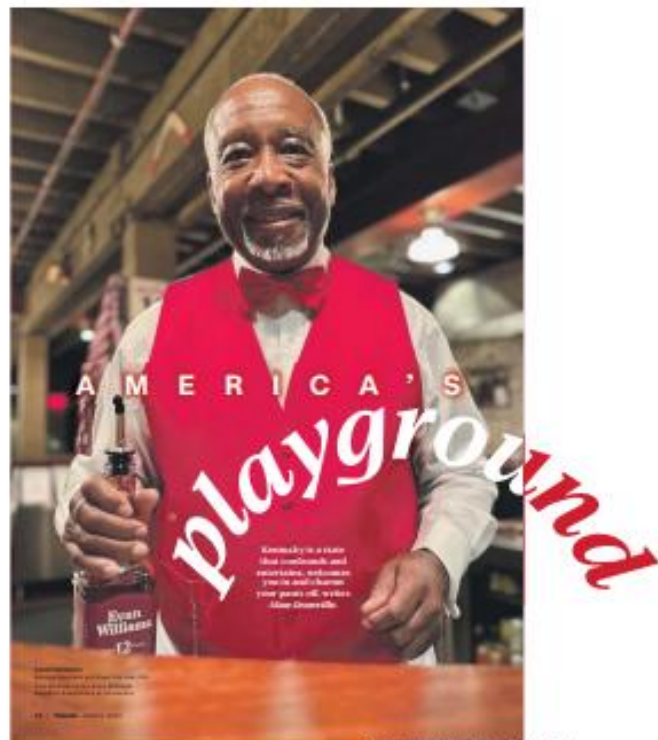
Coverage Highlights

In FY24-25, 167 Travel South articles were published with over 91,574,844 impressions. From the front cover of Traveller magazine to features in The Sydney Morning Herald, here are some highlights.

Sunday Star Times – June 26, 2024

“AMERICA'S playground”

Unique Monthly Visitors: 151,000



If I asked you to pinpoint where the state of Kentucky is on a map of the United States, how confident would you be of getting it right? Somewhere above Florida maybe, to the right of Texas possibly, in among the jumble of all those other Southern states like Tennessee and Missouri.

And what do you know about the Bluegrass State? You may have an idea that Jim Beam bourbon comes from there, or that it is home to one of the world's most famous horse races. And you will definitely have heard of a certain fried

chicken food chain from there.

Kentucky is all that, and so, so much more, but it is criminally overlooked. Figures from the US International Trade Administration show that it sits a lowly 33rd out of the 52 American states and territories visited by international tourists in 2022.

But that deserves to change.

This is a state that confounds and entertains, welcomes you in and charms the pants off you. It's a state that is the perfect backdrop for getting some close mates together to explore a rich playground

for grown-ups. Somewhere different, away from the usual hotspots.

This isn't like Florida or Vegas – it's better than that.

Bourbon, bourbon everywhere

As Guinness is to Ireland, so bourbon is to Kentucky. The indoctrination starts as soon as you land at Louisville Airport. Billboards scream that you are now in the home of barrel-aged American whiskey.

Kentuckians will proudly tell you 95% of the world's bourbon is made here, to a set of strict rules including the use of at least 51% corn in the grain mixture, and that it must be aged in new, charred oak barrels.

Rich limestone waters make the soil perfect for growing corn and, as a result, dozens of distilleries dot the landscape, offering all manner of tours and tastings.

Just an hour's drive from Louisville, visitors to the Bardstown Bourbon Company (bardstownbourbon.com) can sample some of the rarest drops in its whiskey library. One even goes for US\$2550 (NZ\$4180) for a tiny ounce. That's an expensive sip.

At nearby Lux Row Distillers (luxrowdistillers.com), you can try your hand at making a famous bourbon cocktail like an old fashioned in their mixology course. And in downtime

Louisville, the Evan Williams Bourbon Experience (evanwilliams.com) has a speakeasy hidden behind a bank vault complete with service from a fine gentleman called George Harrison, who portrays the real-life Tom Bullock (1872-1964), the first Black American to write and publish a cocktail book. It's an immersive step back into prohibition times when booze here was illegal.

Speakeasies are everywhere in Kentucky, but you need to know where to look. I had stayed for days in my hotel in Louisville without knowing

manufacture of bats that will end up in the hands of Major League Baseballers. The giant 36-metre bat leaning idly on the building is your Instagram moment.

Get out and about

Like many US states, Kentucky likes to boast about things it did first (the enamel bath), what was created there (the song Happy Birthday), stuff no-one else does (manufacturing Chevrolet Corvette cars), or things that are bigger than anywhere else.

The appropriately named Mammoth Cave National Park (nps.gov/maca) is the "longest-known cave system on Earth" and is one of the most popular attractions in Kentucky, with hundreds of kilometres of tunnels and chambers below ground, and dozens of hiking and biking trails up top.

But if you truly want to experience what the outdoors means to Kentucky, then you can't go wrong with a visit to its most famous inhabitants. This is horse country, and at farms across the state, like Mill Ridge (millridge.com) in Lexington, it's

there was one hidden behind a wall near the lobby.

Sporting divide

Kentucky is very red, but it's also divided into blue and red. Confused? Well, politically it is a very strong Republican state (although it does have a Democrat governor). But when it comes to sport, you are either University of Kentucky (blue) or University of Louisville (red) – Wildcats or Cardinals.

College sports rule here, especially basketball and American football. They take it very, very seriously. Packed stadiums holding more than 60,000 can be found in both Louisville and Lexington. Even if you know nothing about sport, to truly experience Americana, my advice is to go to at least one big event.

For those who don't mind a bit of dress-up and a flutter, the refined air at Keeneland Race Course (keeneland.com) near Lexington is a must. This is where the 'old money' of Kentucky hang out, decked out in their Sunday best, only interrupting their mini julep cocktails to politely roar their horses home.

From those who think they are royalty, to someone who was actually sporting royalty, no visit to Louisville is complete without paying respect to perhaps its most famous son – Muhammad Ali.

The boxing legend was born, raised and eventually buried in his beloved city and he is honoured with a multi-million-dollar centre (allicenter.org) showcasing his life and activism. Often controversial, but with a quick wit and a long history of giving back, Ali's legacy is suitably encapsulated.

Around the corner is nirvana for baseball fans. The Louisville Slugger Museum and Factory (louisianmuseum.com) lets visitors witness the

all big skies, rolling green fields, black fences and magnificent beasts.

It's the enduring image of a proud southeastern US state. A state that really shouldn't be overlooked any more.

PHOTOGRAPHS CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT

The world's biggest bat outside the Louisville Slugger Museum and Factory. Kentucky is horse country. Plenty of barrels at Lux Row Distillers, Bardstown. A mural honouring Louisville's most famous son, Muhammad Ali.



Fact file

Getting there:

Air New Zealand has direct flights from Auckland to Houston. Louisville is another two-hour flight.

See: airnewzealand.co.nz

Staying there:

Louisville – Hotel Genevieve is situated in the middle of the trendy NuLu neighbourhood. Rates start at US\$179 (NZ\$293) per night.

See: huckhousehotels.com/hotel-genevieve

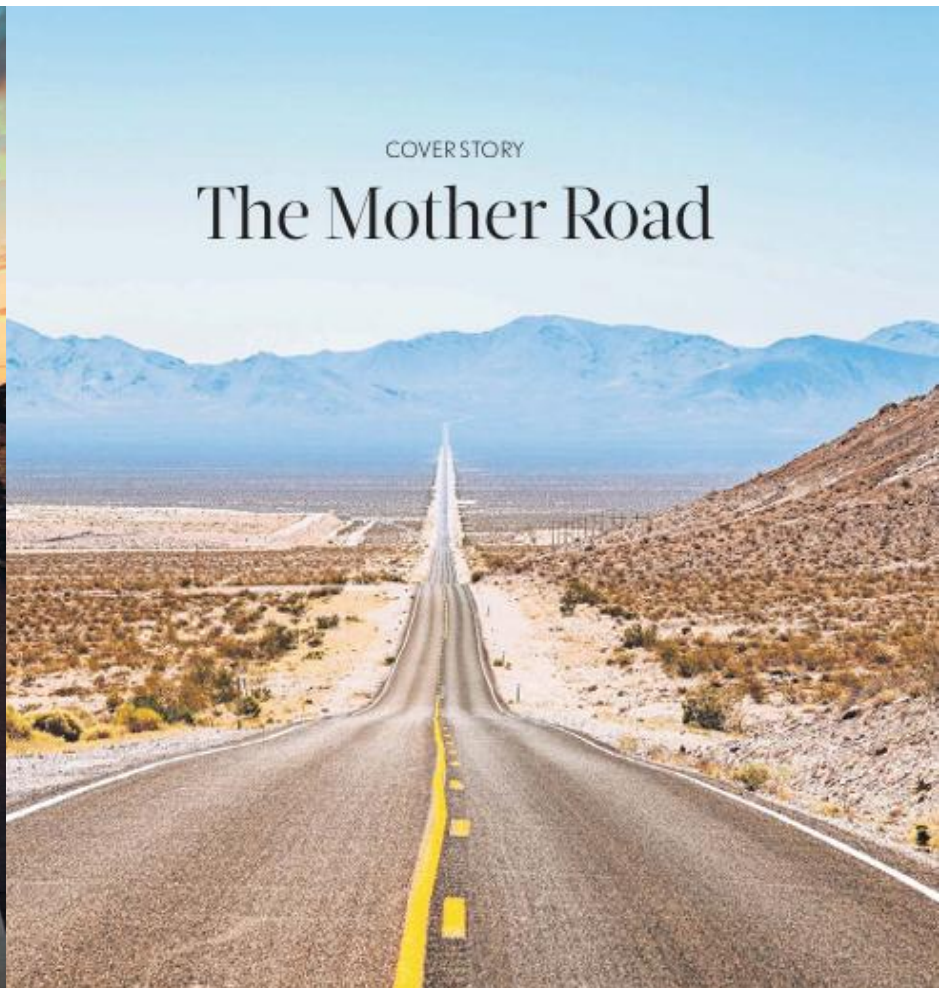
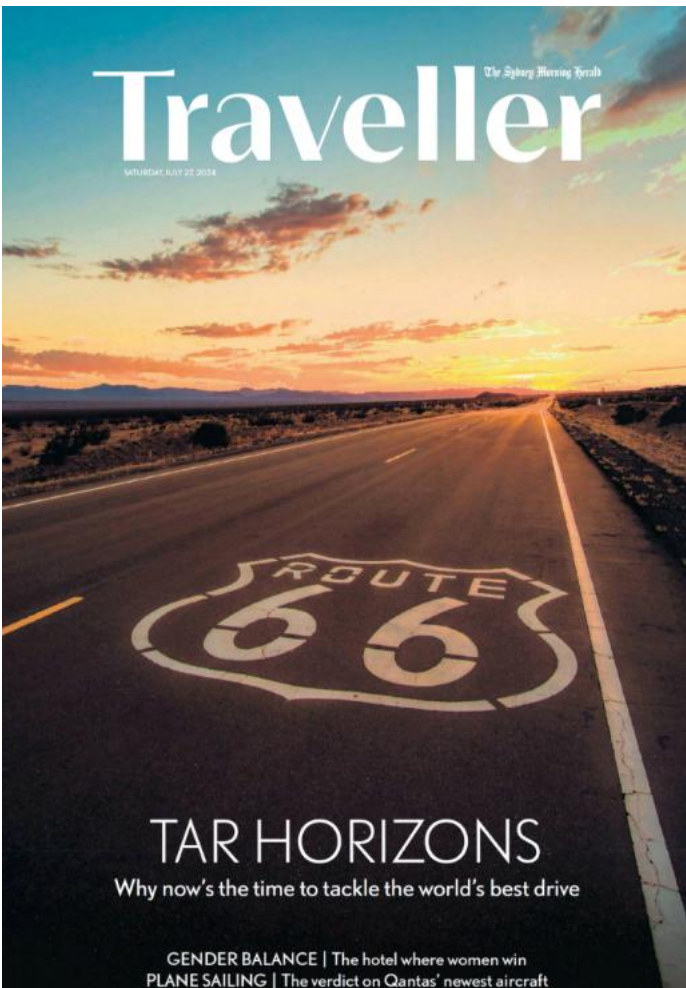
Lexington – The Manchester is in the heart of the historic Distillery District and has 125 guest rooms, a feature restaurant and an art deco rooftop bar to watch the sunset. Rates start at US\$179 per night.

See: themanchestertky.com

Traveller – July 27, 2024

“The Mother Road”

Unique Monthly Visitors: 428,000





As Route 66 prepares for its centenary, now's the time to get your kicks on this not-so-lost highway, writes Katrina Lobley.

Route 66 is a ghost highway. It officially vanished in 1985, but try telling that to the folk of Springfield, Missouri. This Springfield (one of 67 in the US) is dubbed the Buckle of the Bible Belt, thanks to its hundreds of churches. Even while Uber-ing from the airport to my Route 66-themed motel, my driver confesses he glimpsed heaven the previous night as he hunkered down during a minor tornado.

A few years ago, a reporter calculated Springfield has six times as many churches as Chinese restaurants, which is saying something considering many residents are addicted to a local invention called cashew chicken. The city of 180,000 mostly God-fearing people is also the birthplace of another pivotal development – it was from here that a telegram was sent to federal officials on April 30, 1926, suggesting the new diagonal highway connecting Chicago, Illinois, to Santa Monica on the Pacific Coast be christened “66”. The designation was approved on November 11, the highway’s official birthdate.

Route 66 was born and Springfield, in the Missouri Ozarks, wrote itself into the history books (although Tulsa, Oklahoma, this year claimed the Capital of Route 66 title, as the guy who first noticed the 66 designation was available was a Tulsan). While this part of Middle America might be unfamiliar to many Australians, it’s the perfect place to start exploring the near-mythical highway that ran almost 4000 kilometres through eight states. With these states and their retro roadside attractions already gearing up for an influx of visitors in 2026, now’s the time to do the route as it was meant to be done: in a leisurely fashion, so you can shoot the breeze with characters you meet along the way.

Tracking down the route’s historic wisps of blacktop, superseded by more efficient but less interesting interstate highways, can take grunt work, though. Many Route 66 attractions can help, as they sell

guidebooks describing exactly how to trace that journey back to simpler times. It also helps that, as the eight states increasingly recognise the power of Route 66 tourism, brown-and-white Historic Route signage has sprouted alongside the former highway, turning the ephemeral into something more concrete.

Time travel on four wheels

What do people hope to find – beyond photo ops – as they journey along what’s also called the Main Street of America? I have no idea, but my nostalgia trip starts on Springfield’s West College Street. We snap pictures of the 1929-built Rockwood Motor Court – a fine example of what’s known as giraffe-rock architecture (where sandstone or limestone is collected, sometimes split, then mortared in place, creating a pattern that resembles a giraffe’s hide) – and head to College Street Cafe. Inside the tiny diner, a breakfast of eggs, bacon, hash brown, toast and percolated coffee makes for a classic American diner experience right on Route 66. Before leaving, we ink our name on the walls as many have done.

Right out front, a Route 66 badge is painted onto the road. We snap selfies then stroll over to the Route 66 Car Museum – a vast display space for businessman Guy Mace’s collection of historic and movie-themed vehicles, including a *Batman*-inspired 1971 Gotham Roadster and a *Ghostbusters* ECTO-1.

“I’m an unusual collector in that I drive most of my cars,” says Mace, whose favourite set of wheels is a bronze 1967 Austin-Healey, while the most expensive (valued at \$US1.5 million, or \$2,240,000) is a 1936 Horch. Many vehicles on the museum floor are on trickle chargers to keep their batteries in shape.

“If you want to see the true America ... travel Route 66 and you’ll see a lot of small towns. People want to see the real

America,” he says. With up to 40 per cent of the museum’s visitors drawn from overseas, Mace says: “It’s just incredible the mystique that Route 66 has worldwide.”

Equally amazed, even though he meets Route 66 tourists every day, is George Bowick of Gay Parita, a replica Sinclair gas station 37 kilometres west of Springfield on Old 66. The stop is a mere dot on the map but it illustrates how 66 is really about something other than landmarks: it’s about people.

Bowick is continuing the legacy of his gregarious father-in-law, Gary Turner, who died in 2015 but is fondly remembered as a route ambassador. He’d spend hours shooting the breeze with passers-by and giving tips for the best stops along the route. Some people thought that with the passing of the one-of-a-kind Turner (and his wife, Lena, just a few months later), that’d be the end of Gay Parita.

Clearly, they’d never met Bowick (he and his partner, Turner’s daughter Barbara, lived way off the route in Charleston, South Carolina, until duty called). “Here in south-west Missouri-rah, this stretch of Route 66 is known as the ‘ghost stretch’ because so many things have faded away,” says Bowick in his cigarette-roughened voice. He’s lounging on the porch of the gift shop-cum-museum from where, in summer, he watches goldfinches dive-bomb his sunflowers. On the quiet road out front, an oversized Route 66 painted badge provides a perfect photo op. “We’re keeping all of Mister Gary’s ▶

traditions – we do things exactly the same way Gary did,” he says.

Perhaps not everything. It’s hard to know what Miss Lena would have made of the 3D Sinclair green dinosaur (the fuel company’s logo), christened Lena and gussied up with red lipstick and toenail polish, which has joined the memorabilia collection.

This memorable pit-stop has been saved but, because of the mom-and-pop scale of many little businesses along the route, some have shuttered while others, such as California’s Bagdad Cafe, are struggling to stay open.

THE DETAILS

FLY
Delta (delta.com), American Airlines (aa.com), United (united.com) and Allegiant (allegiant.com) connect Springfield, Missouri, to US hubs such as LA, Atlanta, Houston and Dallas Fort Worth. Car-rental companies, including Avis, Budget and Hertz, operate from the airport.

VISIT
In Springfield, see Route 66 Car Museum (66carmuseum.com), History Museum on the Square (historymuseumonthesquare.org) and Fantastic Caverns (missouriscave.com). West of Springfield, see the Route 66 Mural Park at 619 South Main Street, Joplin (visitjoplinmo.com) and Supertam On 66 Ice Cream Parlour and Superman Museum (supertamon66.com). Heading east to St Louis, see Uranus (uranusmissouri.com) and Meramec Caverns (americascave.com). In St Louis, visit the National Museum of Transportation (nrmot.org) and Ted Drewes Frozen Custard (teddrewes.com).

STAY
Best Western Route 66 Rail Haven features motel-style rooms and themed suites (Elvis, Marilyn and Wild Bill Hickok) from \$US81 (\$121 a night, Springfield, (bestwestern.com), Boots Court Motel, Carthage from \$US115 a night, (bootscourt66.com), Wagon Wheel Motel, Cuba from \$US82 a night, (wagonwheel66cuba.com), St Louis Union Station Hotel, Curio Collection by Hilton from \$US210, (hilton.com).

MORE
See route66-centennial.com

Click and connect

If you think Route 66 is only about collecting clicks (on your camera) think again. It’s also about slowing down and chewing the fat. “Route 66 is just a road – it’s always been a road, nothing but a road,” says Bowick. “It’s always been about the people and, when folks are travelling Route 66, if they keep that in mind they will not have missed the boat on anything. You won’t meet a better bunch of people on the planet.”

Between his place and Missouri’s western border, we clock up other iconic Route 66 experiences. In Joplin, where Bonnie and Clyde holed up for weeks in 1933 and a 2011 tornado ripped through the city killing 158 people, art is aiding recovery. Striking murals, along with half a 1964 red Corvette, feature at the Route 66 Mural Park.

Fifteen minutes’ drive out of Joplin is the teeny-tiny Supertam On 66 Ice Cream Parlour and Superman Museum – home to 2500-plus items celebrating the Man of Steel along with ice-cream flavours such as Superman, Fat Elvis and Exhausted Parent.

On the way to Carthage, we snap the 66 Drive-In, which would make a very cool night out if you’re staying at the nearby Boots Court Motel. After showing us around the Streamline moderne-style motel where Clark Gable was a guest, manager Jeremy Morris takes us to another quirky. He lives in an old-tiny house called The Parsonage at Red Oak II – a recreated community that is

part art installation, part open-air museum just off Old 66. Visitors can stroll around the collection of early 20th-century buildings that include a Phillips 66 gas station, schoolhouse and general store.

A road divided

Detouring from the route to catch nearby sights was de rigueur for yesteryear’s road-trippers – so we follow in their tyre tracks. Near Springfield is the ride-through-in-a-jeep-drawn-tram Fantastic Caverns and, on the way to St Louis in the state’s east, you’ll find Meramec Caverns, which the outlaw Jesse James used as a hideout.

Yet Route 66 isn’t all nostalgia for everyone. As Springfield’s History Museum

STOPS IN SEVEN OTHER STATES

Between the route’s big-city bookends, travel through cornfields, the undulating Ozarks, Native American country, and cowboy and Hispanic history – with stops at these one-of-a-kind sights.

Illinois

Roll back to 1950 by heading to Rt 66 Skyview Drive-In at Litchfield in south-central Illinois. The theatre claims to be the only original drive-in still located along the road. We don’t know what the folks at 66 Drive-In in Carthage, Missouri, have to say about that – they opened for business alongside the route in 1949. The pre-television, post-World War II years were drive-in cinema’s golden age: when motel guests would flock for an affordable night of entertainment close to their accommodation. See litchfieldskyview.com 66drivein.com

Kansas

Of the eight Route 66 states, Kansas is the one with the least amount of historic highway, with just 22 kilometres of the route angled across its south-eastern corner. Nevertheless, stop at the Old Riverton Store to admire the 1925 building with its pressed-metal ceiling (the place is said to have inspired *Pearl’s Cars* movie). Just west of town is Marsh Arch Bridge, known as Rainbow Bridge, the only driveable bridge of its kind along the route. See oldrivertonstore.com

Oklahoma

Pops 66 Soda Ranch, on the outskirts of Oklahoma City, is all your sugar-loaded, LED-lit, highly carbonated fizz fantasies bundled into one ultra-modern, photogenic roadside attraction. Opening in 2007, Pops delivers kitschy vibes with its 66-foot (20-metre) tall soda-bottle and straw landmark sculpture that puts on a light display after sunset. Beyond the striking museum-like window display of rows of soft-drink bottles, you’ll find hundreds of soda flavours that range from regular to wacky (think dill pickle, celery, spaghetti and even kitty piddle). See pops66.com

Texas

Everything’s bigger in Texas – everything, that is, except Route 66. Only 300 kilometres of highway originally crossed the Texas Panhandle in the north of the Lone Star State. However, it’s de rigueur to stop at the Midpoint Cafe (marking the route’s halfway point) in tiny Adrian for a slice of “ugly” pie. That’s if you haven’t already filled up on chili or green chili stew at Amarillo’s GoldenLight Cafe, which opened alongside the route in 1946. See goldenlightcafe.com traveltexas.com

on the Square reminds us, journeying through segregated America was fraught for African-American motorists. To help them find places to eat, drink and stay,

African-American New York City mail carrier Victor Hugo Green published *The Negro Travellers’ Green Book* from 1936-66 (a copy of the guidebook’s 1956 cover is in the museum). The guide included Graham’s Rib Station and Motel in Springfield.

Springfield’s unofficial historian, David Eslick, said a 1960 campaign visit by then Vice-President Richard Nixon led to a significant moment for racial integration in the city. As Nixon’s press delegation included two African-Americans, a local hotel was forced to change its segregation policy. Two years later, it reversed its stance, saying the Springfield area “unfortunately is not quite ready” to accept desegregation “on a broad or unlimited scale”.

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 made it illegal for hotels and motels to discriminate based on race.

Another poignant spot along the route is the Old Chain of Rocks Bridge on St Louis’s outskirts. Cyclists and pedestrians who cross the bridge, themed with Route 66 signage, to reach Illinois will find a plaque honouring two young women murdered here in 1991.

A ‘museum’ like no other

Among all its other monikers, Route 66 is also called America’s Longest Museum, and it’s easy to see why. Heading east from Springfield, we tick off the very silly fudge factory at Uranus, spend the night at Cuba’s classic Wagon Wheel Motel and explore the Old 66 displays at both Red Cedar Inn Museum and Visitor Centre and at Route 66 State Park (where the visitors’ centre is fashioned from a 1935 roadhouse that serviced the route).

St Louis provides more: riding to the top of the Gateway Arch, of course, but also diving into the wonders within (and outside) the sprawling National Museum of

Transportation. Queuing at Ted Drewes Frozen Custard (the Chippewa location on the historic Route) for a cup of “concrete” is also a must.

The big city’s a buzz but it’s the smaller places – and the people there – who stick with you the most. At the Route 66 Museum inside the Lebanon-Laclede County Library, we meet Rod Reid. His family bought a Route 66 motel in 1961 so you could say the highway runs through his veins. Today, he’s chair of the national Route 66 Centennial Commission, which is pulling together ways to commemorate the highway’s big birthday. “People want to get back to the roots,” says Reid. “They want to truly get a feel for what makes our country what it is and what it has been. They want to have that experience – not something that’s just manufactured.”

The writer was a guest of Visit Missouri and Travel South USA. See visitmo.com

It’s the smaller places – and the people there – who stick with you the most.

New Mexico

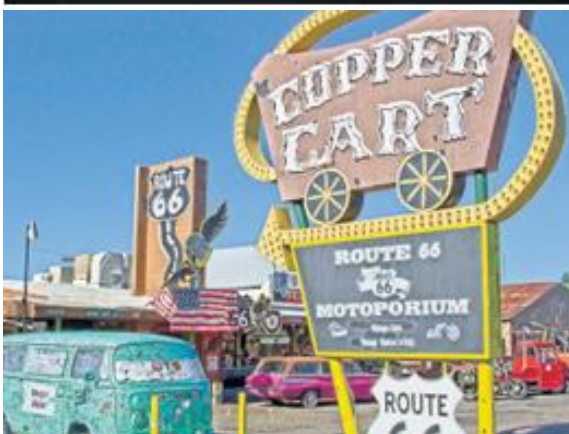
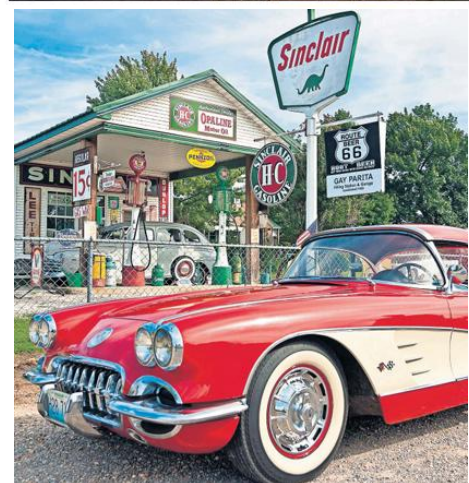
Spend a night or three in Tucumcari, New Mexico. This city of 5000 is home to three restored retro motels: the Blue Swallow Motel (with its neon sign, garage units and pink stucco exterior), Motel Safari (look for its camel sign and try the rawhide or rockabilly suite) and the Roadrunner Lodge Motel (two motels merged into one). See blueswallowmotel.com themotelsafari.com roadrunnerlodge.com

Arizona

After greeting Giganticus Headicus (a Tiki-style lime-green roadside sculpture) in Antares, head through Kingman to perhaps get your kicks – for real – from burros strolling the streets of Oatman, a “living” ghost town that stages Wild West shoot-outs in western Arizona. These feral donkeys, descendants of 19th-century gold miners’ beasts of burden, have no hesitation in approaching visitors – usually to see if they can snuffle a snack. Arizona is also home to one of the route’s most kitsch stays: Holbrook’s Wigwam Motel. See oatmangoldroad.org sleepinawigwam.com visitarizona.com

California

Before reaching the end of the trail at Santa Monica Pier, make the desert highway less lonely by visiting Bagdad Cafe in Newberry Springs. This Mojave Desert landmark is a popular pit-stop thanks to a cult 1987 film. *Bagdad Cafe* was inspired by a real cafe that had long crumbled away so it was shot 80 kilometres away at the Sidewinder Cafe. A change of cafe ownership in 1995 brought about the clever silver-screen name change. Today, owner Andrea Pruett, 83, no longer serves food but, after fund-raising to repair her cafe’s crumbling roof, she still welcomes visitors to stop by and add to her mix of memorabilia. See bagdad-cafe-usa.com



Stuff NZ – July 26, 2024

“This US museum doesn't shy away from country's grim history, but sees hope in the future”

Unique Monthly Visitors: 4,354,237

Stuff

This US museum doesn't shy away from country's grim history, but sees hope in the future



Alan Granville

July 26, 2024 - 8:09am

Comment (3) Share



The International African American Museum in Charleston

The International African American Museum has just been named in Time magazine's "World's Greatest Places". Stuff Travel journalist Alan Granville visited earlier this year.

There is no escaping the human tragedy that was the slave trade at the [International African American Museum \(IAAM\)](#).

The millions who were ripped from their homes in Africa, the countless souls who died in transit, and the misery that those who survived experienced working for their owners. It's documented with sad precision by this museum in [Charleston, South Carolina](#), a city that was once steeped in the slave trade. It's estimated 45% of enslaved Africans stepped on American soil for the first time at Gadsden's Wharf.

So it's appropriate that this grim spot of tragedy is now home to the IAAM – a beacon with an unflinching look at the past, but one that sees a huge amount of hope for the future. A showcase and celebration too for the people who have battled back to make something better out of dire circumstances.

Across 12 permanent exhibitions and nine galleries, the IAAM takes a look at the African, African Diaspora, and African American experience, using more than 150 historical objects, 30 works of art, and nearly 50 films and digital interactive experiences.



Mallika N Pryor is the chief learning and engagement officer here and the former lawyer told *Stuff Travel* it's a careful balancing act between telling the grim tales of the past and showcasing the hope for the future.

“Our interpretation of these stories lives with constancy at the intersection of incredible loss and remarkable victories, small and systemic. So while the future is uncertain, it is hopeful because the path for the people has always been forged with the will to persist and to thrive,” said Pryor.

“The past was filled with grim and haunting truths and yet people constructed new cultural and personal realities in it and through it. Enslaved people chose love in a time they could not guarantee they'd raise the children they brought into existence.



One of the digital interactive experiences at IAAM.
IAAM / SUPPLIED

“Can you imagine choosing to risk that kind of pain and loss because you are working, praying and rebelling to manifest a time when future life might get to choose their own destiny? That is a depth of personal heroism that I struggle to imagine, and yet for centuries people of African descent throughout the western hemisphere did just that.”

With a range of permanent and temporary exhibitions, the IAAM is looking to constantly evolve, said Pryor.

“In my mind, a sustainable cultural institution, while not a community centre must be a centre for community. And by that I mean, the institution must be guided, informed, and in conversation with the individuals who represent the content on their walls and those – irrespective of background – who live nearby.



Malika N. Pryor is chief learning and engagement officer at the International African American Museum.

"What it means to centre community will change over time and that will inform how IAAM delivers on its mission in years to come."

Some 20 years in the making, the museum opened in 2023 and has been the work of many hands and donating companies, which Pryor called "magnificent".

"My having an opportunity to lead, facilitate and do a bit of editing... I am nearly speechless and tear filled when I really pause to think on it."

One of the highlights is the Center for Family History where visitors can trace their genealogy and family history through meticulous digital records.



The IAAM takes a look at the African, African Diaspora, and African American experience. JOSHUA PARKS / SUPPLIED

Brian Sheffey is the director and he said the centre has helped people find their ancestors in several ways.

"Our in-house 30-minute Introduction to Genealogy sessions have provided people with knowledge and tools to help them in their research. Visitors have emailed us to share that a research tip we covered helped them break through a brick wall," he told *Stuff Travel*.

"The CFH research team is also currently building a free, publicly accessible archive that will feature record sets to support genealogical research. African American funeral programmes, family bible entries, slavery-related records, family history and local history books, United States Colored Troops pension applications, digitised microfilm rolls, and more, will all be available to help the public find vital family information online.

"It is a privilege helping people find their family, and witnessing their reactions firsthand; from smiles and laughter to tears of both joy and sorrow."

The details

International African American Museum is at 14 Wharfside Street, Charleston (iaamuseum.org). For adults over 17, entry is US\$22 (NZ\$37) with concessions for children, seniors, and military.



It's estimated 45% of enslaved Africans stopped on American soil for the first time at Charleston's Gadsden's Wharf. IAAM / SUPPLIED

Getting there: Air New Zealand has direct flights from Auckland to Houston. Charleston is another two-and-a-half hour flight. See: airnewzealand.co.nz

Staying there: The historic Mills House (mills.house.com) is in the heart of downtown Charleston and has been operating for just over 170 years. It is just a short walk from all the sights and amenities. There are a variety of room types starting from just over US\$300 (NZ\$490) a night.



The entrance of the International African American Museum, Charleston. JOSHUA PARKS / SUPPLIED

Carbon footprint: Flying generates carbon emissions. To reduce your impact, consider other ways of travelling, amalgamate your trips, and when you need to fly, consider offsetting emissions.

The author was hosted by Travel South USA.

- Stuff

➦ Share

The Age - Traveller – August 2, 2024

“America’s most famous road trip is now a ‘ghost highway’”

Unique Monthly Visitors: 2,782,972

Traveller

America’s most famous road trip is now a ‘ghost highway’

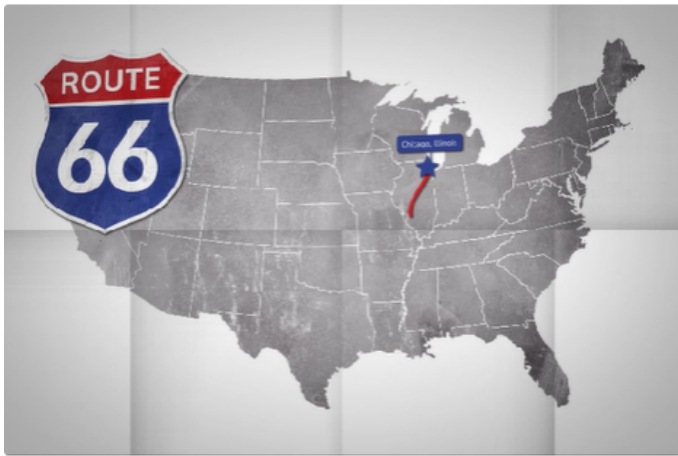
Katrina Lobley
AUGUST 2, 2024



This article is part of Traveller's Holiday Guide to the world's greatest road trips. [See all stories.](#)

Route 66 is a ghost highway. It officially vanished in 1985 – but try telling that to the good folk of Springfield, Missouri. This Springfield (one of 67 in the US) is nicknamed the Buckle of the Bible Belt, thanks to its hundreds of churches. Even while Uber-ing from the airport to my Route 66-themed motel, my driver confesses he glimpsed heaven the previous night as he hunkered down during a minor tornado.

A few years ago, a reporter calculated Springfield has six times as many churches as Chinese restaurants, which is saying something considering many residents are addicted to a local invention called cashew chicken. The city of 180,000 mostly God-fearing people is also the birthplace of another pivotal development – it was from here that a telegram was sent to federal officials on April 30, 1926, suggesting the new diagonal highway connecting Chicago, Illinois, to Santa Monica on the Pacific Coast be christened “66”. The designation was approved on November 11, the highway’s official birthdate.



Route 66 was born and Springfield, in the Missouri Ozarks, wrote itself into the history books (although Tulsa, Oklahoma, this year claimed the Capital of Route 66 title, as the guy who first noticed the 66 designation was available was a Tulsan). While this part of Middle America might be unfamiliar to many Australians, it's the perfect place to start exploring the near-mythical highway that ran almost 4000 kilometres through eight states. With these states and their retro roadside attractions already gearing up for an influx of visitors in 2026, now's the time to do the route as it was meant to be done: in a leisurely fashion, so you can shoot the breeze with characters you meet along the way.

Tracking down the route's historic wisps of blacktop, superseded by more efficient but less interesting interstate highways, can take grunt work, though. Many Route 66 attractions can help, as they sell guidebooks describing exactly how to trace that journey back to simpler times. It also helps that, as the eight states increasingly recognise the power of Route 66 tourism, brown-and-white Historic Route signage has sprouted alongside the former highway, turning the ephemeral into something more concrete.

Time travel on four wheels

What do travellers hope to find – beyond photo opportunities – as they journey along what's also called the Main Street of America? I have no idea, but my nostalgia trip starts on Springfield's West College Street. We snap pictures of the 1929-built Rockwood Motor Court – a fine example of what's known as giraffe-rock architecture (where sandstone or limestone is collected, sometimes split and then mortared in place, creating a pattern that resembles a giraffe's hide) – and head to College Street Cafe. Inside the tiny diner, a breakfast of eggs, bacon, hash brown, toast and percolated coffee makes for a classic American diner experience right on Route 66. Before taking leave, we ink our name on the walls as many others have done.



Sign along the route. iStock

Right out front, a Route 66 badge is painted onto the road. We snap selfies then stroll over to the Route 66 Car Museum – a vast display space for businessman Guy Mace's collection of historic and movie-themed vehicles, including a *Batman*-inspired 1971 Gotham Roadster and a *Ghostbusters* ECTO-1.

"I'm an unusual collector in that I drive most of my cars," says Mace, whose favourite set of wheels is a bronze 1967 Austin-Healey, while the most expensive (valued at \$US1.5 million, or \$2,240,000) is a 1936 Horch. Many vehicles on the museum floor are on trickle chargers to keep their batteries in shape.

"If you want to see the true America ... travel Route 66 and you'll see a lot of small towns. People want to see the real America," he says. With up to 40 per cent of the museum's visitors drawn from overseas, Mace says: "It's just incredible the mystique that Route 66 has worldwide."



© Gay Parita.

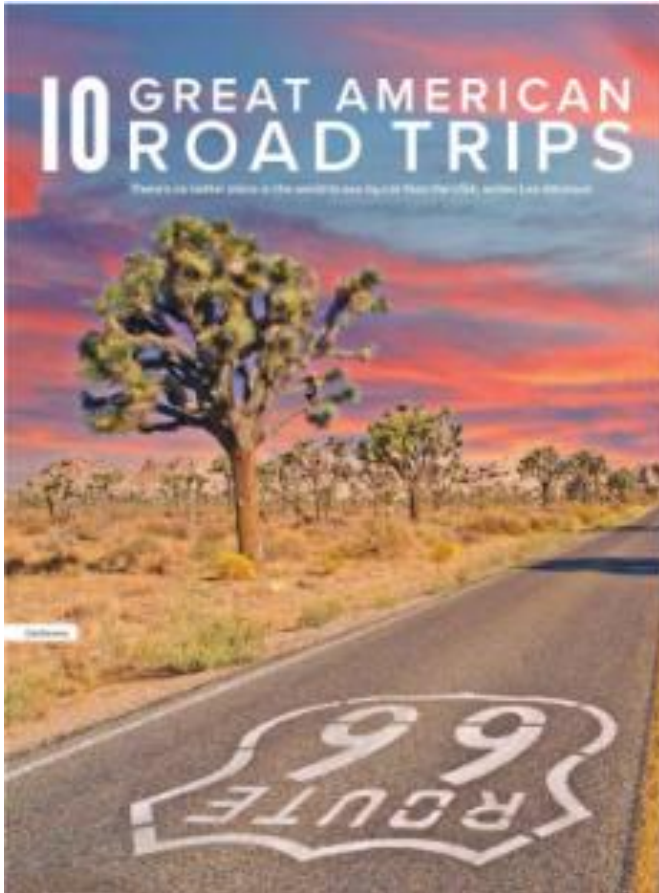
Equally amazed, even though he meets Route 66 tourists every day, is George Bowick of Gay Parita, a replica Sinclair gas station 37 kilometres west of Springfield on Old 66. The stop is a mere dot on the map but it illustrates how 66 is really about something other than landmarks: it's about people.

Sunday Herald Sun - Escape – August 18, 2024

“America’s most famous road trip is now a ‘ghost highway’”

Unique Monthly Visitors: 703,000

ESCAPE



6 Wild and easy
Blue Ridge Parkway
It's called America's favourite drive and it's easy to see why. Built specifically as a scenic tourist road – work began in 1935 and it took 52 years to complete – this spectacular drive winds through the Appalachian Mountains in Virginia to North Carolina's Great Smoky Mountains. Highlights include the highest peak in the eastern United States (Mount Mitchell), the oldest river in North America (rather oddly called New River), the deepest gorge east of the Grand Canyon (Linville Gorge) and the highest waterfalls east of the Rockies (Upper Whitewater Falls).
How far? About 755km.

7 The loneliest road
Highway 50
The last of the original two-lane transcontinental highways, this epic road trip from Sacramento (near San Francisco) on the west coast to Ocean City in Maryland on the east coast is a trip through the middle of America across a dozen states. It was dubbed the loneliest road by *Life* magazine in 1986 and the name has stuck. Highlights along the way include Lake Tahoe, the deserts and canyons of Nevada and Utah, a Rocky Mountain crossing in Colorado, Wild blues in Mississippi, and jazz in New Orleans, with plenty of music-themed museums and lots of clubs along the way. Don't even think about getting an early night on this trip.
How far? About 1010km.

8 For music lovers
The Blues Highway
Cue the playlist and crank up the volume on this road trip between Nashville in Tennessee to New Orleans in Louisiana. Take a backstage tour of country music's most famous venue, the Grand Ole Opry in Nashville, and spend some time in Memphis, the birthplace of rock 'n' roll and Elvis's home, Graceland. It's all about the Napa and Sonoma valleys north of San Francisco. The Napa Valley, stretching between the towns of American Canyon and Calistoga, is the most well-known of the US wine regions, and its multimillion-dollar wineries are a major drawcard – the 47km-long Silverado Trail will take you to some of the biggest and best. Neighbouring Sonoma County, on the other hand, is predominantly rural. While wineries are big business here, too, there are many more small-scale winemakers, with more than 85 cellar doors along a route called the Wine Road (see wineroad.com for a map) that winds around the Russian River Valley near Healdsburg and Dry Creek Valley and Alexander Valley near Geyserville.
How far? About 170km.

“The space race built this city”

Unique Monthly Visitors: 48,000

The Canberra Times

The space race built this city

Artists and engineers can co-exist - it's not rocket science, writes *Carrie Hutchinson*.

ROUNDING the corner, it's hard not to gasp. The centrepiece of this giant room is a rocket. Not just any old rocket either; it's the Saturn Five, launched into space by the Marshall Space Flight Centre in the 1960s. Only this one never took off.

"When the Saturn Fives fly, we don't get them back," says guide Joey Fann. "They're not reusable, like some of the SpaceX vehicles."

It's just one of the big attractions at the US Rocket and Space Centre in Huntsville, Alabama. Outside is the Pathfinder space shuttle; inside you can find out about current advancements in interstellar travel. There are also hundreds of school kids here participating in Space Camp. In this hall, however, the focus is on the Apollo program. And Joey isn't just any guide.

Space man

"One of my first memories is watching the Apollo astronauts on the moon," he says. "That really spurred an interest of mine. I grew up not too far from here in Middle Tennessee and can remember coming here when I was just a little kid and being fascinated by all the artefacts."

That fascination eventually led to Joey working on the International Space Station Program right here in Huntsville. He's now moved into software engineering but keeps his fingers in the moon pie by volunteering.

He tells us how the space program ended up in Alabama, about the race to put a man on the moon before the Russians, and of the incredible engineering it took to make that happen. One of the smaller exhibits in

this hall is the Apollo 16 Command Service Module Casper. In front of it, in a glass case, is a moon rock collected by Apollo 12.

"Sometimes I come here and just sit and stare and imagine what it would be like to be leaving Earth's orbit - going through the hatch to the lunar module, landing on the moon and coming back," he tells us then snaps back into informational mode and indicates Casper. "This is the only part with heat shields. You can see the honeycomb structure. Each cell was hand-injected with a composite material designed to react with the atmosphere coming back in. It would burn away taking the heat with it to keep the astronauts safe inside."

As tempting as it is to listen to Joey's stories of exploratory feats for hours, there's more to Rocket City than spacecraft.

Artistic vision

In the 1800s, Alabama was cotton central and led to Lowe Mill opening in 1901. Conditions were appalling - the work, carried out by children as well as adults, was hard and dangerous. Eventually the mill became a shoe factory then a warehouse until it was boarded up in 1970. It sat derelict until 2001 when geneticist Jim Hudson bought the site determined to create an arts centre. Today, Lowe Mill Arts & Entertainment has 153 studios housing more than 200 working artists.

There are gallery spaces, cafes, stores,

barbers, printers, a theatre and even a meadery. The old dock hosts music events. Then there are the makers: jewellers, sculptors, painters, designers and more. Missy Richey creates Muppet-style puppets and Danny Davis of Tangled Strings Studio left a career with NASA to create beautiful custom guitars. Another former rocket engineer, Jeff Mello, also makes stringed instruments, although more modest ones.

"I made one cigar box guitar then a few more and was hooked on them," he says.

When the Cigar Box Guitar Store in Lowe Mill was put on the market, he and his wife Tara bought it. They now also run the world's longest-running cigar box guitar music festival - 20 years and counting - each summer. In the store, there are handmade instruments hanging from the walls and propped on stands.

"Alright, grab a guitar," Jeff says, organising an impromptu beginners' jam. He hands around a box of picks for us to help ourselves.

He's open tuned all the guitars, just like Keith Richards. We practise strumming in open G. Next, we work on placing our fingers on the frets, add strumming then moving our fingers along the frets.

"You don't need to know how to play," he says. "As long as you all strum in time it'll sound like music."

Soon we're playing 12-bar blues. Would we be asked to open for the Rolling Stones? No. Is it recognisable as a tune? Sure.

Out with the old

Lowe Mill isn't the only repurposed building in Huntsville. An old appliances factory is now Stovehouse. It's one of those places

you can buy fresh flowers, take a swing dance class and meet friends for a craft beer. The Co-Op Brew Pub has what the owners claim is the longest bar in Alabama and 40 beers on tap from a variety of local brewers.

Then there's Campus No 805, once Stone Middle School, now an adult playground. Take out your frustrations at Civil Axe Throwing, play the pinnies at Ronnie Ray-gun's, try your hand at classic arcade games at Pints & Pixels, catch a band at Lone Goose Saloon or grab some dinner at Rock N Roll Sushi. There's also a couple of breweries on site, including Straight to Ale.

On a Thursday night it's packed with people playing trivia, scarfing down pretzels, and sipping on Monkeynaut IPA and Stout at the Devil. Oh, and among the brewers and owners of Straight to Ale are several former rocket scientists and engineers. Huntsville might just be the city built by space.

The writer was a guest of Travel South and the Alabama Tourism Department

TRIP NOTES

Getting there: Qantas flies from Sydney to Dallas connecting with partner American Airlines to Huntsville. Connections are available from Canberra and other cities.

Staying there: The Embassy Suites Huntsville Hotel in the city's downtown region offers spacious, updated suites, an indoor pool and fitness centre, and onsite restaurant and cafe. Rooms start at about \$285. See hilton.com

Explore more: huntsville.org

“As long as you all strum in time it'll sound like music.”

“America’s Favourite”

Unique Monthly Visitors: 425,000

Traveller



CITY | US

America's favourite

Ask Americans which US city they'd like to visit, and chances are they'll say none other than Charleston. Thanks to its first-time hospitality, time-warp architecture, walkability and pretty flower-filled historic lanes, South Carolina's largest city was named the favourite of *Travel + Leisure* magazine's readers for the past five years.

Many Australians, though, know little about this Atlantic Coast charmer. Our top-10 US cities are California, New York, Hawaii, Florida, Alaska, Washington state, DC, Georgia, Illinois and Massachusetts, according to a *Travel USA* 2023 survey. For those who said Georgia, here's the great state South Carolina is right next door.

My getting-to-know-Charleston adventure starts by checking in to the four-star-plus Midle House Hotel. The downtown hotel, which opened in 1953, has a well-stocked history. Guests helped save it from the city's Great Fire of 1961. President Roosevelt stayed there in 1961 and, after falling into a coma, it was rebuilt in the late 1960s.

After rolling through three other institutional hotels built in 1912, 1914 and 1915, I see part of the Charleston Collection by Hilton. One guest no longer in existence is a three-museum project with the phrase, "Well, I do indeed!"

I soon discover that my hotel is perfectly located. A ghost tour leads me through nearby streets to end among the foundations behind the Circular Congregational Church. Wrecks of Spanish moss-hanging from overhead branches add to the spooky atmosphere. Chills descend in this city, which is still reeling with its heart-



Spanish moss and Southern charm combine to make this city an unbeatable destination, writes Katrina Lobley.

rending slave-trade past. It's estimated almost half of all enslaved Africans to arrive North America arrived via Charleston's port. At that very spot where they were loaded ashore (if they survived the brutal Atlantic crossing, which pushed into holds like coffins), stands a new museum that explores the past while celebrating the present.

The International African American Museum doesn't hold back when recounting Charleston's painful history – yet that's balanced with stories of survival and triumph. Its galleries include one dedicated to the culture of the Gullah-Geechee – descendants of the enslaved – who successfully adapted to life in the marshes and waterways along a coastal corridor representing a region divided by the slave country.

Exhibits include a ballroom known locally as a de-constructed "peach house" – a one-room building used as a place of worship on plantations where the enslaved farmed rice, cotton and sugar. The museum's African American Memorial Garden is also alive with meaning: there is a poignant installation referencing the Gullah-Geechee song "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" as well as a list of prisoners – a wall marked with Gullah-Geechee names.

Preservation/charity make a last night. Charleston's historic 18th-century art scene shows their magic at the Charleston City Market – an institution covering four city blocks. If Charleston's beauty gives too much, head to Waterfront Park to catch a sailing lesson or, back, again, around in the Pineapple Fountain. Pineapples sprout like magic, but this fountain also represents resilience and hope, as it was installed in the aftermath of 2005's deadly Hurricane Hugo.

There's more to see in the "Holy City" – more churches, notably, and the pastel-painted 11 Georgian townhouses that comprise East Bay Street's Barbours House. North of town is Cypress Gardens, a relatively photogenic swamp garden said to be a haven for those who 2004 movie, *The Sea Hawk*.

In the other direction, on Johns Island is the Angel Oak Tree. It's estimated this sprouting tree is 300 to 400 years old and, like the spot where the new museum stands, is full of old ground. The land was once a plantation whose workers had graves beneath its gnarled limbs. Descendants of a doctor (most recent – and some minor) that the spirits of the enslaved not only survived at and the tree that also been protected it all these years. **✎**

The Waterfront Park and its Pineapple Fountain, a symbol of hospitality and also resilience and hope. Photo: *Black*

THE DETAILS

TOP *Charleston, with American Airlines, flies to Charleston via Dallas Fort Worth from Sydney and Melbourne. See aa.com.*

SEE *The International African American Museum (aamuseum.org) is open Tuesday to Sunday, 10am to 5pm. aa.com Charleston City Market (charlestoncitymarket.com) is open daily from 9.30am to 5pm. Cypress Gardens (cypressgardens.com) is open daily from 9.30am to 5pm. The Angel Oak Tree (angel-oak.com) is open daily, free admission.*

STAY *The Midle House Hotel has rooms from \$250 to \$1,200 a night. See mhouse.com.*

For more info, go to TravelUSA.com. See also www.visitcharleston.com.

“Where Noah met Allie”

Unique Monthly Visitors: 384,993

Traveller



Newsworthy in their own universes, these were marriage proposals. “We still get a couple a week,” says the handsome young gentleman, smiling the flat-bottomed, slightly brown and lopsided smile that thrusts up imperceptibly from the awkward, black-clothed shoulders of the swamp-creatures’ swivel.

The 12th-century water swamp at Cypress Gardens, 45km south of Charleston, South Carolina, is a charming charmer. It’s been the backdrop for a parade of films, including the 1954 classic *The Pirate*, DC Comics’ *Swamp Thing* and, recently, Netflix’s *Outer Banks* series. Most famous of all, however, is its last-minute role in the 20th century’s most successful, when it was, arguably, superannuated. *The Notebook*.

Back in 2004, dead-beat editor’s choice of director Nick Cassavetes’ adaptation of Nicholas Sparks’ novel, a tale of teenage love, the impact of this like “If you’re a bird, I’m a bird.” *The Notebook* charmed every into cult-movie status, regardless of how much fans, it “still isn’t over”. Its legacy is undeniable: that 20 years after its release, multiple brides are still posed upon Cypress Gardens’ Wedding Garden Gazebo every week.

Believers will know the “It’s like a dream” scene by heart: when the poor Noah is considering, half-dressed, how to get his way, old money and equally half-dressed Allie (Rachel McAdams) back into his heart, through an unusually massive gaggle of geese. Not a single goose has been here today, however.

“They were especially trained through it for the film, but they flew away, never to return,” says Jill Potts, owner of Electric Town

of Charleston, which shows the *Notebook* locations, including a seasonal off-limits to the public, but including one central location on that island.

The film theme’s soft plates notes drift from Jill’s phone as we face under the built-for-the-film *Notebook* Bridge. I could eye on that first of crying, you’re crying.

Yellow-bellied dider notle slippery slip from front legs, it comes fish for lunch. Diddy, 3m alligator swim away from our attention, sometimes blocking popular nearby hiking paths. The largest ones, Allie (gator) and 4m two, are found in an enclosure near the garden’s botanical exhibit. During filming, and weather proved more challenging than these magnificent reptiles. Some snakes were shot in winter’s depths as geese and McAdams would sprint for their jackets after every “Aa”.

Grand Southern mansions anchor *The Notebook*’s 1940s “simpler time” aesthetic. Among the McAdams’ home on the Old Charleston Navy Base, an off-limits today tipper. However, you can pay handsomely to get inside the ancestral house under a Spanish moss-draped oak tree outside the Neoclassical mansion where Allie follows the career and artist brother’s line of painting.

The Notebook’s second-most noteworthy mansion is at Boone Hall Plantation, 20km southeast of Charleston, which doubles as Allie’s parents’ summer home where Noah, accidentally, crashes his truck through a fence. Its spectacular new road drive, the Avenue of Oaks, focuses all attention towards Boone Hall’s Colonial Revival-style “show” mansion.

Less attention, however, is given to the plantation’s true slave culture, a visceral reminder of the iniquitable truths behind

The Daily Telegraph - Escape – January 26, 2025

“After 20 years, The Notebook fans are still flocking to South Carolina”

Unique Monthly Visitors: 1,915,989

ESCAPE

After 20 years, The Notebook fans are still flocking to South Carolina

Two decades since its big screen appearance in *The Notebook*, this destination is still attracting movie lovers on the trail of romance.

Steve Madgwick

No swamp in the known universe hosts more marriage proposals. “We still get a couple a week,” says the handsome young gent gently rowing the flat-bottomed dinghy between bald cypress trees that thrust up improbably from the mirrored, black-tannin shallows like giant swamp-creature snorkels.

The 32ha blackwater swamp at Cypress Gardens, 45km north of Charleston, South Carolina, is a cinematic chameleon. It’s been the backdrop for a potpourri of films, including Mel Gibson’s *The Patriot*, DC Comics’ *Swamp Thing* and, recently, Netflix’s *Outer Banks* series. Most famous of all, however, is its four-minute role in the 21st century’s most successful, schmalziest and, arguably, superb romance, *The Notebook*.

Back in 2004, dead-hearted critics panned director Nick Cassavetes’ adaptation of Nicholas Sparks’ novel, unable to grasp the impact of lines like “If you’re a bird, I’m a bird”. *The Notebook* charmed its way into cult-movie status regardless and, to lovesick fans, it “still isn’t over”. Its legacy is so indelible that 20 years after its release, multiple brides are still rowed up to Cypress Gardens’ Wedding Garden Gazebo every week.



Rachel McAdams and Ryan Gosling in *The Notebook*.

Believers will know the “it’s like a dream” scene by heart: when dirt-poor Noah (smouldering, baby-faced Ryan Gosling) rows old-money and equally baby-faced Allie (Rachel McAdams) back into his heart, through an unnaturally massive gaggle of geese. Not a single goose honks here today, however.

“They were especially trained, brought in for the film, but they flew away, never to return,” says Jill Paris, owner of Eclectic Tours of Charleston, who’s showing me *Notebook* locations, including some usually off-limits to the public, but excluding one seminal site (more on that to come).

The film theme’s soft piano notes drift from Jill’s phone as we float under the built-for-the-film Notebook Bridge. I avoid eye contact; I’m not crying, you’re crying.

Yellow-bellied slider turtles slippery dip from floating logs. Herons fish for brunch. Tubby 3m alligators swim away from our intrusion, sometimes blocking popular nearby hiking paths. The largest ones, Ally(gator) and 4m Boss, are fenced in an enclosure near the garden’s Swamparium exhibit. During filming, cold weather proved more challenging than these magnificent reptiles. Storm scenes were shot in winter’s depths so Gosling and McAdams would sprint for their jackets after every “cut”.



Following Noah and Allie on a rowboat through Cypress Gardens.

Grand Southern mansions anchor *The Notebook*’s 1940s “simpler-time” aesthetic. Many, like The Admiral’s House on the Old Charleston Navy Base, are off-limits to day-trippers. However, you can pay handsomely to get married on the astroturf lawn under a Spanish-moss-draped oak tree outside the Neoclassical mansion where Allie follows the arrows and rekindles her love of painting.

The Notebook’s second-most noteworthy mansion is at Boone Hall Plantation, 20km northeast of Charleston, which doubles as Allie’s parents’ summer home where Noah, accidentally, crashes his truck through a fence. Its spectacular tree-lined driveway, the Avenue of Oaks, focuses all attention towards Boone Hall’s Colonial Revival-style “show” mansion.



explore



Foot soldiers for a better future

Birmingham, Alabama, is a city that hopes history never repeats, writes *Carrie Hutchinson*.

IT WAS May 3, 1963. More than a thousand Birmingham students skipped school – just as they had the day before – to protest segregation. Only this day was different. The city's commissioner for public safety, Bull Connor, ordered the police to use force to disperse them. They turned fire hoses and their dogs on children, some as young as seven years old, arrested them and locked them up. Some would be released and back to the streets they'd go. It went on for a week, as the world looked on in horror.

"I was 12 when I ended up going to jail," says Nadine Smith. "I didn't go into the city just because I was too young. They took us to the fairgrounds where they put us in things that looked like animal pens."

"We sang songs. We weren't afraid to be there. On about the seventh day, they finally gave us a telephone and told us to make our own phone call. We were supposed to call our parents to tell them to come and get us. We didn't. When we got the telephone most of us were like, 'I need a toothbrush and a change of underwear.' They snatched the phones from us."

Remembering the past

Nadine and other former marchers now

From top: Four Spirits memorial commemorating the 1963 bombing in Birmingham, which killed four young girls, foot soldiers, including Nadine Smith (second from left), with Street Baptist Church. Pictures: Shutterstock, supplied



spend some of their time at the Birmingham Civil Rights Activist Committee Headquarters. Meeting some of the "foot soldiers" is just one of the ways visitors to Birmingham today can trace the history of civil rights in the south.

Right through the downtown area and historically Black neighbourhoods, more than a hundred trail markers provide information about the civil rights movement and its leaders. There's the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute and the Masonic Temple, former home of the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NAACP). St Paul's United Methodist Church is where the Reverend Dr Joseph Lowery founded the Southern Christian Leadership Conference with Dr Martin Luther King. In 2017, President Barack Obama proclaimed the four city blocks on which these key sites are situated the Birmingham Civil Rights National Monument.

It's hard to believe in the modern, bustling Birmingham of today that the city, along with everywhere else in Alabama, was segregated until the late-60s.

It started with seats

The fight for equal rights didn't start in downtown Birmingham, but in the neighbourhood of College Hills. From 1956,

Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth led the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights from Bethel Baptist Church.

When, in November 1956, the Supreme Court ruled segregation on buses illegal – a year after Rosa

Parks refused to vacate her seat – he decided to mark the occasion.

"Reverend Shuttlesworth told his congregation that the day after Christmas, guess what, we're going to ride the bus in an integrated fashion," says Martha Bouyer, who's now educational coordinator at Bethel. "And you always let the press know what you were going to do."

Bethel Bible Baptist Church was bombed three times. The first? Christmas night, 1956. Reverend Shuttlesworth was in his bedroom, reading his Bible. Friends were visiting and the children were playing in the living room.

"Reverend Shuttlesworth was actually blown up into the air," continues Martha. "And when he came back down, there was a huge crater left by the bomb. Once he realised he wasn't hurt, he started gathering up his family."

The pastor had been reading in his underwear and, as he climbed out of the rubble, he grabbed a coat that was still hanging on its hook. Somehow, no one in the parsonage was injured, and followers took it as a sign from God. The next morning, in borrowed clothes, Reverend Shuttlesworth and 200 of his congregants went downtown.

"He did exactly what he said," says Martha, during a tour of the rebuilt Bethel Baptist Church, next door to the outline of the one that was finally razed by a blast in 1962. "He never asked anybody to do anything he was not willing to do. If he said, 'Let's ride the bus,' he's riding the bus. 'Let's integrate schools.' He's the first to bring his family. And, really, that's how this got started."

A march to remember

It was Reverend Shuttlesworth's work that brought Dr Martin Luther King Jr to Birmingham, where mass meetings were held at the 16th Street Baptist Church. But when adults stopped protesting for fear of losing their jobs (or worse), the movement stagnated. It was then Reverend James Bevel organised for groups of children to march to City Hall, lunch counters and downtown shops.

The Children's March lasted for eight

days. People outside Alabama were so shocked, President John Kennedy began establishing new federal civil rights legislation.

The movement was reintegrated in the south, although change was slow and sometimes non-existent. Just months after the Children's March, on September 15, 1963, the 16th Street Baptist Church was bombed, killing four young girls at Sunday School.

Today, you can tour the church and see the large memorial stained-glass window given to the church by the people of Wales. Across the road, at Kelly Ingram Park, there's a sculpture depicting the four young girls, Denise McNair, Addie Mae Collins, Cynthia Wesley and Carole Robertson. Further into the park, there are statues of Dr King and Reverend Shuttlesworth, as well as depictions of the snarling dogs and children behind bars. And just around the corner is the AG Gaston Motel, where central figures in the civil rights movement, including Dr King, stayed.

It's a somber experience to visit these monuments to a violent history. Harrowing, too, because the people who lived through those times somehow still manage to evade love, light and hope. As one of them tells me, "We talk about it now so it never happens again."

The writer was a guest of Travel South and Alabama Travel

TRIP NOTES

Getting there: Qantas flies from Sydney to Dallas, connecting with partner American Airlines to Birmingham, Alabama

Staying there: Hampton Inn & Suites Birmingham Downtown-Tulwiler was built in 1914 to get the Iron and Steel Institute to hold its convention in Birmingham. It's believed the ghost of Colonel Edward Tulwiler manifests on the sixth floor. The hotel is around the corner from the Birmingham Museum of Art and a short walk from the Civil Rights District. Rooms start at about \$220 a night. hampton.com

Explore more: bcr.org/birmingham.gov

ESCAPE



The Robert Johnson legend begins here, too. The story goes that the guitar player transformed himself into a blues maestro by selling his soul to the devil at a crossroads. The apocryphal story has spawned four much debated crossroads "sites," from the original one down a gravel road across from Vicksburg to the famous intersection of Highways 61 and 49 in Clarksdale (marked with a red-dot dot-dot).

B-roads and backwaters

[illegible]

Thirty minutes southwest, Burns' ("Baby Doll") House is also rich in historical significance. It was the only antebellum home in the area not to be looted by advancing Northern troops in the Civil War. Then, in 1966, the white ground-enclosed residence became the setting for *Baby Doll*, a film adaptation of a Tennessee Williams play about a former Confederate aristocrat, who (the Catholic church doesn't "sanctify") the black comedy lends its name to the nightie style worn by actress Carroll Baker in the film.

The importance of a little Money

The small community of Morley—close to Robert Johnson's childhood home—played a monumental role in sparking America's civil rights movement into life.

A Mississippi Freedom Trail marker outside Bryant's Grocery store tells the story of Ernest T.B. (1905-1963). He was kidnapped, tortured and killed after being accused of flirting with the shopkeeper. His husband and his half-brother were acquitted by a small white jury (they later "sold" their conviction to a racist). In 2002, a memorial statue of Ernest was erected in nearby Greenwood, a slow road to a fraught history.

"Take your time," he says, with vitriolic enthusiasm. "You've got to be patient. You've got to be patient."

I've dipped into the *Mighty Mississippi*; my eyes are pruned from late nights but, yes, I've hardly heard the first verse of the Delta's current tune song.

The author is a guest of Travel South Africa.

journalist Steve Montague has road-tripped 17 of the 50 US states but still panics whenever he approaches major intersections on the "wrong" side of the road.

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Clockwise from top: Grammy Museum in Cleveland; the Brick Men street preacher; a farm shack at Burns ("Bobby Dool" House (right); retro gas station at Deekley Farms; a mural in Clarksville celebrating the town's musical history



ESCAPE

DESTINATION / 31



Entry to Oak Alley Plantation and its slave quarters (inset).



TAKE A TOUR

Confronting history

Louisiana Plantation Houses



Eliza O'Hare has spent 25 years writing about style, design and travel, and now reports between her bases in Sydney and the Cinque Terre.

In Louisiana, all was not well before the Civil War. Or after the war either. But the sugar-coating around slavery is finally over for some of the great plantation houses of the state. I was invited to tour three estates in the Saint James parish and I wondered how they might approach the confronting heritage of slavery that built the extraordinary wealth across the south. Here's how the descendants of three plantations on the banks of the Mississippi are reckoning with the past.

Oak Alley Plantation

Tourists take selfies on the oak-lined driveway to the big house, and why not? It's gorgeous, as is the impeccably preserved interior, gold-rimmed crockery and original hand-stitched French linens, but step into the antechamber and you'll also see a set of cast-iron ankle shackles on display.

This self-guided tour plays it as it lays, deftly revealing the extraordinary wealth that was once here alongside the true histories and daily indignities of the enslaved who built the house

and worked the sugarcane and pecan fields. It includes a walk through a restored workshop and slave quarters.

The wall engraved with names of the slaves who passed through Oak Alley is particularly moving. Tickets from \$US29; allow two hours. oakalleyplantation.org

St Joseph Plantation

The sugarcane plantation next door may be less manicured, but is still in the imposing Grecian style, all white columns and expansive verandas, and all built using slave-made mud bricks and labour. Hollywood came calling in search of a spooky colonial location for the 2005 film *The Skeleton Key*, which afforded the family the resources for extensive renovations required to keep this mansion-museum standing.

Tours here are guided mainly by the descendants of the original family and start with a quick video before we head out for a solemn walk through quarters, kitchens, sheds and schoolhouse. Tickets from \$US22; allow one hour. stjosephplantation.com

Laura Plantation

By the time I arrive at the third plantation of the day, I'm overwhelmed. It's a lot. But tour guide Joseph Dunn is

so passionate that I am immediately swept up in the saga of the Duparc family. This is a Creole plantation – weatherboard architecture painted pale yellow, blue, green and terracotta.

The tour is delivered through the eyes of Laura, granddaughter of the first Duparc. The discovery of records dating back to 1808 means the available histories of the hundreds of slaves who lived and died on Laura are more accessible. And more real.

Stories of children fathered by the owner with his own slaves, then sold are heart-breaking and while the slave quarters are stark and confronting, the grounds remain breathtaking – as conflicting and confronting as the history of Louisiana's plantations. Tickets from \$US28; allow one hour. lauraplantation.com

TO KNOW

GETTING THERE

- > The three plantations are next door to each other in St James Parish, a 50-minute drive from New Orleans.
- > Hire a car and see one plantation or hop on a round-trip tour from New Orleans and see all three.
- > If you're self-driving you can also overnight at Oak Alley in one of its weatherboard cottages, including breakfast, starting from \$270 a night.

NEED TO

Stuff NZ – April 28, 2025

“Rattlesnake Saloon, Alabama: Beers and country music in one of the most unique places I’ve ever visited”

Unique Monthly Visitors: 3,531,945

Stuff

Rattlesnake Saloon, Alabama: Beers and country music in one of the most unique places I’ve ever visited



Welcome to the Rattlesnake Saloon, Alabama

VIDEO CREDIT: STUFF

It is safe to say the members of our group weren’t quite expecting what was about to unfold as the large truck pulled up in front of us.

The cigar-chomping driver ambled out of the converted pick-up, ushering us to sit on the open-air wooden benches on the back.

“You better hold tight,” was the simple instruction. We didn’t need telling twice. As we approached a steep decline, nervous laughter emanated from my comrades.

This unusual taxi is the only way in and out of one of the most unique bars I have ever visited – part dining room, part live music venue, and all set under a rock bluff in a remote part of northwestern Alabama.



The Rattlesnake Saloon opened in 2009.

ALAN GRANVILLE

As the pick-up truck slowly worked its way down the track, the incredible setting opened out in front of us.

This land has been in the Foster family for generations. The cave was once used to home pigs, until it took some lateral thinking by Danny Foster and his youngest son, William Gordon Foster to turn this particular location into a saloon and restaurant.

The story goes it took 49 days to create this watering hole in a cave, with the discovery of a rattlesnake den during the construction leading to its eventual name.

That was in 2009 and the venue has become one of the most popular drawcards to this part of northwestern Alabama, and I can see why.



The saloon is one of the most popular drawcards to this part of northwestern Alabama.

ALAN GRANVILLE

The menu is very much a ‘if it ain’t fried, it ain’t food’ style of dining but is certainly tasty. My BBQ sandwich of pulled pork in a brioche bun hit the mark, while the deep fried cheesecake is a heart-stopping highlight.

But it’s the overall atmosphere which draws visitors.

All through the evening it was difficult to wipe the smile off my face at the audacity of the setting. The cheap beers probably helped too.

If anyone ever asks me to paint a picture of what hospitality in the Southern USA looks like, I think I have found my inspiration.

Details

Rattlesnake Saloon, 1292 Mt Mills Rd, Tuscumbia, Alabama – rattlesnakesaloon.net

Getting there

Air New Zealand flies Auckland to Houston and American Airlines flies Auckland-Dallas. Huntsville, Alabama is another two-hour flight, with Tuscumbia just over an hour’s drive from there.

Stuff NZ – May 11, 2025

“Muscle Shoals: The unsung US town with a strange name and its huge influence on music”

Unique Monthly Visitors: 3,531,945

Stuff

Muscle Shoals: The unsung US town with a strange name and its huge influence on music



Muscle Shoals was once dubbed ‘The Hit Recording Capital of the World’.
SUPPLIED

The laminated sign on the battered orange vinyl sofa has a warning all in caps: PLEASE DO NOT SIT. THANK YOU! The large holes partially covered by peeling gaffer tape should already be enough to discourage any posteriors.

Anywhere else it would have been dumped long ago, but not here. Because this humble sofa is in a very special room, one that has witnessed music history. Since 1969, it has had legendary singers and bands sit on it, sleep on it and party hard on it, all while they created some of the most famous lyrics and melodies of all time.



Cher’s been here, so have the Rolling Stones, Lynyrd Skynyrd, Elton John, Paul Simon, Linda Ronstadt, Rod Stewart, Bob Seger ... the list goes on.

But this isn’t Memphis, Detroit or Nashville, or one of the more famous music cities. This is a small, strangely-named town by a twisty river in Alabama that burned bright thanks to one shrewd entrepreneur and an extremely talented group of musicians.

The unusual name

There’s an aura of mystery about the winding Tennessee River which flows through this part of northwestern Alabama. The indigenous tribes believed the waters sang to them, calling their kin home. Music is everywhere. WC Handy, known as the father of the blues, was born here, while another local Sam Phillips discovered a young Elvis Presley.



Inside FAME Studios. A tour operates around the recording sessions.
ALAN GRANVILLE

Today the region is simply known as The Shoals, made up of four close-knit cities: Muscle Shoals, Tuscumbia, Sheffield and Florence.

The entrepreneur and the rivalry

With musical heritage flowing through the region, it was only a matter of time before it rippled beyond Alabama’s borders across the US and the world. Muscle Shoals would soon rival the country’s biggest hit-making cities, and it’s thanks to one very savvy man.

Rick Hall could do it all – write, produce, play, engineer, promote and publish. He opened FAME (Florence Alabama Music Enterprises) Music in the late 1950s, and, with the help of a group of local session musicians, set about creating a sound unlike any other in the US. This was heartfelt soul mashed with rhythm and blues and a slice of Southern country.



The entrance to one of the FAME studios.
SUPPLIED

The Sunday Herald Sun - Escape – May 4, 2025

“Viking Mississippi: New Orleans to Memphis”

Unique Monthly Visitors: 384,993

ESCAPE



WHAT'S HOT

Think a compact ship won't have a pool? Think again. There's a lovely plunge version on the ship's aft, perfectly positioned for sunset river views.

WHAT'S NOT

I would have loved the ship to have a fitness studio, so I could work off some of that Southern fried food, but skipops around the Promenade Deck is equivalent to walking a mile (plus you can do it with me), skip (in fact).



WE SAIL ON... Viking Mississippi

New Orleans to Memphis

Alexandra Carlton loves every moment
of a slow trip along a storied US river

The Mississippi River is the stuff of stories, songs and legends: the playground of Huckberry Finn and Tom Sawyer, the liquid highway that shines “like a national guitar” in Paul Simon’s *Graceland*. It’s the lifeblood of America’s South, and there’s no more gracious way to explore it than on the low-lying, 386-guest *Viking Mississippi* riverboat. Slip Saenger and dance to zydeco, spot jators in the swamplands and visit the birthplace of the Delta Blues. Travelling this river is a historic, heart-touching journey like no other.

ITINERARY

Viking Mississippi’s eight-day Mississippi Delta Explorer voyage begins in the jumping jazz capital of New Orleans, and snakes its way up mighty river to the heart of blues country, Memphis, Tennessee, a journey of around 1000km (you could drive it more directly in about six hours, but where’s the fun in that?).

Along the way we stop at small southern towns that brim with history and hospitality: Dumas and Baton Rouge in Louisiana, Natchez and Greenville in Mississippi. Each stop explores the South’s many layers of culture and cuisine, from African and Acadian music to the dark past of plantations and the tragedy of unmarked Civil War graves. At every stop we feast on biscuits and gravy, blackened catfish and the famous Mississippi hot tangles.

Must-book excursions include the Cajun Swamp Experience in Dumas (there are more crocs than people, and you’ll likely see a raccoon or two, too) and the Steve Azar Blues and B.B. King Museum experience in Greenville.

ON BOARD

Viking’s interiors are some of the most attractive of any ships: cool, crisp and Nordic. The Explorers’ Lounge at the bow of the ship on Deck 2 is particularly charming, dappled with a fresh blue-and-white colour scheme, edged by a galaxy-patterned light instalment and bathed in sunshine during the day.

Don’t expect to find anything gaudy or gilt in the 193 staterooms, either: the look here is all about clean lines and pretty practicality. Every one is river-facing; the entry-level staterooms have french balconies, while the top-level Explorer Suite includes a wraparound balcony and a private dining room.

DINING

There are two main dining areas: the casual, buffet-style River Café on Deck 5 and the more formal The Restaurant on Deck 1, which serves both international and regional dishes (their soups are particularly excellent; don’t sleep on the gaupcho or gumbo if you see them on a menu).

Hot tip: almost everything served at the latter is also available at the former, so if you value variety over more formal, plated service, the sun-drenched River Café is your best dining bet.

And an even hotter tip: in my view the tastiest food on the ship can be found on the bright and breezy Aquavit Terrace, which is right beside the River Café, almost like an alfresco extension. This place is a temple to surf and turf, serving fresh Gulf shrimp and oysters on ice, as well as barbecue classics grilled to order, like wagyu burgers, steak and – appropriately for the destination – fresh catfish.

ENTERTAINMENT

Because you leave the ship for excursions almost every day the entertainment program isn’t as extensive as other cruises: there’s no back-to-back calendar of shuffleboard or bridge. But you are in the heartland of American music so the evening entertainers in The Living Room on Deck 1 are first-class specialising in blues, country, jazz and zydeco, the fiddle-centric music of the swamps. There’s also a daily lecture that helps expand guests’ knowledge of the region covering everything from the history of river steamboats to slavery.

PRE- AND POST-CRUISE

It’s a long trek to the US from Australia so it makes sense to add on what Cajuns and Creoles call a *lagniappe*, or a little something extra, to your cruise. Viking offers pre- and post-cruise itineraries in New Orleans where the voyage ends, Memphis and Nashville, the latter of which is about two hours from where the ship docks in Memphis.

Take a walking tour of New Orleans and discover its haunted voodoo history, visit the sacred halls of Graceland in Memphis, where the King himself lies sleeping, or see how much heat you can take by feasting on the hottest of hot Nashville hot chicken.

The writer was a guest of Viking. Viking’s eight-day Mississippi Delta Explorer is priced from \$6495 per person in a Deluxe Veranda room with savings of up to \$4800 per couple from new 2025, 2026 and 2027 sailings. Available until June 30, vikingrivercruises.com.au

From top:
The Bow is
a great spot
to soak up the
sun and views;
the Viking
Mississippi
travels about
1000km of the
mighty river.

The Sydney Morning Herald - Traveller – May 4, 2025

“America’s most famous river journey is also highly underrated”

Unique Monthly Visitors: 678,948

Traveller

America’s most famous river journey is also highly underrated



New Orleans has a lot of love, and beads, to give. Celebrated for a season, not just one day, the carnival period leading up to Mardi Gras is a wild time in the Big Easy. Armfuls of colourful beads are thrown by revellers on balconies to people down below, and the crowded streets throb with tipsy party energy. I arrive wearing basic black. Within half an hour, I’m sporting dozens of gifted strands of beads in purple, gold and green, the hues of New Orleans.

I’m here to join Viking’s Mississippi Delta Explorer river cruise from New Orleans to Memphis, the birthplace of blues and rock’n’roll. Along the way, there will be delicious Creole and barbecue cuisine to savour, a sobering lesson in the history of slavery, Civil War battle sites and unforgettably warm small-town welcomes.



Mississippi on the Mississippi River between Louisiana and Mississippi.

One of the world’s great rivers, the mighty Mississippi is storied in American culture, history and identity. It’s where Delta blues music developed, it’s the setting of Mark Twain’s classic tale of Huck Finn’s river adventures, and the home – still, to this day – of grand antebellum mansions and former slave plantations.

Essential to the communities along its banks and beyond, the river provides drinking water for almost 20 million people and carries hundreds of millions of tonnes of freight every year. Yet for all its vitality, Big Muddy, as it’s cheekily referred to by some, doesn’t always receive the love it deserves. Not as scenic as the Great Lakes, not as affluent as the East Coast cruise routes, it’s too easy to make assumptions about the people, places and political leanings along the way. I’m here with an open mind and heart.

Life on the Mississippi



When Mark Twain recounted his days as a steamboat pilot on the river in his memoir, *Life on the Mississippi*, he vividly captured the power and beauty of the river. He wrote of a time in the 19th century when the river was the lifeblood of America, its major water highway and home to thriving river towns.

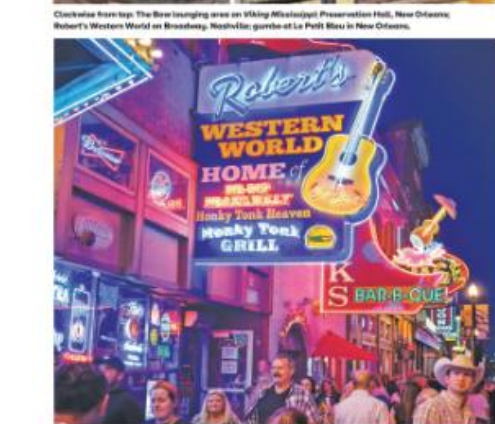
I’m eager to learn about that history and culture in big cities and small towns I’ve never heard of until now. Viking’s decision to custom-build a river vessel in 2022 for Mississippi River sailings makes it possible to do it in style and comfort.

The 386-guest river ship, Viking Mississippi, has much in common with other ships in the extensive Viking fleet. There’s the same Scandi design and international cuisine, but this time with an American accent and an all-American crew. There’s also a generous shore excursion program that offers at least one complimentary shore visit in each port.

New Orleans knows how to party

In the weeks leading up to Mardi Gras in New Orleans, dozens of colourful parades roll through the streets, where the beads (and toys) are thrown from elaborately decorated floats, and a seat on one of the wrought-iron balconies in the French Quarter is the hottest ticket in town.

ESCAPE



Cajun food belongs to the Louisiana bayous. It is heavy on the spice and French technique like the first Cajuns or "Acadians" were originally from France. In Barrow, I decided to take an alligator swampboat (slightly recommended) rather than focus on eating or music, so the best Cajun food I had was served on a boat. The chef made the shrimp cuisine to the location, and gummy like, served Cajun cooked fish from a tower from the all-eco-Aquatic Terrace as well as served through lower Louisiana. The chef gave me a menu.

Alexandru Carlsen loves the American South because it combines all her favourite things – cuisine built from multiple cultures, rich history, and the origins of the world's greatest art form: jazz, blues and rock and roll.

Wiley's eight-day, all-inclusive Delta Explorer is priced at \$30,495 per person.

Delta Vacations with savings of up to \$400 per couple on new 2025, 2026 and 2027 sailings. Book by 31 Jan 2025. wiley.com

Clockwise from below: Robert's Western World; a Dirty South breakfast sandwich at Sunrise Memphis; an oligolar swamp tour in Darrow (also top right); downtown Nashville; Fat Mama's tamales (inset).



Sunday Star Times – May 11, 2025

“Muscle Shoals, Alabama: The unsung US town with a huge influence on music”

Unique Monthly Visitors: 816,000

Muscle Shoals, Alabama: The unsung US town with a huge influence on music

SUNDAY STAR★TIMES

MAY 11, 2025

travel



Brought to
you by



TURN OVER FOR
SUNDAY

Rhythm OF THE SOUTH

Alan Granville heads to Alabama to visit an unsung musical destination.



The laminated sign on the battered orange vinyl sofa has a warning all in caps: PLEASE DO NOT SIT. THANK YOU! The large holes partly covered by peeling gaffer tape should already be enough to discourage any posturing. Anywhere else it would have been dumped long ago, but not here. Because this humble sofa is in a very special room, one that has witnessed music history. Since 1969, it has had legendary singers and hands sit on it, sleep on it and party hard on it, all while they created some of the most famous lyrics and melodies of all time. Cher's been here, so have the Rolling Stones, Lynyrd Skynyrd, Elton John, Paul Simon, Linda Ronstadt, Rod Stewart, Bob Seger... the list goes on. But this isn't Memphis, Detroit or Nashville, or one of the more famous music cities. This is a small, strangely named town by a twisty river in Alabama that earned bright thanks to one shrewd entrepreneur and an extremely talented group of musicians. Welcome to Muscle Shoals – a town once dubbed "The Hit Recording Capital of the World."

The unusual name

There's an aura of mystery about the winding Tennessee River which flows through this part of northwestern Alabama. The indigenous tribes believed the waters sang to them, calling their kin home. Music is everywhere. WC Handy, known as the Father of the blues, was born here, while another local, Sam Phillips, discovered a young Elvis Presley. The origins of the name Muscle Shoals are somewhat muddled. Some believe it is a reference to the plentiful mussels and the moniker could be a simple misprint. It could also be a reference to the shape of the river, which looks like a flexed arm. Or it could come from the effort needed in the past to navigate the waters. However it came to be, it has stuck. Today the region is simply known as The Shoals, made up of four close-knit cities: Muscle Shoals, Tuscumbia, Sheffield and Florence.

The entrepreneur and the rivalry

With musical heritage flowing through the region, it was only a matter of time before it rippled beyond Alabama's borders across the United States and the world. Muscle Shoals would soon rival the country's biggest hit-making cities, and it's thanks to one very savvy man. Rick Hall could do it all – write, produce, play, engineer, promote and publish. He opened FAME (Florence Alabama Music Enterprises) Music in the late 1950s, and with the help of a group of local session musicians, set about creating a sound unlike any other in the US. This was heartfelt soul infused with rhythm and blues and a dose of Southern country. FAME had some early success but it was a time from a hospital orderly and part-time singer that truly put the studio on the worldwide map. That man was Percy Sledge and the song was *When a Man Loves a Woman*, and the rest is history. The first set of session musicians departed to Nashville for better pay, but it was their replacements who truly cemented the 'Muscle Shoals sound'. Their official name was the Muscle Shoals Rhythm Section but they were affectionately known as The Swampers. They were later immortalised in Lynyrd Skynyrd's sweet *Home Alabama*. "Now Muscle Shoals has got the Swampers. And they've been known to pick a song or two (yes, they did)." FAME's success continued with Wilson Pickett recording *Mandinga Lady*, while Otis Redding, Little Richard, Gandi Staton, Clarence Carter and Rita Jones also created classics. With an unmistakable rhythm and blues sound, many of the black artists were taken aback to find

PHOTOGRAPHS FROM TOP

The sofa that's seen it all. Muscle Shoals is in northwestern Alabama.

Fact file

Tours at the studios are fitted round the recording sessions. Adult tickets for Muscle Shoals Sound Studios, 3614 Jackson Hwy, Sheffield, (muscleshoalsoundstudios.org) are US\$25 (NZ\$42). Standard tickets for FAME, 403 E. Avalon Ave, Muscle Shoals, (famestudios.com) are US\$20, and backstage passes are US\$40.

Getting there: Air New Zealand flies Auckland to Houston and American Airlines flies Auckland to Dallas. Huntsville, Alabama, is another two-hour flight, with The Shoals just over an hour's drive.

Staying there: Florence is a lively city, home to the University of North Alabama. The Stricklin Hotel, 317 N. Court St, (stricklin.com) is slap bang in the middle of the main drag. Rooms from about US\$230 a night.

Hall and The Swampers were, in fact, white. "This wasn't an easy time in the United States" history – segregation and racism were rife. But this small recording studio became a "safe haven" where blacks and whites could work together in musical harmony", Hall later wrote in his autobiography. He was also instrumental in helping one of the world's most famous singers to find her voice. Aretha Franklin had been struggling for years in the industry, but at FAME she recorded *I Never Loved a Man (The Way I Love You)*. Although the session ended acrimoniously with a fight between Hall and Franklin's husband, her career trajectory sky-rocketed soon after, and she went on to record the mega-hit *Respect* with The Swampers later in New York.

Infused with that success, and with the help of funds from famed producer Jerry Weicker, the musicians set up their own studio nearby, called Muscle Shoals Sound Studios, igniting a fierce rivalry between Hall and the group. Cher was the first star to record there but it was an inauspicious start. The studio was housed in an old cabaret showroom and the roof was leaking badly. This was far from the glamorous studios the singer was used to. There were fears Cher would walk, but she didn't. Although the subsequent album, *3614 Jackson Highway*, named after the studio's address, ended up being a flop, other artists soon made their way to this sleepy part of Alabama.

The Rolling Stones recorded two of their most popular tunes here – *Brown Sugar* and *Wild Horses*. The band was on a break during a tour but could not promote the fact it was working on new material as it would jeopardise its visas, so the recording had to be done secretly. Keith Richards wrote some of *Wild Horses* after he locked himself in the studio's toilet. Above the loo now hangs a toilet seat for good luck.

Over the years, the fortunes of both studios ebbed and flowed, and the musical styles broadened to include rock, pop and reggae. The Grammys found success at FAME, while The Swampers moved to a

Through these doors walk the finest Musicians, Songwriters, Artists, and Producers in the World.



new location where the likes of James Brown, Dina Scott and Eric Clapton visited. An early version of George Michael's *Caribbean Queen* was also recorded there.

While many of the characters and stars from those early days are no longer with us, their legacy means the musicians are still coming.

Not long ago Lana Del Rey arrived unannounced to record, and country star Chris Stapleton was also a recent visitor. There are now 14 studios dotted around

The Shoals, and more and more new artists discover the aural magic of the area.

The tourists are coming, too, with both studios hosting daily tours to capitalise on their

notoriety. FAME has stayed at the same location for decades, witnessing the town grow up around it. The original Muscle Shoals Sound Studios building became a museum, before operating as a fully functioning studio once again.

And during all that time, more than five decades later, sitting quietly in the corner is something that has seen it all – a humble, battered orange sofa. Just don't sit on it.

PHOTOGRAPHS FROM TOP

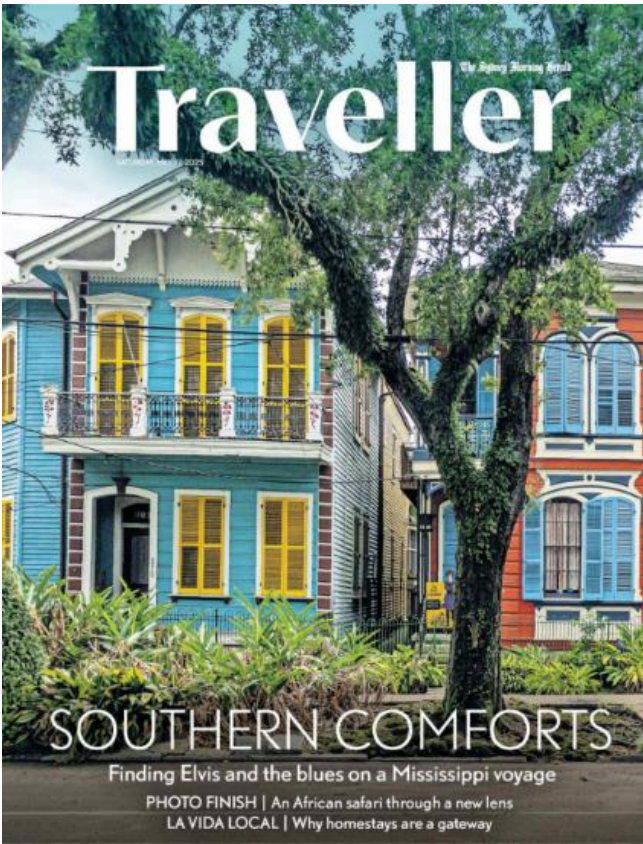
The entrance to one of the FAME studios. Linda Pansadt recording at Muscle Shoals Sound Studios. Cher was the first artist to record at Muscle Shoals Sound Studios.



Photographs: Alan Granville and supplied. The author and team fly Travel South Ltd.

Alabama

“Southern Comforts”
Unique Monthly Visitors: 580,000



COVER STORY
Mississippi yearning



One of the world's great river cruises winds its way through the heart of America's Deep South, writes Kristie Kallahan.

New Orleans has a lot of love, and it's not just for the city itself. It's for the Mississippi River, which flows through the heart of the city and into the Gulf of Mexico. The river is a lifeline for the city, and it's a source of pride for its residents. The river is also a source of inspiration for many of the city's artists and writers. The river is a source of life, and it's a source of love.

Life on the Mississippi
When Mark Twain mentioned his desire to travel down the Mississippi, he was not alone. Many people have wanted to travel down the river since then. The river is a source of life, and it's a source of love. The river is a source of inspiration for many of the city's artists and writers. The river is a source of life, and it's a source of love.

Rolling on the river
The Mississippi River is a source of life, and it's a source of love. The river is a source of inspiration for many of the city's artists and writers. The river is a source of life, and it's a source of love. The river is a source of inspiration for many of the city's artists and writers. The river is a source of life, and it's a source of love.

part of modern-day America. There are many things that are a source of life, and it's a source of love. The river is a source of inspiration for many of the city's artists and writers. The river is a source of life, and it's a source of love. The river is a source of inspiration for many of the city's artists and writers. The river is a source of life, and it's a source of love.



abundant with many historic residences, meticulously preserved and designed. The house is a source of life, and it's a source of love. The house is a source of inspiration for many of the city's artists and writers. The house is a source of life, and it's a source of love. The house is a source of inspiration for many of the city's artists and writers. The house is a source of life, and it's a source of love.

Five other great river journeys
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