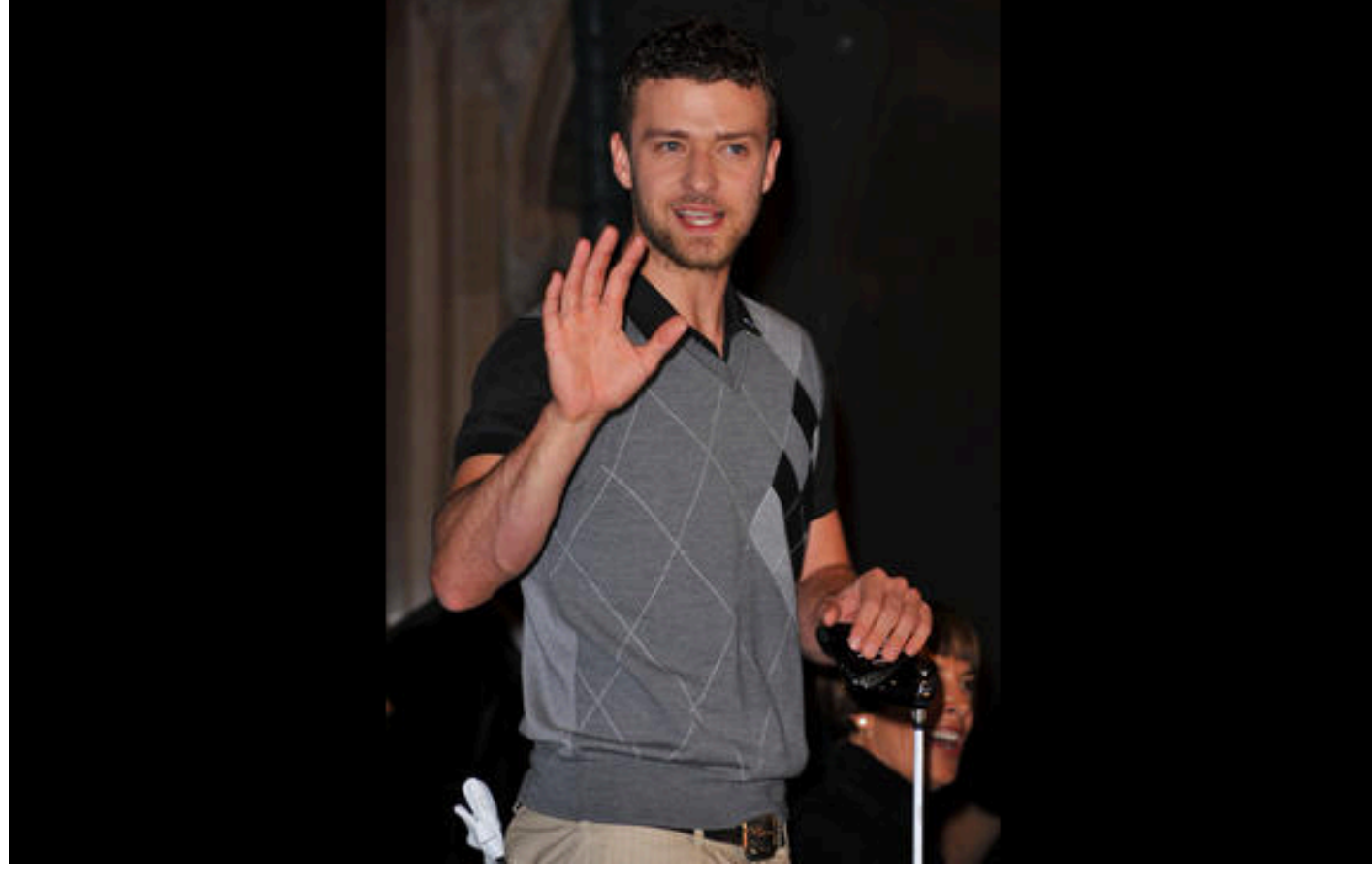


From BWI nonstop: Meet me in Memphis

For a quick getaway that guaranteed to be a rockin' good time, head to this soulful city of the South

By Stephanie Citron



The shortest distance between two points is a straight line, thereby making “nonstop” one of the most fetching words in travel today. Luckily for us, BWI-Marshall Airport seems to be piling up flights that will get you to your destination without interruption. BWI offers so many nonstop routes that you could choose a different city each week and not run out of places to go for more than a year.

For our new series of occasional articles, we’ll be exploring some of these destinations that are perfect for a quick getaway from Baltimore. Our first nonstop is perhaps the most rockin’ city in the South: Memphis.

Southwest Airlines launched nonstop service last fall from Baltimore to Memphis. Better still, the airline is adding a second daily flight for June and July.

Located in a region credited with launching so much of the American music scape, Memphis is often overshadowed by New Orleans, Nashville and even Austin, Texas. But the city’s rhythmic legacy began even before Elvis shook ‘em up with those scandalous shimmying hips.

Memphis is the birthplace of rock ‘n’ roll, blues and soul. The city was the setting of the first music recording that was categorized as rock ‘n’ roll’ — a circa-1952 tune entitled “Rocket 88” by Jackie Brenston. And it’s also where W.C. Handy scripted Memphis Blues, which became known as the first chronicled blues music. Memphis is also the home of B.B. King and rock-a-billy Elvis, who both recorded at Sun Studios, along with other giants like Otis Redding and Al Green.

Music is not the only historic acclaim here. Memphis is an important locale in the evolution of modern-day African-American history, as chronicled in the newly reopened National Civil Rights Museum, built upon the site where Dr. Martin Luther King was assassinated 46 years ago this month.

Memphis, founded in 1819, is named after the ancient capital of Egypt on the Nile. Perched on protective bluffs overlooking the Mississippi River, the town became an important trade port for merchants heading west seeking the region’s “white gold,” as cotton was known, and its burgeoning slave market. It quickly evolved into the world’s largest spot cotton and hardwood lumber markets.

Remarkably, the origins of Beale Street, Memphis’ now-famous entertainment district, were ignited by Robert Church Sr., a former-slave-turned-millionaire-businessman. Church bought up property in the area to create welcoming establishments for the black community. Beale Street promptly became a gathering spot for African-American musicians, ultimately luring both black and white audiences. In 1917, Church’s son (and namesake) instituted both the NAACP and Solvent Savings Bank in Memphis; Solvent Savings Bank became the largest black-owned bank in the world by 1921.

A diverse population is always the perfect ingredient for intriguing, flavorful cookery. Memphis is renowned for its barbecue, soul food and low-country cooking. Today, local chefs fuse that heritage with regional provisions to produce creative meals.

Here’s a look at things to do in Memphis right now.

What’s new

The National Civil Rights Museum is newly reopened and completely transformed by a \$27 million renovation adding immersive and interactive exhibits. Housed in the nondescript Lorraine Motel, which was thrust into the national memory on April 4, 1968, when Dr. King was assassinated on a second-floor balcony, it documents the struggle for civil rights. Standout exhibits include the Montgomery Bus, the sit-in counter, the Freedom Rides bus and the Memphis sanitation truck, as well as new interactive exhibits and more than 40 new films. *Lorraine Motel, 450 Mulberry St., civilrightsmuseum.org.*

The International Memphis in May Festival features three colossal events: The Beale St. Music Festival (May 2-4) stages the finest headlining musical acts and local talent performing rock, blues, soul, gospel and alternative sounds; The World Championship Barbecue Cooking Contest (May 15-17), aka “The Superbowl of Swine,” perhaps the most anticipated barbecue competition in the country; and Sunset Symphony, a full-day event commencing with a picnic in the park and ending with a classical concert at dusk. *Go to memphisinmay.org.*

“60 Years of Elvis.” Going to Memphis and not visiting Graceland is like going to Los Angeles and not touring a movie studio. It can be done, but you’d miss a central component of the city’s cultural heritage and evolution. Along with the mansion tour, car museum, costumes and private planes, Graceland has a new exhibit commemorating rock ‘n’ roll’s 60-year journey since a young truck driver named Elvis recorded “That’s All Right” on July 5, 1954. *Graceland, 3734 Elvis Presley Blvd., elvis.com/graceland.*

Overton Square. One of Memphis oldest neighborhoods is also new again. Overton Square is an entertainment district in Memphis’ Midtown section that has reinvented itself in 2014 with four live theaters, trendy restaurants, bars and boutiques. *Go to overtonsquare.com.*

Don’t miss

Stax Museum. What was once a little record shop housed in an old theater evolved into Stax Museum of American Soul, one of music’s most important recording studios, where black and white artists collaborated on tunes that changed the face of music. Artists include Otis Redding, Isaac Hayes and Booker T. *Stax Museum, 926 E. McLemore Ave., staxmuseum.com*

Sun Studio. Take a tour of Sun Records, the original recording studio that launched the music careers of Elvis Presley, Johnny Cash, Carl Perkins and Jerry Lee Lewis. *Sun Studio, 706 Union Ave., sunstudio.com*

Beale Street. Post-Civil War African-Americans migrated to Beale Street (between Second and Fourth streets), and it evolved into melodious melting pot for legendary musicians like B.B. King and W.C. Handy, wailing out the origins of soul and blues tunes. Today, this three-block stretch of famous nightclubs, bars, nostalgic shops and restaurants is Memphis’ prominent entertainment district. *Go to bealestreet.com.*

B.B. King’s Blues Club is surely the most popular establishment on Beale Street. The 88-year-old King himself still plays here a few times a year. *B.B. King’s Blues Club, 143 Beale St., bbkingclubs.com*

Shangri-La Records. Who goes to a music store anymore? Most likely, you – when you’re in Memphis. Shangri-La Records has been named one the best sources in America for vintage vinyls and new CDs. If these walls could talk, they’d surely sing the blues and everything else. *Shangri-La Records, 1916 Madison Avenue, shangri.com*

Cotton Museum. Memphis is still the largest spot-cotton market in the world, and the captivating Cotton Row and Cotton Museum, located on the floor of the original Cotton Exchange, is as much about the evolution of Memphis and the slave trade imported to harvest it, as it is about the city’s role in cotton production. *Cotton Museum, 65 Union Ave., memphiscottonmuseum.org*

The Pink Palace might be the most unusual museum you will ever visit. Designed to exhibit a culture unique to Memphis, it is housed in the pink Georgian mansion of Clarence Saunders, who pioneered the concept of the supermarket in the U.S. Among its peculiar menagerie of curious exhibits is a replicated aisle of a Piggly Wiggly store (the prototype for modern American supermarkets, which was launched in Memphis), dinosaur fossils and a planetarium. *The Pink Palace Museum, 3050 Central Ave., memphismuseums.org*

Full Gospel Tabernacle. Perhaps Memphis’ answer to a jazz brunch is Rev. Al Green’s Full Gospel Tabernacle, where the soul-music-legend-turned-minister entertains, inspires and welcomes visitors. 11:30 a.m. and 4 p.m. Sundays. *Full Gospel Tabernacle, 787 Hale Road, algreenmusic.com/fullgospeltabernacle.html*

Where to eat

Barbecue. Be it wet sauce or dry rub, the first word in Memphis dining is barbecue. Honestly, it’s difficult to find another place that does it so well. But inventive city chefs are also integrating unexpected essences and techniques into traditional Southern flavors to create new local flavors; their eclectic new eateries are popping up all over the city. Some favorites include Central BBQ (cbqmemphis.com) and Dancing Pigs Bar-B-Que (dancingpigs.com).

Soul food. Makes sense that a city built with so much American soul would offer some of the best soul food to be found. Try The Four Way (fourwaymemphis.com), serving up soul food for more than 50 years. Soul Fish Cafe (soulfishcafe.com) is a local tradition.

Low country fusion. For an interesting take on Southern food, get a table at Hog and Hominy (hogandhominy.com), billed as “Italian dining with a Southern drawl.” Menu items include biscuit gnocchi and calabrese made with black-eyed peas.

What to hear

If it’s soulful sound you’re seeking, you can’t go wrong with the blues venues on Beale Street. For a fresh vibe, check out the eclectic collection of clubs in Midtown, whose indie music scene is garnering hipster attention nationwide. This vibrant neighborhood is brimming with fashionable cocktail bars, avant-garde cafes and snappy music clubs. It’s now or never, so don’t miss the city’s legendary Elvis impersonator at Dad’s Place.

Blues: B.B. King’s 143 Beale St. <http://www.memphis.bbkingclubs.com>, Blues City Cafe, 138 Beale Street bluescitycafe.com/

Rock, Indie and Elvis Revival: Hi-Tone Cafe, 412-414 N. Cleveland St., hitonememphis.com; Dad’s Place, 1471 Brooks Road, facebook.com/dadsmemphis; Alfred’s, 197 Beale St., alfredsonbeale.com

If you go

Nonstop to Memphis

Flight time: 1 hour, 45 minutes

Getting there from BWI: Seven flights on Southwest Airlines from \$91. Additional daily flights will be added for the months of June and July.

Lodging

Peabody Memphis Hotel, 149 Union Ave., peabodymemphis.com. You know you’re in a city with rhythm when everybody gets into the act. This historic hotel is so classy, even the resident ducks parade in formation — from the rooftop to the lobby each day. From \$239 per night.

Westin Memphis Beale Street, 170 Lt. George W. Lee Ave., westin.com/bealestreet. Those Gibson guitars displayed in the lobby aren’t just for gawking over; you can borrow one to play in your room. From \$230 per night.

Travel tip

Does it say direct or nonstop? Direct flights generally don’t mean nonstop. They will eventually get you to your destination, but usually incur a stop or two along the way.