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Habitats for Humanity: *The Parkway from Mississippi to Alabama*

Prepare to be uplifted: As the rolling hills of Mississippi grow steeper, giving way to the lower Appalachian peaks of Alabama, the Parkway leads through an 80-mile stretch of adventure and terrific scenery that includes a national wildlife refuge, exhilarating recreation areas and cultural sites, and attractions sure to boost your spirits.

Your journey begins magnificently at Pharr Mounds, where eight Native American burial mounds spread out over 90 acres of lush green fields. Archeologists estimate the age of these mounds at around 2,000 years; visitors find the site, with its sheer size, an inspiring union of man and nature, of the sacred and the historic.

There's another exciting union up ahead—the meeting of the great outdoors and great outdoor fun, in Tishomingo County, justifiably known as “the outdoor recreation capital of the Mid-South.” With two large lakes—Bay Springs and Pickwick Lakes—seven marinas (including one of the largest freshwater marinas in the nation), 40 miles of the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway, two state parks, more than 12,000 acres of pristine and protected hunting areas, and 10 parks created by the Corps of Engineers, this amazing county more than earns its designation as the “outdoor recreation capital of the Mid-South.” For those ready to play, Tishomingo is the place.

Located on the Trace, the Tishomingo State Park isn't just a must-see, it's a must-experience. Here, in Bear Creek Canyon, with its majestic sandstone cliffs and outcroppings and overhangs as tall as 60 feet, visitors enter a world apart, where waterfalls tumble gracefully into rocky streams and mountain laurels bloom amidst hardwood forest. The Park's 1,530 acres abound not only with natural beauty but also with recreational treks, with 13 miles of hiking trails (including a nifty swinging bridge) and 8 miles of meandering stream that make for great canoeing. Swimming, camping, and rock climbing are also part of the fun.

Another scenic climb (one you can make in your car) is located northwest of the Park. Woodall Mountain is the highest peak in Mississippi and a high point of any visit.

South of Woodall and the Park, at Bay Springs Lake, fishermen are lured by the large mouth bass, while other visitors enjoy the museum and overlook of lake and lock. Situated on Bay Springs' 530-acre peninsula, the Crow's Neck Environmental Education and Conference Center is beloved by thousands of the region's schoolchildren, as the setting for some of their most enriching and exciting lessons in biology and biodiversity. Once school's out, the sugar white sands of Bay Springs' Old Bridge Beach are a real summertime treat.

Bay Springs Lake is only one of the many projects that make up the Tenn-Tom Waterway, an engineering marvel that winds its way through the county laying out a feast of water fun even as it provides practical transportation for the region.

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As a boating and fishing paradise, Tishomingo naturally offers plenty of marinas to accommodate the thirst for water fun, including one of the largest freshwater marinas in the country. And it isn't only the waters for boating and fishing you'll want to check out—in Mineral Springs Park in Iuka, you'll find the award-winning mineral springs water that wowed a World's Fair, and today joins a pioneer cabin and covered bridge in an utterly charming park attraction. Also be sure to check out the nearby Old Courthouse Museum for a fascinating tour through the area's past.

Just as the fishermen seek out the treasures of the deep, before you leave Tishomingo County, it's a great idea to peruse the non-aquatic treasures of the county's many outlet and antique stores. Don't miss downtown Iuka while in town, for it is there you will find arts and craft shops and an apron and quilt museum. And the hospitality in lovely towns like Belmont and Golden is unbeatable.

From there, it's time to head north, to one of the "Great Lakes of the South," the mighty Pickwick Lake. Skirting the edges of Pickwick is the J.P. Coleman State Park, which with its well-appointed marina, motel, cabins, RV spaces, and campground, is a popular gathering place. Pickwick itself stretches in long elegant fingers from Tishomingo into the Shoals area of Alabama, spreading out at nearly 50,000 acres at full summer pool. The fun at this man-made Goliath isn't endless, it just feels that way. Brimming with small and large mouth bass, crappie, and catfish, the "Small Mouth Capital of the World" is also, naturally, a prime habitat of fishermen, campers, boaters, and assorted lovers of fun.

At about 15,000 acres, Wilson Lake has plenty of bragging rights, too, with three previous world-records to its credit, for small mouth bass, freshwater drum, and sauger. At the adjacent Veteran's Park in Florence, you can camp, fish, go boating, play tennis, or just soak up the view.

Also at Florence, you can take a swing at two courses on the famous Robert Trent Jones Golf Trail, or snap an "ollie" at one of the few skate parks in Alabama.

Back in the early 1800's, stick-ups were common along the Trace, but at Colbert's Ferry, you can see the site of what was surely one of the most infamous highway robberies in history. According to legend, George Colbert reportedly charged Andrew Jackson \$75,000 to ferry his army across the Tennessee River.

Just as a bridge now takes traffic (at no charge) across the Tennessee, visitors to this extraordinary area today find themselves utterly transported by the lush natural beauty and abundance. At Colbert's Ferry, birdwatchers commune with orioles and Kingbirds, and at Pickwick, swallows forage across the vast expanse, loons and cormorants splash the surface, while bald eagles perch along the shoreline.

On the Shoals Creek Nature Preserve, hikers find themselves face to face with gorgeous waterfalls, and on the 38,000 acres in or around the Freedom Hills National Wildlife Preserve, hunting by permit is available for both small and large game. For hunters who want to experience the chase the way the Native Americans once did, bow-hunting season runs from October through January.

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Not so handy with a bow and arrow? Not to worry, you can still follow a fascinating path through Native American history. At Pharr Mounds, a vast 90-acre complex encompasses eight

mounds dating back 2,000 years. Bear Mound is only a few miles away, and at Florence you'll find the largest domiciliary mound in the Tennessee Valley, with artifacts at the adjacent museum dating back 10,000 years.

Civil War history is another Shoals highlight: Historic Pope's Tavern nursed both Union and Confederate soldiers as a Civil War field hospital. The Edith Culver Museum is a trove of Civil War artifacts, and at LaGrange College Site and Antebellum Cemetery, the first chartered college in Alabama, visitors can stroll through a recreated LaGrange Mountain village on the site where the historic college was destroyed during the Civil War. At Waterloo, stand where the largest cavalry force ever amassed in the Western Hemisphere came to train.

For all its historical and natural attractions, the Shoals area of the Natchez Trace is equally well known and well loved for its contributions to American modern culture. For example, after you make the quarter mile trek at Freedom Hills to the highest point on the Alabama segment of the Parkway, you must stop at Tusculumbia to take the tour of Ivy Green, Helen Keller's childhood home, for another truly uplifting experience.

The house and gardens have been meticulously maintained, and visitors can see both the birthplace cottage where Helen and Ann did their work, as well as the main house furnished with the original family furniture. Out in the garden, amidst the magnolias, crepe myrtle and ivy, you'll find the famous pump, a simple piece of old-fashioned equipment now dispensing inspiration where once it gave young Helen her first opportunity to "see." So inspiring is the site and Helen's story that the four-day festival honoring the "First Lady of Courage" at Tusculumbia's Spring Park draws up to 100,000 visitors every year.

As you're heading north, put some classics on your CD player, like Bob Seger's "Old Time Rock 'n' Roll." Or Paul Simon's "Kodachrome" or "Loves Me Like a Rock." What you're hearing is the Muscle Shoals Sound, hard to define, easy to love and impossible to get anywhere else. Musical stars from the Rolling Stones to Rod Stewart to Peter, Paul and Mary to Cher lined up to work with the famous "Swampers" of the Muscle Shoals Rhythm Section. Bob Seger cut the demo for "Old Time Rock 'n' Roll" here; the little piano dah-dah-dah intro was an engineer's mistake that the singer liked so well he made it part of the song.

Today, the building that first housed the Muscle Shoals Sounds Studio is open to the public, although the studio is no longer there. However, at the Alabama Music Hall of Fame and Museum, you can immerse yourself in the whole Muscle Shoals story, as well as the fascinating stories of other famous Alabama musicians. This is more than a stroll through musical history, albeit one that includes a walk-on tour of an actual tour bus used by the group Alabama. Be forewarned: the Alabama Music Hall of Fame is a truly interactive experience, complete with recording facilities equipped to give each and every visitor a shot at singing stardom!

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Another musical must-see is the W.C. Handy birthplace and museum. Born in a log cabin in Florence, Handy went on to world-wide acclaim as the "Father of the Blues." His piano and trumpet are just a few of the artifacts on display at the museum, which is also an important resource for African American history. Every year, the Handy Music Festival draws not only record crowds but also high praise from aficionados as well as fans.

The town of Florence is worth seeing for its architecture alone, with styles ranging from elegant Victorians to bungalows that came straight out of Sear and Roebuck catalogue to the Rosenbaum Home, Alabama's only Frank Lloyd Wright-designed home, one of only 26 pre-World War II Usonian houses and the only such home in the Southeast open to the public.

Built in 1939, the home was sold to the city of Florence by the Rosenbaum family in 1999. By then, the house was in dire need of repair, and city residents joined together to implement the improvements with countless volunteer hours and funds generated through a special one-cent sales tax. Today, the house is a restored gem, complete with furnishings designed by Wright

It might seem surprising for a fellow in a small town in Alabama to commission one of the world's most notable architects to design his family home; it might seem unusual for world-renown rockers to bypass L.A. or London studios for Muscle Shoals. But then, there is very little about this area that is usual. Surely, it took an unusual person like Shoals resident Key Underwood to decide that when his trusty dog Troop died he deserved more than an unmarked plot in the backyard. And why not a real cemetery with headstones and all? Seventy years later Coon Dog Cemetery is a popular Shoals attraction, with more than 100 dogs buried there, their graves marked by a range of statuary fit for man's best friend.

If the idea of Coon Dog Cemetery makes you want to smile, go ahead. You won't be the first, or the last. The cemetery even has its own annual Labor Day celebration.

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