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Swept Away: *The Parkway from Natchez to Jackson*

Along these 110 miles stretch of road, the Civil War was fought on two fronts: in the battles involving muskets and cannons, General U.S. Grant’s forces won handily at Port Gibson and Raymond in Grant’s opening gambit for Vicksburg. But when it came to the charm offensive, the cities of Natchez, Port Gibson and Raymond proved so winning in their ways that they beguiled the torches right out of the victors’ hands. Today, they continue to captivate as rich repositories of antebellum history, beauty and splendor—among other considerable attractions.

Nature sets the stage, with spring dogwoods splashing pastel showers along the roadway, red clover spilling over the shoulders, verdant corn and soybean fields carpeting the vistas. Against this backdrop Emerald Mound seems both utterly at home and yet incredibly magnificent. Built around 1400 AD, this ceremonial mound of the Natchez Indians spreads over eight acres; it is the second largest of its type in the nation. A trail leads up 35 feet to a quietly inspiring view at the top.

In Natchez, a different kind of man-made achievement awaits, in one of the most historic and architecturally significant towns in the nation: Street after street of lavish antebellum mansions, many of them open either for tours or for lodging, with hospitality that gives new dimension to the term “living like a king.”

With roots going back to early 1700s, Natchez boasts a colorfully raffish history as a frontier town where Kaintuck boatmen caroused and gamblers and thieves ruled the notorious Natchez-Under-the-Hill. The boatmen floated their loads down the Mississippi River before they sold everything, flatboats included, to walk home—perhaps with a lighter bankroll after a night Under the Hill, or a roadway encounter with one of the Trace’s notorious highwaymen.

There are no more outlaws at Natchez-Under-the-Hill, but it is once again the docking place for steamboats such as the *Delta Queen*, and a popular tourist attraction with restaurants, bars, gifts shops and a hotel casino.

As a port on the Mississippi, Natchez in antebellum times became a shipping center and contact point between merchants and cotton planters, and the effect to the economy was electric: at one point, Natchez boasted a higher concentration of millionaires than anywhere else in the country.

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Drawing on the city's rich cultural history under both Spanish and French influences, the wealthy and cosmopolitan knights of King Cotton produced a profusion of palaces alike only in grandeur. Today, the roll call of homes is simply too long and varied to list—the Historic District is packed. Stanton Hall, a Greek Revival behemoth, spreads over an entire block; Rosalie, another columned jewel, sits high on a bluff overlooking the Mississippi River.

Even Longwood, in essence a spectacular failure, is hauntingly beautiful. With its octagonal design and unfinished interiors, the towering mansion seems like something out of a strange dream, as indeed it was—the doomed dream of Haller Nutt, who signed a treaty with the Union Army so that his own army of European and Northern artisans could work without the inconvenience of war.

In 2007, the Natchez Pilgrimage celebrates its 75th anniversary, making it perhaps the longest continuously running tourism event in the country. And yet Natchez is certainly more than homes and hoop skirts. The Grand Village of the Natchez Indians is a rewarding stop, as is the historic Jefferson College, the first educational institution in the Mississippi Territory. The Natchez Museum of Afro-American Culture charts the history of area African-Americans from the Civil War through World War II. And with the waterfront booming, more top-ranked casino and hotel development is underway.

Outside Natchez be sure to stop at Mount Locust, where weary travelers once found haven from the hardship of the road. Established in 1780, this “stand,” as frontier inns were once called, is one of the few remaining on the Trace.

Further down the road, all that remains of Windsor are 23 ghostly Corinthian columns standing guard above the Mississippi River. Before it burned in 1890, the antebellum mansion the columns once adorned was the largest home in the state, a magnificent landmark on the Mississippi. Today, the Ruins of Windsor exert an indescribable yet irresistible power. As the sun sets behind the ruins, watch out—even the most hardened cynic gets swept away.

While U.S. Grant declared the city of Port Gibson “too beautiful to burn,” there was plenty of fighting in and around the area, and today plenty of preserved history is here to experience. At nearby Grand Gulf, Union bombardment pounded the town, but at the Grand Gulf Military Monument Park, a 400-acre landmark listed on the National Register of Historic Places, visitors will find a whole world to explore—Fort Wade, the Grand Gulf Cemetery, a museum, campgrounds, picnic areas, hiking trails, an observation tower and restored buildings like the Spanish House from the 1790s.

In Port Gibson, at the Shaifer House, where the first shots were fired after Grant crossed the Mississippi, limited development has allowed the site to retain a sense of authenticity; visitors who look closely can see where the house is pocked with bullet holes. Bethel Presbyterian Church is another skirmish site.

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Church Street is the semi-official entrance to Port Gibson, which today still retains much of the splendid beauty that disarmed a battle-hardened general. Although there are more than 40 historical homes, churches and residences, one of the more remarkable “points of interest” comes on Church Street: The First Presbyterian Church, with its giant golden hand rising from its steeple pointing a forefinger into the sky. This was a tribute to the fiery mannerisms of a young preacher who saved souls in the 1820s. What might he have said of the later interior addition of an ornate chandelier salvaged from a gambling steamboat?

The Temple Gemiluth Chassed, Mississippi’s oldest synagogue, is also on Church Street, and at the Engelson House, visitors can stroll through the oldest formal gardens in Mississippi. With historic B&B’s and quaint shops—the Port Gibson Antiques Market opens in 2007—this small city allows you plenty of ways to stretch your great time, as well as your horizons. “No Easy Journey,” a permanent exhibit at the town’s administration building, chronicles the Civil Rights movement in Claiborne County. And at the Cultural Crossroads community center, story telling, folk art and theatre connect past with future. A special treat: The famous and famously beautiful quilts of the Crossroads Quilters who use their gifts to help Claiborne County youth.

From Port Gibson, it’s on to Rocky Springs, a less fortunate town, decimated by yellow fever and erosion. Explore the old church (the single remaining structure), hiking trails, a stream and an old cemetery nearby.

After the Battle of Raymond, the Hinds County Courthouse was converted to a Confederate field hospital, but when the citizens of Raymond realized Union soldiers were in need, they opened churches and homes as ad hoc nursing stations. That kind of spirit still animates the town as it welcomes visitors and rallies around historical sites.

The city’s preservation of the Raymond Battlefield site has meant the addition of a walking trail and a feature on the History Channel program “Sacred Soil.” Any tour should include the battlefield and the courthouse, and be sure to see the St. Marks Episcopal Church, where the bloodstains are still visible on the floors from the church’s turn as a field hospital, listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

With its picturesque Square and all its historic homes, Raymond offers a real sense of place and a sense of a joie de vivre that is downright infectious. In only a few years, the city’s Fall Pilgrimage has grown into a rollicking two-week event that includes not only tours of some seriously beautiful historic homes but also some distinctly fun-loving programs. “The Trial of the Bedbug,” based on historical records, recounts the mock trial undertaken by some real (though somewhat inebriated) citizens to bring an offending boarding house bedbug to justice. Historic reenactment on the delightful side.

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