



Southern charm

Music, food and bourbon may be easy to come by in the Deep South, but the stories behind them really create the experience, finds **Clare Vooght** on a mega-fam with TTC

Exploring the places that inspired musical icons from Elvis to Al Green, and hearing toe-tapping rhythms in the cities they were written – it's no wonder the Deep South features on many clients' bucket lists.

"The Deep South is our top-selling route in the US, with British and Irish travellers drawn to its unique charm and cultural experiences," says Becky Francis, TTC Tour Brands' sales director for the EMEA region. "Across our five brands, in 2022 we saw a 300% increase in bookings to the Deep South of America.

"And this year, we are on track to surpass pre-pandemic numbers for the Deep South routes, with Cost saver and Insight Vacations already having surpassed passengers booked in total for 2019 and Trafalgar and Luxury Gold not far behind."

Things are looking strong for 2024 too, with the Deep South a standout region for TTC's North American itineraries. Forty per cent of passengers booked on its North American trips have chosen Trafalgar: Tastes and Sounds of the South, while 30% are booked on the Insight Vacations itinerary in the region.

So it's perhaps no surprise that TTC chose the Deep South to showcase its five touring brands on its first global mega-fam ➤

Beale Street, Memphis

PICTURE: Shutterstock/Sean Pavone

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ABOVE: Nearest Green Distillery, Tennessee PICTURE: Clare Vooght

since the pandemic. I joined 49 agents from around the world, including 11 from the UK, to sample some Deep South experiences from the TTC portfolio earlier this summer, travelling from Tennessee, down through Mississippi and ending up in Louisiana – taking in everything from music and food to civil rights spots. And it’s the stories we heard along the way that truly made this a memorable trip.

TENNESSEE: THE BOURBON WHISKEY TASTING

“That ain’t sweet tea,” says our guide, Jason, in the dulcet southern tone we’ve grown accustomed to over the past few days in the American South.

We’re sipping the first of five generous pours of premium whiskey distilled here on a former horse farm near Lynchburg, Tennessee. But Nearest Green Distillery isn’t your run-of-the-mill American whiskey distillery. Here you can

“Our tour ends with a walk through the old horse stalls, housing around 1,800 barrels

find bourbon created by the man who taught Jack Daniels the tricks of the trade.

While few know the story of the first African American master distiller on record, that’s soon likely to change, as chief executive Fawn Weaver has set her sights on making the distillery the most-visited in the world by 2026.

In the on-site speakeasy, visitors can learn how Nathan ‘Nearest’ Green, created Tennessee whiskey, using techniques that were likely brought over from West Africa and passed down through the generations – before teaching his

good friend Jack Daniels how to distill.

Our tour ends with a walk through the old horse stalls, housing around 1,800 barrels, and it feels like we’ve discovered a secret that’s not going to be kept that way for very long.

Book it: Experience available as an optional excursion (\$20) on Contiki’s Boot Scoot N Blues 15-day Southern road trip, which is priced from £3,054 based on a November 2023 departure, including accommodation, some meals and domestic transport. International flights not included. contiki.com

MEMPHIS: THE MUSIC BUS TOUR

It’s halfway through our Memphis tour and the whole bus is singing along to Al Green’s *Let’s Stay Together*, strummed on musician Davy Ray Bennett’s guitar as he leads us through the city’s musical history.

“Reverend Al Green has a service in town – I’ve never ➤

ASK THE agents



Rachel Wilkinson, consultant, Bon Voyage

“I recommend the Deep South to music lovers of all ages. I have a widower going on the Trafalgar tour in October and I know he’ll be well looked after by the knowledgeable tour director and the attentive driver. If you want stress-free travelling, combined with spine-tingling musical experiences and daily opportunities to immerse yourself in Deep South hospitality, this trip is ideal.”



Charlotte Kinder, travel consultant, Tropical Sky

“Look at the tour itineraries rather than just the costing. Whether [the hotels are] three, four or five-star, I don’t think that matters as much as the itinerary. You don’t spend that much time in the hotel. And if your customer wishes to upgrade on something, suggest they upgrade on the tour itself rather than flights.”



Karen Williams, Travel Counsellors

“The music has been incredible, from country to soul to jazz. We’re going home with such superb memories. I think this sort of trip needs at least 10 days – but ideally four nights in Nashville, three nights in Memphis, one night out in the country and then probably four or five nights in New Orleans.”



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been, but I heard it lasts for three hours," says Davy, before launching into a rendition of early soul number *Walking the Dog*, by Rufus Thomas, as we pass by the 'Welcome to Beale Street' sign, marking one of America's most famous entertainment streets.

Beale Street provided venues for artists BB King, Howlin' Wolf and, most famously, Elvis Presley. We drive past Presley's pre-fame home Lauderdale Courts – not far from the clubs and bars of Beale Street – where he lived with his parents after moving from "a shotgun shack in Tupelo". "Eight years later, Elvis was buying Graceland," says Davy.

The tour also takes in Sun Studio – also known as the 'birthplace of rock'n'roll' – and poignantly the Lorraine Motel, where Martin Luther King was assassinated, but also where Wilson Pickett wrote *In the Midnight Hour* and where

Eddie Floyd wrote *Knock on Wood*. "There were happier times at the Lorraine Motel," says Davy.

Book it: Experience available as an optional excursion (\$30) on CostSaver's 11-day Rhythms of the South tour, which starts from £1,766 based on a September 23 departure, including accommodation and domestic transport. International flights not included. [costsaver.com](https://www.costsaver.com)

LOUISIANA: THE COASTAL SEAFOOD ADVENTURE

While New Orleans may be famous for jazz, daiquiris and Mardi Gras, a nature spot at the edge of the city is home to some of the largest wetlands in the US.

On the way there to meet a fifth-generation oysterman, we pass the 1.8-mile 'Great Wall of Louisiana', built after Hurricane Katrina to protect the city from

DESTINATIONS

DEEP SOUTH | THE US



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Entrance to Graceland; seafood on Luxury Gold's Southern Grace tour; agents enjoy a whiskey tasting; museum visit on Contiki's Boot Scoot N Blues tour

PICTURES: TTC; Brian Hynes; Clare Vooght



floods. We press on to Shell Beach in Yscloskey where we stop at a memorial to victims of the 2005 hurricane, before meeting oysterman Don, who tells us how, despite the challenges posed by the often harsh working environment, he's not going anywhere anytime soon. He explains that Louisiana is the number-one state for blue crab, oyster and shrimp production, all thanks to these wetlands. And tucking into Don's catch – lightly grilled oysters, topped with soft, melted cheese – it's not hard to see why.

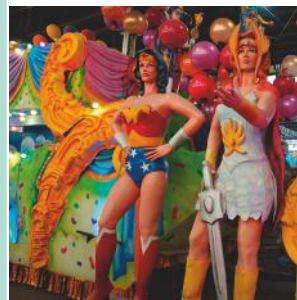
Book it: The coastal seafood adventure features on Luxury Gold's nine-day Southern Grace tour, which starts at £5,115, based on a September 29 departure, including accommodation, some meals and transport. International flights not included. luxurygold.com



GRACELAND

See the home where Elvis lived and entertained – including the jungle-themed den – and take a look around the King of Rock'n'Roll's private jets.

Book it: Graceland features on all TTC's Deep South tours (chargeable on Contiki and Costsaver). Trafalgar's 10-day Tastes and Sounds of the South costs from £2,844 for an October 27 departure. trafalgar.com



MARDI GRAS WORLD

Create your own Mardi Gras mask at Mardi Gras World, before discovering how artists make the floats for New Orleans' famous Mardi Gras parade.

Book it: Mardi Gras World and Mask Making features on Insight Vacations' 12-day Country Roads of the Deep South tour, which costs from £4,125, based on a March 22, 2024, departure. insightvacations.com



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