

Mississippi Blues & Civil Rights

Leo Platvoet



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Photo cover paperback: Licious Spiller plays in front of Cat Head Delta Blues & Folk Art in Clarksdale

Photo title page: Street musician in New Orleans

Page 5: Mural in Clarksdale

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Introduction

Mississippi, The Magnolia State, situated in the Deep South of the United States, is an intriguing destination. It is a state where African Americans suffered heavily from the slave trade, their exploitation on the countless cotton plantations, the terror invoked by the Ku Klux Klan, and the government's segregation policies. It was in Mississippi that the blues was born, the music that has had such a big influence on all the popular music that has come after it. This *Odyssee Travel Guidebook*, *Mississippi: Blues & Civil Rights*, considers the state's history of slavery, racism, the struggle for civil rights, and the music that bears witness to those struggles. While traveling, you will experience the past, present and future of the blues in museums and historical places, but also at festivals and in clubs, cafes and juke joints where the blues is alive and attracting a new audience. Civil rights museums, demonstrations, boycotts and sit-ins in small towns and large cities tell the story of resistance and hope, a story that resonates in the blues. This guide also describes New Orleans, Louisiana and Memphis, Tennessee, two other cities associated importantly with both Mississippi's blues and the struggle for civil rights.

About this guidebook

Mississippi is described in four chapters:

- the vast Delta with its cotton fields and Clarksdale;
- the wooded and hilly North and bustling Memphis;
- the Southwest, with Vicksburg, Natchez and the capital Jackson;
- the coast with its white sandy beach, seaside resorts and swinging New Orleans.

The guidebook contains sidebars with biographies of the most important blues musicians and Black activists. The bios conclude with a reference to videos on YouTube (YT) and, as far as the blues is concerned, suggestions for (available) albums.

The guidebook starts with a short outline of Mississippi (landscape, population, politics and government, and *Odyssee's* Highlights) and ends with the chapters Background Information (history of Mississippi and of the Delta Blues) and Practical Information (transportation, sleeping, eating and drinking, and other practical considerations).

The addition {FB} in descriptions of clubs, festivals, etc. means that actual information can be found on their Facebook page.

Road numbers are indicated between braces {}.

As a bonus, the Spotify playlist *Odyssee Mississippi Blues* provides you with four hours of fantastic blues from Mississippi. This playlist doubles as a musical tour guide when you are on the road in Mississippi, or just traveling there in your imagination.

I hope you enjoy this *Odyssee Travel Guidebook*!

Leo Platvoet

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Exploring Mississippi



Cotton is blooming in the Mississippi Delta

The state of Mississippi is named after the mighty Mississippi River which defines the western border of the state. The river is also responsible for the characteristic landscape of the state, the wide river delta marking the western part of Mississippi. The Delta plays an important role in Mississippi history: its fertile soil fed extensive cotton fields, cultivated by enslaved people originally brought from Africa. This set the stage for the birth of the blues as well as many landmark events in American civil rights history.

Mississippi has approximately three million inhabitants and covers an area of over 48,430 sq miles/125,433 sq km. It is part of the Deep South of the US and is surrounded by the states of Louisiana, Arkansas, Tennessee and Alabama.

Landscape

The Mississippi Delta extends on both sides of the river, as it passes through Mississippi, Arkansas and Louisiana. In the north it forms a wide plain from Memphis to Vicksburg. Between Vicksburg and Natchez, the Mississippi Delta narrows and recedes into a slightly hilly landscape.

The rest of Mississippi also consists of lowlands, although the northeast and east are characterized by green, often forested hills: the *Hills* and *Pines* regions. The highest point in the state is *Woodall Mountain* (807 feet/246 meter) in Northeast Mississippi. In the Northeast, around Aberdeen and West Point, the black fertile

soil is called the *Black Prairie* and is part of the *Alabama Black Belt*.

The coast, located along the Gulf of Mexico, consists mostly of an artificially constructed sandy beach, intersected by bays and swamps.

Other major rivers include the *Big Black River*, the *Pearl River*, the *Yazoo River* and the *Pascagoula River*. Large lakes, which are actually man-made reservoirs, include the *Ross Barnett Reservoir*, *Arkabutla Lake*, *Sardis Lake*, and *Grenada Lake*.

Climate

Mississippi has a warm maritime climate with long hot summers and short mild winters. The summer lasts about four to five months, with an average maximum temperature around 84 to 93 degrees F (29 to 34 degrees C). From July to December, there is a risk of hurricanes moving from the Gulf of Mexico into Mississippi, sometimes with disastrous consequences. The enormous amounts of rainfall due to hurricanes and tropical storms regularly cause flooding. There is also an average of 27 tornadoes per year in Mississippi, a quarter of which are severe. The most reliable weather forecast, including all kinds of extremes, is provided by the *National Weather Service*: www.weather.gov, for the cell phone: www.mobile.weather.gov

Weather in Mississippi (Jackson)												
	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
Max. temperature (F and C)	55/13	60/16	70/21	77/25	84/29	90/32	91/33	91/33	88/31	79/26	68/20	59/15
Daily hours of sunshine	5	6	7	8	9	10	9	9	8	8	6	5
Days of rainfall	11	9	10	8	9	9	11	10	9	6	8	10
Ocean temperature (F and C)	63/17	63/17	64/18	70/21	77/25	82/28	84/29	86/30	84/29	77/25	72/22	66/19

source: www.klimaatinfo.nl

Temperatures (in F and C), days and hours are monthly averages.

Local deviations may occur. The ocean temperature regards the Gulf of Mexico (Gulfport).

Flora and Fauna

The north and east of Mississippi are mainly covered with conifer forests. In the northeast corner of Mississippi, it is mainly hardwood deciduous trees that dominate the landscape. Swamps are common. Although the Delta was covered with forest and swamps until 1835, it is now defined by cotton fields interspersed with willows and cypresses. Nut trees, amber trees and elms are also common. There is an extraordinary variety of plant species in the state, with over 3,000 identified species on record.

Bison, cougars and wolves have disappeared from the landscape. Deer are now the largest animals still around. Foxes, raccoons, possums, skunks, marmots, and weasels can also be spotted. Crocodiles, turtles, water snakes and frogs live in the coastal swamps. The state is home to non-venomous garter snakes as well as the venomous coral snake, water moccasin and diamondback rattlesnake.

This area is inhabited by more than 400 bird species including waterfowl, pheasants, pigeons, cuckoos, vultures, storks, larks, swallows, nuthatches, hawks, kingfishers, spoonbills, cranes, owls, and eagles. The Mississippi River is an important migration route for geese, pied sandpipers, terns, gulls, and many species of ducks. Mussels and 63 different kinds of lobsters can be found in the wetlands, especially along the coast.

National Forests

Mississippi has six National Forests: *Holly Springs* (N of Oxford), *Tombigbee* (W of Columbus), *Delta* (SE of Rolling Fork), *Bienville* (S of Forest), *Homochitto* (SE of Natchez) and *De Soto* (between Gulfport and Hattiesburg).

These forests serve different purposes: ecological reserves for rare plants and animals, recreational use by people (hiking, fishing, hunting, canoeing, picnicking, camping, bird watching) and commercial use for timber. A permit is needed for some activities, including hunting and fishing. Requirements may vary with each forest and it is strongly recommended to inform yourself in advance:

www.fs.usda.gov/main/mississippi

Mississippi: Absorbing All Waters

The Mississippi is the second-longest river in the US after the Missouri River (which actually flows into the Mississippi). Its source is at Lake Itasca in Northern Minnesota and the river travels for 2318 miles/3730 km where it flows into the Gulf of Mexico. The name is of Native American origin: *Misi-ziibi* ("absorbing all waters") because the Mississippi is fed by hundreds of tributaries in a watershed that stretches from the Rocky Mountains in the west to the Appalachians in the east. For thousands of years, Indigenous tribes inhabited its banks. With the arrival of Europeans, the river became an important transportation and trade route. From the 19th century on, steamers transported agricultural and industrial products along and across the river. Gaining control of the Mississippi by the Union forces at the battle of Vicksburg was a decisive turning point in the Civil War. During the 20th century, the construction of levees, dams, and locks changed the wild river into a human-controlled waterway. But the elements will not always be controlled. *The Great Mississippi Flood* of 1927 was the largest river flood event ever in the US. The Delta was particularly affected: 27,000 sq miles/70,000 sq km was flooded, 700,000 people, mostly African Americans, were left homeless and 500 people drowned. More levees, locks and dams were constructed after the disaster but floods continue to this day.

Agriculture is the biggest polluter of the river. The numerous plantations and farms along the river make tackling pollution "from the source" difficult. The river is the subject of many books and songs. Mark Twain is the best-known writer who was inspired by the river and its surrounding communities. The flood of 1927 inspired blues singers like Memphis Minnie (*When The Levee Breaks*) and Charley Patton (*High Water Everywhere*).



Mississippi River at Natchez

Population

Nearly three million people live in Mississippi. In 1900, there were 1.5 million and in 2000 2.8 million inhabitants. Demographers foresee a decline in the near future due to the weak economy. The largest cities are the capital Jackson (167,000 inhabitants), Gulfport (72,000) and Southaven (54,000), a suburb of Memphis. Demographically, white people make up 58% of the population, followed by African Americans at 37%, the highest percentage of African Americans of all the states. All other groups, such as Hispanics, Asians, and Native Americans comprise around 1% of the population. The number of white people is slowly decreasing while the Black population is slowly increasing. Most Euro-Americans have English or Scottish roots.

English is the dominant language. Spanish is spoken by 1.9% and French by 0.4%.

Mississippi is known as the most religious state in the US: 59% of the population considers itself very religious. In contrast, 14% adhere to no religion at all. Christians are by far the largest group (83%), dominated by Protestant congregations (77%). Other religions comprise around 0.5%. Mississippi has over 6,000 unmarried gay or lesbian couples, 33% of whom have at least one child – the highest rate in the US.

Politics and Government

The state of Mississippi, like the federal government of the United States, has a separation between executive, legislative, and judicial powers. The governor, who is directly elected by its citizens, leads the executive branch. The legislature is made up of the House of Representatives with 120 members and the Senate with 52 members. There is a state court system including Circuit Courts, Courts of Appeal and a state Supreme Court. The 82 counties in the state have their own administrations.

Republicans have been the dominant party in the state since the 1970s. Of the six representatives in the United States Congress, five are white Republicans; the one Black Democrat represents the Delta in the House of Representatives. In the 2019 elections, the Republican Tate Reeves was elected governor with 52.2% of the vote. Republicans also dominate the State House and Senate with around 60% of the seats.