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## Aerial Arrivals to Terrestrial Touring

Discovering the Natchez Trace

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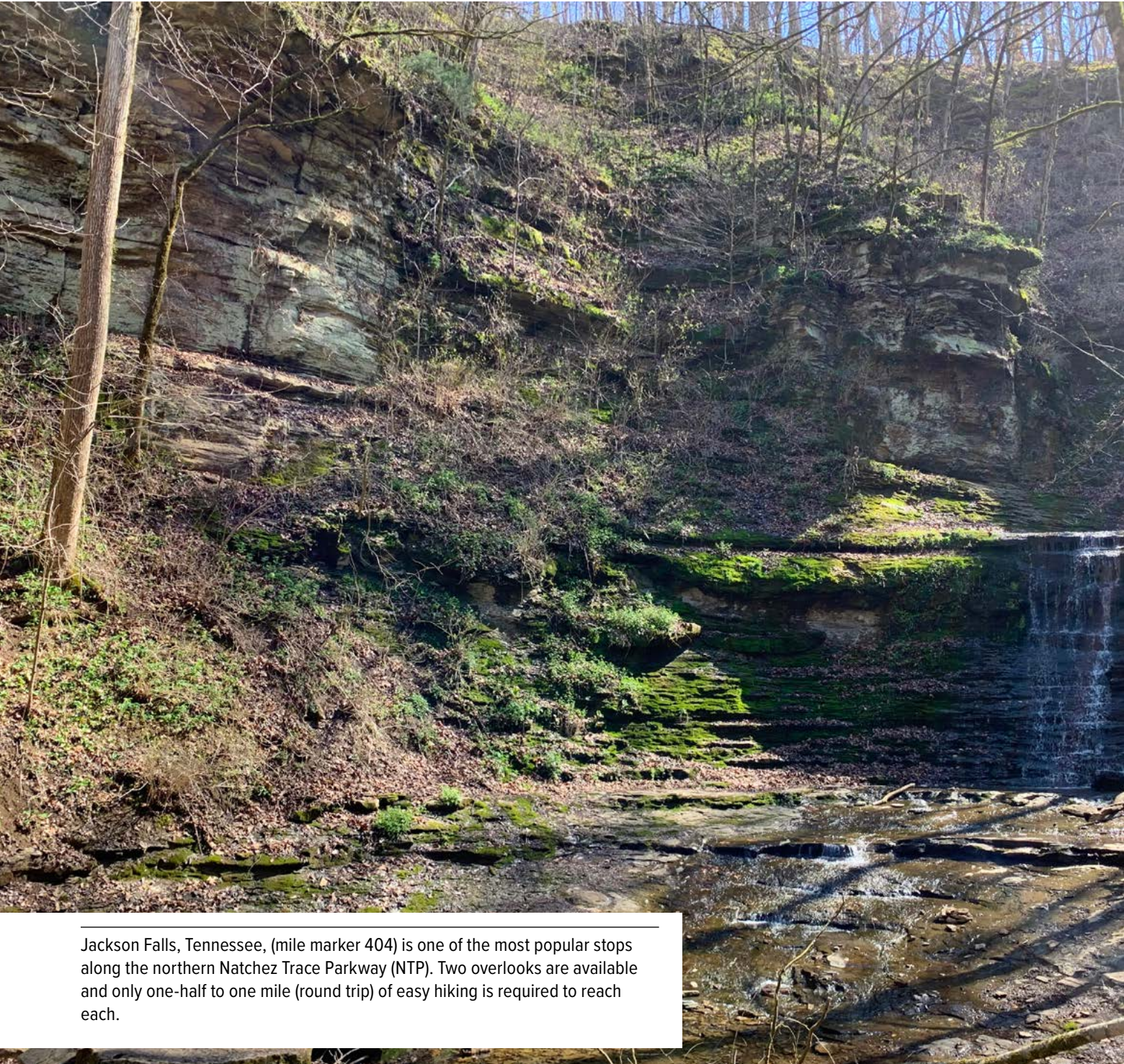
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# Tracing Our Ro



Jackson Falls, Tennessee, (mile marker 404) is one of the most popular stops along the northern Natchez Trace Parkway (NTP). Two overlooks are available and only one-half to one mile (round trip) of easy hiking is required to reach each.



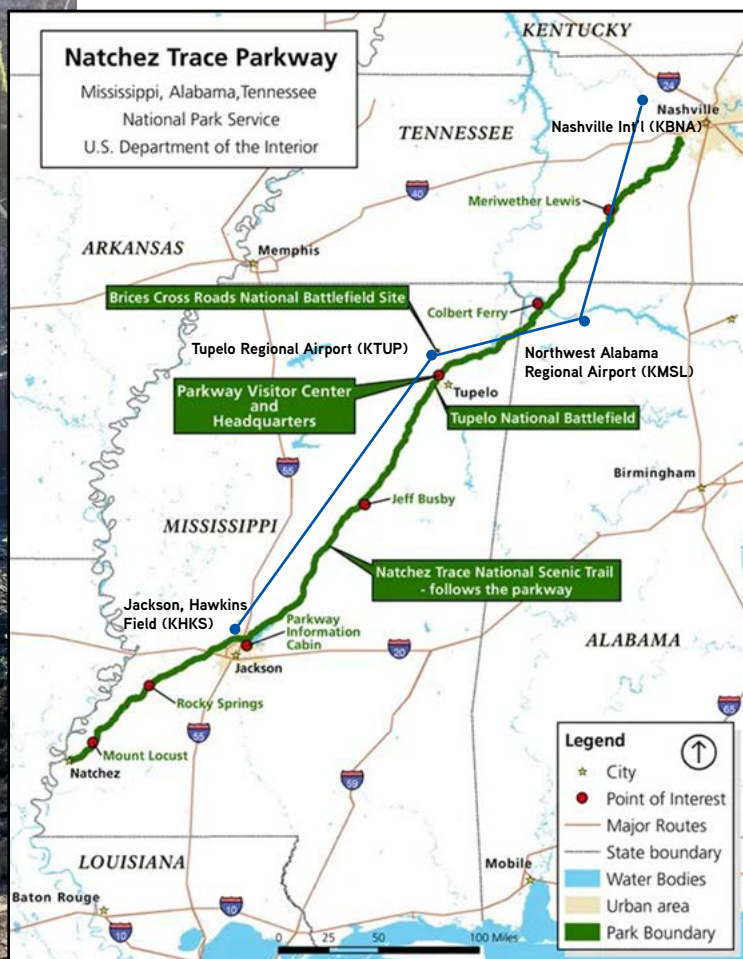
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## Flying and Touring the Natchez Trace, Part 1

by Matthew McDaniel

All photos are credited to the author unless otherwise noted.

*Author's Note: In Part 1, we'll explore the history of sites along the northern three-quarters of the Natchez Trace. In the next issue, we'll wrap up the tour, covering the southernmost portions of the route and nearby attractions.*



Map of Natchez Trace Parkway. (National Park Service)

As pilots, we all share a common interest in modern transport. Often, we fly just for fun, feeding our passion to be airborne. However, King Air category aircraft are primarily a means of rapid transport. They are magic carpets that, in a matter of hours, cover distances that once took weeks, months or even a year or more.

When an opportunity presents itself to use aircraft to explore a route our ancestors traveled for thousands of years before man ever flew, maybe we should take it. Going fast from place to place can buy us time to enjoy, explore and learn about the place we are in. Such is the journey along one of North America's oldest transportation routes – the 444-mile Natchez Trace.

The entire route could be flown in under two hours if viewed as a simple cross-country flight. From beginning to end, the great-circle distance is only 355 nautical miles between Nashville International Airport (KBNA) in Tennessee and the Natchez-Adams Co. Airport (KHEZ) in the southwestern corner of Mississippi. Explorations of what lies at each end could easily occupy a tourist for weeks. However, in between, ample





The Meriwether Lewis National Monument is a somber but beautiful spot to reflect upon the life of a man who accomplished so much in such a short time. It stands 200 yards from Grinder's Stand and directly over his gravesite, at mile marker 385 of the NTP. The broken column design represents a life cut short.

airports and opportunities exist to land and take in the sites, history and beauty.

### Route, Trail or Trace

Loosely speaking, in traditional French, a “trace” is a line of footprints or animal tracks. In practical use today, the term is interchangeable with “trail.” However, pioneering settlers of the New World often used the words independently to differentiate the characteristics of a route. A trail was thought of as a navigable route between points. A trace, on the other hand, tended to avoid water or wetland crossings, often making the total distance between points longer but easier and safer to traverse.

Originally, the Natchez Trace was a travel and trade route of Native Americans (mostly of the Natchez, Choctaw and Chickasaw nations) and dates back at least 10,000 years in that capacity. Many sections of the trail were blazed not by humans but by wildlife. Animals created paths along natural ridge lines of dry ground (avoiding water crossings) to reach grazing lands and/or areas to partake in salt and mineral deposits. Native Americans utilized the foot paths of deer, bison and other large game. Eventually, man-made paths connected the animal paths, and the Natchez Trace took shape. Native settlements sprang up along the route and their prehistoric stories were gathered through the burial mounds and artifacts they left behind. It wasn't until the mid-1700s that European explorers discovered the trace and began to spread the word of its existence. In 1742, a Frenchman wrote of the trail and its miserable conditions. As expected, such explorers relied heavily on assistance from native guides to navigate the trace.

As the 19<sup>th</sup> century dawned, President John Adams designated the trace a postal route, connecting Nashville with the Mississippi River, deep into what was then only known to Americans as “the southwest.” Soon after, peace treaties were





The birthplace of Elvis Presley is in Tupelo, Mississippi. The two-room house built by Elvis' father, Vernon, was occupied by family for years and is now both preserved and open for touring.



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signed with native tribes in the area and the U.S. Army began formal improvements. Soldiers and civilian contractors labored, at President Thomas Jefferson's behest. Conditions remained deplorable. Workers and travelers alike referred to the route as "The Devil's Backbone" rather than the name Jefferson gave it: "The Colombian Highway." When Jefferson's administration closed the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, upgrading the trace became even more pressing. Its west end, in Natchez, provided direct access to the Mississippi River (the eastern border of the newly acquired territory). By 1809, the trace could be navigated end to end by wagon in two to three weeks. Trading posts and inns soon popped up to support (and profit from) weary travelers. However, highwaymen, bandits and all variety of ne're-do-wells continued to strike fear into travelers along the more remote stretches.

Riverboat men who floated south to sell goods couldn't fight the Mississippi's current to return home. They would sell their rivercraft for lumber in Natchez or New Orleans and travel the trace back north. Grizzlier historical uses included the movement of enslaved people to be sold at markets, forced marches of native people to one of several points where the trace intersects with what is now called the Trail of Tears and movement of

military troops during the War of 1812. Half a century later, Union and Confederate troops would wage epic battles near the trace.

### The Natchez Trace Parkway

The National Park System (NPS) includes some massive national parks and monuments. Yet, the humble Natchez Trace Parkway (NTP) covers one of the largest geographical ranges of any NPS area. Its long (444 miles) and narrow (800 feet average) shape passes through three states, 25 counties, 22 communities and contains over 350 archaeological sites. First established as part of the NPS in 1938, the modern, paved parkway wasn't completed until 2005. Traffic on the parkway is limited, prohibiting its use for personal or business transportation. This keeps traffic on the parkway light, allowing NTP visitors to move between sites along the trace with ease. The parkway is in like-new condition, making for smooth and peaceful driving.

Speed limits are 50 mph or less along the NTP, making the total drivetime from end to end about 11 hours. However, one can hop on/off the NTP at numerous points. That's where the advantage of aviation comes into play. There are a variety of airports adjacent to the NTP that

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The Tupelo National Battlefield commemorates the last Civil War battle to take place entirely within Mississippi. It was an important victory for the Union, helping them to protect supply lines that proved critical in the Atlanta campaign. The park that commemorates the battle is located one mile east of the Natchez Trace Parkway.

allow pilots and passengers to fly in and visit smaller sections of the trace, possibly spending a day or two in/around one section before returning to the airport to fly on to the next.

The NTP can be traveled in either direction, though it technically begins in Natchez and progresses northeastward. However, since Nashville is more centrally located than Natchez, I'll assume that would be the more common starting point. The various points of interest along the NTP number in the hundreds. Even the official sites noted on NPS maps number many dozens. Seeing it all is next to impossible, so do your research and narrow your focus to suit your tastes – prehistoric and archeology sites, military history, natural features, hiking, historic inns (aka, stands) and trading posts, state parks, modern-era pop culture, etc.

Autumn is considered the best time to visit the NTP, when the fall colors are abundant. However, with its deep south geography, most any time of year will support suitable flying conditions. The peak of summer is likely the least desirable, due to the heat and humidity the region is well known for. Our visit was in springtime and conditions were quite pleasant. Regarding airports for use, I'll stick with the larger options where full services and cars are advertised as available, to ease the transition from aerial arrivals to terrestrial touring. However, never assume regarding services and call ahead.

### **The North 100 (Tennessee)**

Nashville is the perfect launching point to begin exploring the Natchez Trace. Tourism opportunities within Nashville itself are so abundant that they are beyond the scope of this article. Consider scheduling time

there in advance of your NTP explorations. Nashville has three controlled airports within its Class C airspace that could all be equally convenient launching points toward the northern sections of the NTP. Smyrna (KMQY) on the southeast side and John Tune Field (KJWN) on the northwest side are both Class D airports underlying the outer shelf of the Class C. Nashville International Airport (KBNA) provides the quickest access to the NTP. Take highway TN-100 to enter the parkway at mile-marker 444 (the terminus). Alternately, take US-31 to the historic city of Franklin, site of a significant Civil War battle, the McGavock Confederate Cemetery and multiple historic properties dedicated to preserving that era's history. From Franklin, the parkway can be entered from TN-96. Either route will provide a view of the double arch bridge at Birdsong Hollow, an architectural masterpiece and the unofficial north gateway of the NTP.

Most points of interest require short walks from the parkway pullouts to the sites themselves. Within Tennessee, some of the most popular are the War of 1812 Memorial, the Gordon House (circa 1818) and the Fall Hollow waterfall. The highlight for me was the Meriwether Lewis Monument and gravesite. The famed co-leader of the Lewis & Clark Expedition returned from that arduous two-year journey unharmed in 1806 and soon became the governor of the Louisiana Territory. He left his home in St. Louis in 1809, intending to travel to Washington, D.C., via the Mississippi River to New Orleans, then ship to D.C. He planned to meet with Jefferson and present his journals to a publisher. In Natchez, he decided to travel by land instead, including the entire length of the trace. About a month later, he was just 70 miles southwest of Nashville, taking a night's rest at Grinder's Stand when two gunshots rang out. The



The Cypress Swamps along the NTP showcase the hardy nature of baldcypress and tupelo trees, which have buttressed lower trunks and root systems to help anchor them in the soft, wet swamp lands.



A juvenile alligator basks in the morning sun inside the Cypress Swamp. The boardwalk hike through the swamp is near mile marker 122 along the NTP and is part of the Natchez Trace National Scenic Trail.



following morning, Lewis was found dead. Controversy still surrounds his death, with it officially being ruled a suicide. Yet, ample circumstantial evidence points to robbery/murder. Lewis was only 35.

## The Middle Trace (Alabama and Northern/Central Mississippi)

Northwest Alabama Regional Airport (KMSL) is a great second landing point, which serves the Florence and Muscle Shoals area. Though uncontrolled, this field is well equipped with multiple runways and instrument approaches. Roughly 30 miles of the NTP crosses the northwest corner of Alabama, and it is all quickly accessible from KMSL. About a half-dozen points of interest fall within that short distance, the most notable being the Colbert Ferry Stand Site. This Tennessee River crossing point played a major role in both the War of 1812 and the improvements made to the trace throughout the years.

Before departing KMSL, music lovers may want to visit the Muscle Shoals Sound Studio, where the “swampy” southern rock sound is rooted. Rock legends including The Rolling Stones, Cher, Paul Simon, Bob Seger and Aretha Franklin recorded there. Southern rock torchbearer Lynyrd Skynyrd did so, as well. In fact, the swamp lands mentioned in their classic hit “Free Bird” are on full display along the NTP with walks through and views of various cave springs, sloughs, bottoms and creeks. The Alabama Music Hall of Fame is also nearby. The music theme can be carried into the next stop, too.


Only 50 miles or so across the state line into Mississippi, the Class D Tupelo Regional Airport (KTUP) awaits. Tupelo is most famous as the birthplace of Elvis Presley. He and his parents lived there until he was 13. Then, looking for a better life, they loaded their meager possessions into a sedan and moved to Memphis. The house where Elvis was born in 1935 is preserved, even though the family was forced to leave it when Elvis was only 3. His father was unable to repay the \$180 loan he’d secured to build the home. The two-room dwelling is now part of a museum dedicated to the King of Rock ‘n’ Roll.

Centrally located along the NTP, the Parkway Visitor Center is just north of Tupelo. As with any NPS site, a stop at the visitor center can provide helpful information and touring tips. Trace State Park is just southwest of Tupelo and is one of the areas where visitors can hike original sections of the “Old Trace.” The last Civil War battle within Mississippi is commemorated within the Tupelo National Battlefield and other Civil War battlegrounds and graveyards are nearby. Thirty miles south of KTUP are the Bynum Mounds. While there are many native burial mounds along the trace, these are the oldest (dating 100 B.C.E.–100 C.E.). They are also the most easily accessible and close-up via paved pathways. If you’d prefer to fly there, the Houston Municipal Airport (M44) is nearby and perfectly suitable. However, no

Jet-A fuel is available and ground transportation should be prearranged.

Another 100 air miles south of M44, is the Mississippi capital city of Jackson, where like Nashville, three airports are available. The principal being the Class C Jackson-Medgar Evers International (KJAN). While KJAN is the best in terms of services and facilities, it is also the most expensive and farthest from the NTP (though only about 10 miles). If you want to take in some of the city sites of Jackson, Hawkins Field (KHKS) is the downtown airport. It is Class D, underlying the outer ring of the Class C, advertises crew cars available and is closer to the NTP. Additionally, it is the nearest to downtown attractions such as the State Capitol Building, the Mississippi Civil Rights Museum and the Museum of Mississippi History. Finally, there is Bruce Campbell Field (KMBO), an uncontrolled field also under the Class C, on the north side. KMBO is perfectly situated, mere minutes from NTP, with suitable runway, approaches and fuel available. Rental cars would have to be prearranged there, however.

Two prominent features of central Mississippi are several Old Trace stand sites and the towering cypress trees with impressive exposed buttress root systems. The old stands are sprinkled all along the NTP in this area and each offers a slight variation in the history of the trace and its travelers. Fifteen miles north of Jackson (near NTP mile marker 120) is a beautiful hike through the Cypress Swamp. The water tupelo and baldcypress trees have extraordinary abilities to thrive in such places. They take root at the peak of summer when the swamp is nearly dry, but thereafter can survive as seedlings while fully submerged. Boardwalks will keep your feet dry as you trek across the wettest areas. The swamp walks/hikes along the NTP are not the smelly, mosquito-infested scenes you might imagine. They are pristine cypress forests with colorful water features, teeming with wildlife and natural wonder.

*In Part 2, we’ll cover the South 100 portion of the NTP, including the most prominent Civil War battlefield of the Old South as well as the antebellum wonders of Natchez and southern Mississippi. *

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