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Archive

The King and I

Memphis, the birthplace of rock-and-roll, is celebrating the 50th anniversary of the genre with major events throughout the year. They include:

- **Global Moment in Time.** On July 5, the actual day of the anniversary, radio stations around the world will simultaneously play "That's All Right (Mama)," the Elvis song that started it all. A commemorative concert at Sun Studio later that day will feature special guest Billy Bob Thornton and entertainment by Billy Lee Riley, Sonny Burgess & the Pacers, Rock a Billy Country, Stan Perkins, Cordell Jackson, and more.
- **Elvis Week.** The King is king August 7-16 at this annual event with special meaning this year.
- **The Rock 'n' Soul Museum.** The museum will unveil its new exhibition space at the grand opening of the FedEx Forum in September.

For more information, visit www.50yearsrocknroll.com.
— Jill Becker

The Tally

Here's how I spent my \$299-for-a-weekend-in-Memphis dollars and still managed to have **86 cents** left over.

Lodging.....\$187.82
Sleep Inn at Court Square

Going Solo in Memphis

by Kevin Raub

As part of a series on budget travel, our bachelor shows us the best of the city without breaking the bank.

Would it be possible to get two bags of pretzels?" I ask the flight attendant on my flight from Dallas to Memphis. Like a squirrel in October, I'm stocking up. Because if and when my \$299 kitty for a bargain-conscious weekend in Memphis runs out, those pretzels might come in handy. Besides, I'm going to the bustling metropolis on the banks of the Mississippi for something money can't buy: to engulf myself in the legend of Elvis Presley — something my father, who was the biggest Elvis fan I've ever known, never got the chance to do.

Growing up in the Raub household, the pecking order went something like this: Elvis rode shotgun to God himself. Bob Knight, ex-Indiana Hoosiers/current Texas Tech basketball coach, was God himself. Whoever was batting cleanup for the Chicago Cubs was vying for a congregation in there somewhere.

I was introduced to Elvis in the late '70s, when my father proudly brought home a horrendously ugly baby-blue Ford Leisure Van — complete with a state-of-the-art eight-track cassette player — which soon became a sanctum for The King's music. My first thought: torture. By high school, however, music had become a profound part of my life, and it didn't take long for me to see the same great qualities in Elvis that my father had seen. He's credited with inventing rock-and-roll, for goodness' sake! Like my dad, I owe a great debt to him. I'm quite sure that debt is more than \$299, but that will have to suffice for now.

There are two very compelling reasons to visit Memphis: to pay homage to the history of rock-and-roll and the blues, and also to immerse yourself in an entire genre of food that should come with a surgeon general's warning.

Aiming to do both, I touch down late afternoon on a Friday and weigh my transportation options. Although the city bus system in Memphis, known as MATA, doesn't even pretend to be as efficient as its counterparts in San Francisco or New York, I happen to arrive a few minutes before Bus 32 rolls through Memphis International Airport (\$1.35). It's probably not the most scenic ride into town, but it sure as heck is the cheapest.

(901) 522-9700
www.sleepinn.com

Attractions.....\$33.80
A. Schwab Store
 (901) 523-9782

Graceland
 (800) 238-2000
www.elvis.com

Memphis Brooks Museum of Art
 (901) 544-6200

The Peabody
 (800) 732-2639
www.peabodymemphis.com
 Sun Studio, (800) 441-6249,
www.sunstudio.com

Dining/Entertainment..\$62.02
B.B. King Blues Club
 (901) 524-5464
www.bbkingclubs.com

Charlie Vergos Rendezvous
 (901) 523-2746
www.hogsfly.com

Gridiron Diner
 (901) 396-9869

Gus's World Famous Hot and Spicy Fried Chicken
 (901) 527-4877

Huey's Downtown
 (901) 527-2700
www.hueys.cc

Peabody Place
 (901) 261-7529

The Pig on Beale
 (901) 529-1544

Transportation.....\$14.50
 MATA bus system
www.matatransit.com

TOTAL.....\$298.14

My first inclination was to stay at a hostel, but I realize I'm getting too old for communal sleeping. Instead, I spring for an \$80-a-night room at the Sleep Inn at Court Square, hands down the best deal for the money within a five-minute walk of Beale Street (not to mention the fact that the Main Street Trolley stops right outside its doors). No sooner had I dropped off my bags than I was back out on the street and headed to Charlie Vergos Rendezvous, the most famous spot in town for Memphis' beloved barbecue.

The route to Charlie's from the Sleep Inn takes in the best of historic downtown Memphis, a collage of architectural styles (beaux-arts, Victorian revival, gothic revival) reminiscent of small-town America that live on simultaneously with new urban developments like Peabody Place, a dining and entertainment complex featuring 22 state-of-the-art theater screens and 12 restaurants. With more locations listed on the National Register of Historic Places per capita than any other city in the U.S., Memphis offers a wonderful collision of old and new, with a killer soundtrack to boot. As I take this all in, my nose picks up the muddled, smoky waft of charcoal, vinegar, and secret spices that extends far beyond the sketchy downtown alley where you'll find Charlie's. There are more than 110 barbecue joints in Memphis, but Charlie's is the granddaddy of them all.

With my senses pushing overload, I sit down and mull over the extensive menu, more out of habit than necessity, as I've been given a tip: Look no further than the pork ribs. I debate the price difference between a full order (\$15.95) and a small order (\$12.50), and decide to go hog wild with the full Monty and chase it down with a pitcher of Michelob (\$6.95). Line of thinking here: no regrets. If it means pretzels for breakfast on Sunday, come what may.

Charlie favors the drier version of barbecue ribs over the sauce-saturated variety, but his secret hot sauce is on the table for those so inclined. I am. One bite into these perfectly seasoned, slathered ribs of pork and I'm in hog heaven. And although I know it's financially irresponsible, I can't resist taking a little Charlie home with me. A bottle of famous sauce and accompanying spices runs me \$7.

Fully fueled, I head for Beale Street, the birthplace of the blues. Yet it's "Love Me Tender," not W.C. Handy, I hear bellowing down its Bourbon Street-like corridor. Inside The Pig on Beale, one of the many bars and live-music clubs that line this section of the street, I see something that walks like Elvis and talks like Elvis, so it must be ... wait ... nope. It's Radford Ellis, whose Elvis impersonation show, the E-Factor, holds court here on Friday nights. When one of the first things I hear is, "Are you folks getting drunk yet? Because the drunker you get, the better I sound," I wonder if I will be begging for my \$2 cover back. I happily down a cheap Pabst Blue Ribbon draft (\$3), but I don't think I'm as altered as Ellis would like. His act is entertaining, if not for its lack of talent. His \$15 CD? Not in the budget.

While my father does somersaults in his grave, I seek authenticity at B.B. King's Blues Club, where the blues legend himself has been known to show up unannounced. The \$7 cover hurts, but the sweet sounds of Preston Shannon's soulful wail and a Mason jar of Louisiana's finest draught, Purple Haze (\$5.03), quickly eases the blow. If it's the best in contemporary blues you seek, this is the spot. I break for bed, however, before I end up emptying my pockets under a spell induced by Shannon's mesmerizing

guitar licks. Along the way, I stop at the A. Schwab Store, a Memphis emporium like no other. Elvis once shopped here, but for what I'll never know. The inventory ranges from voodoo powders to handcuffs to religious icons. A. Schwab has been in business since 1876, but surely more for spectacle than practicality.

The next morning, I'm pleasantly surprised to find that the Sleep Inn provides breakfast. Score! Starbucks coffee it ain't, but the bagel does the trick. Then it's out the back door to catch Bus 43 — the Elvis Presley line straight to Graceland (\$1.15). I've opted for the Platinum Package tour (\$24.30 with AAA discount), which includes the mansion, automobile museum, Elvis' two airplanes, and the Sincerely Elvis Museum. Say what you will about Elvis' tastes, but you can never say he didn't know what he liked.

I'm shocked at the green shag carpet that lines the walls and ceiling in the Jungle Room, the 350 yards of multicolored fabric that covers nearly everything in the Pool Room, and the mirrored ceiling in the TV room. Graceland is a gaudy mess. The only thing missing is a big blue leisure van. Maybe that's in the automobile museum.

At the end of the tour, I realize I've made a critical error. Sun Studio, my next stop, runs a free shuttle between itself, Beale Street, and Graceland. I could have saved \$1.15! It's a good thing this afternoon's duck march will be free, but more on that later. Time waits for no man, and the hourly shuttle is here. I simply don't have time to stop by Elvis' favorite spot for cheeseburgers, a joint down Elvis Presley Boulevard called the Gridiron Diner. I hop aboard the shuttle and head for another Memphis institution.

It was inside the soundproof walls of Sun Studio that Elvis birthed rock-and-roll's first record, "That's All Right (Mama)," in 1954. When released to radio the next day, it was played 14 times in the first three hours alone. On the tour (\$9.50), you can stand in the very spot where it all went down.

Sun Studio used to serve food (including the King's beloved fried peanut butter and banana sandwich), but these days it sticks to music. Still, a man's gotta eat, and I simply can't afford lunch at any place as nice as the Memphis Brooks Museum of Art's The Brushmark Restaurant, which offers panoramic views of Overton Park along with its \$9 fried-green-tomato BLTs. So it looks like burgers at Huey's are in order.

The beef at this local icon is consistently voted the best in town by Memphis magazine's annual reader's poll. The decor, I quickly notice, isn't half bad, either. Although the walls are covered with a fascinating array of Memphis memorabilia, it's the thousands of frill picks stuck in the ceiling that are this joint's standout feature. For \$1, you can try to guess exactly how many there are. Sadly, gambling is for no man on a budget. Sure bets are the gut-busting World Famous Huey Burger (\$4.60) and some of the biggest onion rings I have ever laid eyes on (\$1.60).

Next, I head up the street to the Peabody Hotel, the nicest digs in town. It's here that the famed duck march takes place every day at 11 a.m. and 5 p.m. This silly tradition began in the 1930s and is still quite a spectacle. It revolves around hordes of folks lining up around the lobby's central fountain, martinis in hand, to watch as five of the cutest mallard ducks

you've ever seen swim up out of the fountain and march along a red carpet into a nearby elevator. Don't ask.

Watching adorable ducks waddle through expensive hotels does nothing to spoil my appetite for dinner, incidentally. After last night's ode to pig, I make a beeline for Gus's World Famous Hot & Spicy Fried Chicken. I don't want to hear anything about your grandma or the Colonel. Save it. Gus's chicken is undeniably the best fried bird you'll ever eat. "I don't even know," says night manager Scott Ramboin, when I ask him what the secret is. "They just tell me how to cook it, not how to make it."

I douse my three-piece white-meat plate (\$7.80) in hot sauce and devour this heart attack on a platter like a contestant on *Survivor*. It's so good, despite scorching the roof of my mouth, I continue on undeterred. Then I realize, I too am a survivor.

I stumble back to the Sleep Inn, dizzy from a cholesterol-induced food coma, having survived a budget weekend in Memphis with enough spare change to upgrade to the MATA airport shuttle (\$12) the next morning and still have 86 cents worth of jingle in my step. Now if I could just bring the Chicago Cubs a World Series and put Bob Knight back in charge of the Indiana Hoosiers, my father could rest easy. Pretzels, anyone?

KEVIN RAUB is a San Francisco-based travel and entertainment writer whose work has appeared in *Travel+Leisure*, *FHM*, and the *New York Post*.

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