

GRILLS & THRILLS

By **Andy Harries**

DRIVING along the AL-34 highway westwards, the willow oaks and loblolly pines give way to an old iron bridge. Suddenly, a vast and sweeping panorama of the Coosa River opens up for miles in all directions, the water a flat mirror of the cloudless sky.

This is Alabama and the American South at its most shatteringly beautiful – but there's no time to loiter. My destination is a small shack about six miles up the road, famed for its barbecued pork sandwiches.

Butts To Go, on the outskirts of Pell City, is high on my list of essential visits during a 2,200 mile barbecue road trip of the South, taking in Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, Tennessee and North Carolina.

The right car is essential for any grand tour, and my V8 Mustang is just the job: 1970s cop-show looks, a rag top and an exhaust growl like a Delta bluesman after a night playing a smoke-filled club. I'm travelling solo (with permission from my forgiving wife) so there are no arguments about maps, music or the calories I consume as I eat my way round the South.

My trip kicks off in Atlanta, Georgia, where the laid-back Darwin Hotel is my base for a couple of days.

Atlanta's a big city but easy to explore by bike or on foot thanks to the 22-mile car-free loop of abandoned railway line called the BeltLine. There are plenty of shops, cafes

and restaurants along its course, dazzling public artworks and vast parks.

I walk to Grant Park for dinner at DAS BBQ, where giant iron smokers sit like steam trains, stripped of their wheels but still puffing from their smokestacks. The beef brisket is divine.

Barbecue is an essential part of Southern life, as celebrity chef Dwayne 'Big Daddy' Thompson explains when I visit his restaurant in Bessemer, Alabama, later in the trip: 'Barbecue is the original soul food and cooking low and slow allows the ingredients to get to know each other while your diners do the same.'

From Atlanta, I roar along the I-20 to Birmingham, Alabama – a city central to the South's civil rights movement. After a day exploring, I meet three veterans of the 1963 children's crusade – protests that helped trigger the end of U.S. segregation.

Paulette Roby, Terry Collins and Nadine Smith all have extraordinary tales to tell – none more so than Nadine. In May 1963, she walked out of High School to join child protesters marching on City Hall

and was arrested as her classmates were beaten by police.

She was detained for five days and when finally allowed a phone call, instead of pleading to get out she asked her parents for clean underwear and a toothbrush. She was just 13 years old.

'We're still facing the same fights, only the arenas have changed,' adds Terry.

Concern that a second Donald Trump victory would set back the civil rights movement is voiced

by every black American with whom I discuss politics on the trip.

I don't clock a Trump bumper sticker ('Even my dog hates Biden') until driving through the flat plains from Birmingham to Florence, Alabama.

Almost every home proudly flies the Stars and Stripes, but there's little sign of support for the Donald.

In Florence, my base is the Gun-Runner, an uber-cool boutique hotel with a popular rooftop bar.

After a whistlestop tour of the Muscle Shoals Sound Studio, in the town of Muscle Shoals, where a host of stars, from Aretha Franklin to Rod Stewart, made records, it's time to hit the road again.

The rain's slamming down and I drive past endless miles of harvested corn fields on the way to Tupelo, Mississippi, and the Elvis Presley Birthplace. The museum is in a fine location and is nothing like as kitsch as Graceland.

I stop for lunch at Johnnie's Drive-In nearby. Treat yourself

like a King by ordering Elvis's favourite: a dough-burger with all the toppings.

Cruising along the US-61 towards Clarksdale, Mississippi, for the city's annual Sunflower River Blues Festival, I spot a sign for Oxford, and decide to detour for a pilgrimage to the

home town of my favourite author, the late Larry Brown.

I want to see the fire station where Brown worked as a firefighter before becoming a celebrated Southern writer. In his memoir *On Fire*, Brown writes about cooking steak and chicken

outside the station where he stayed when on duty. And sure enough, the crew were out back, barbecuing lunch that they invited me to share.

The hospitality and kindness shown by these men is typical of people I meet. Southern folk are renowned for their generosity, good manners and ready humour – despite travelling alone, I was never lonely.

Later, I arrive at the Travelers Hotel in Clarksdale, a beautifully restored former rail workers' flop house. And what's on a coffee table in the lobby? A book of

Larry Brown short stories. How's that for serendipity?

Clarksdale has a gritty authenticity befitting its status as a Southern blues capital. I spend a wild night at Ground Zero, a music club part owned by film star Morgan Freeman, followed by a hangover-curing Sunday brunch at the Bluesberry Cafe, listening to the live stripped-back soul of Lucious Spiller.

After a flying visit to the brilliant B.B. King museum in Indianola and a glorious drive on the arrow-straight roads of the Mississippi Delta, I set the satnav for Memphis, Tennessee, for three days of raw politics and rocking music.

I stay at the Arrive Hotel, a short walk from the National Civil Rights Museum.

Built on the same site as the Lorraine Motel, where Dr Martin Luther King was assassinated in April 1964, the museum is an powerful experience – one that ends with the solemnity of Room 306 and the balcony on which he stood as the fatal shot rang out.

Across the street is the window from which James Earl Ray fired

his gun. Later that day, I drive to Chattanooga, before stopping at Sevierville – Dolly Parton's Tennessee home town.

I'm booked for dinner at the Appalachian, one of the South's best restaurants – and barely finish my starter when a group of diners asks me to join them.

Next day, I fill up (a full tank costs about £35) for the best drive of the trip: up through the Smoky Mountains and on to North Carolina.

After pit stops in Asheville and Lexington, I drive to state capital, Raleigh, and the super-cool Longleaf Hotel at the edge of the downtown area. It's a 1950s motel given a 21st Century makeover.

For my last supper, I make a pilgrimage to Sam Jones BBQ.

He's continuing the legacy of his grandfather whose restaurant opened in 1947 and was declared one of the best barbecues in the US by National Geographic magazine.

'Where y'all from?' asks a woman dining with four pals in the booth next to me – and before long we're all in the bar.

That's how it is in the South: you never know what pleasures are just along the road.

● *Virgin Atlantic flies daily to Atlanta from Manchester and London Heathrow. Return economy fares start from £720pp (virginatlantic.com). Darwin Hotel, Atlanta, Georgia, from £162 per night (thedarwinhotel.com); GunRunner Boutique Hotel, Florence, Alabama, from £175 per night (gunrunnerhotel.com); Travelers Hotel, Clarksdale, Mississippi, from £123 per night (stayattravelers.com); Arrive Hotel, Memphis, Tennessee, from £187 (arrivehotels.com); Longleaf Hotel, Raleigh, North Carolina, from £110 per night (thelongleafhotel.com).*



SOUTHERN COMFORTS:
A barbecue chef at work. Main image, music and food venues tempt in Memphis. Centre, Andy's route

FIVE TOP TIPS FOR YOUR TREK

- 1** Make sure your car hire includes breakdown recovery: the South is vast and you can easily end up stuck in the middle of nowhere.
- 2** Get an American data plan for your mobile. You'll be relying on your phone's satnav.
- 3** Read the rules for four-way stop signs. They are the number one cause of minor accidents.
- 4** Make use of the rest areas on highways. They don't have food and fuel but are often in beautifully maintained public parks.
- 5** Don't speed. There are cops everywhere and tickets are pricey.

