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**Heart of the Country:
*The Parkway from the Shoals to Nashville***

Leading to Nashville, this stretch of the Parkway offers up history with all the makings of a great country song: love, heartbreak, tough old birds, plenty of fightin’ and a woman who really stood by her man.

The new Wayne County Welcome Center in Collinwood welcomes guests to Tennessee as friendly volunteers tout attractions like Collinwood’s Old Depot Library, the only surviving building associated with the Tennessee Western Railroad. Tour the small museum at the Welcome Center, learn about local festivals, and enjoy rural attractions like canoeing, fishing and hunting.

Continue with a walk among the wildflowers along the banks of the free-flowing stream at Sweetwater Branch, a popular destination for locals and visitors alike.

From there, it’s a short drive to the grave of early American explorer Meriwether Lewis, who met his mysterious death, possibly by suicide, on this spot in 1809. It was Lewis, along with his partner William Clark, who first documented vast areas of the Louisiana Purchase. At the gravesite you’ll also find a campsite, picnic area, with self-guided walking trails, and restrooms.

On from the Lewis site, the road crosses over the Tennessee Valley Divide, which served as the boundary between the United States and the Chickasaw Nation when Tennessee joined the Union in 1796. From there it’s on to Leiper’s Fork, a delightfully jaunty village that is a Registered National Historic District and a great place to kick back and while away a few hours or even a few days.

Leiper’s Fork was settled back in 1790s, by hail and hardy pioneer stock. You’ll find an historic marker at the home of one of the founders, Thomas Hart Benton, who went on to become a U.S. Senator - although by that time, he had moved to Missouri after a brawl with Andrew Jackson, which left Jackson with a gunshot wound to the shoulder and Benton with the firm conviction that Tennessee was just too small for the both of them. The name Thomas Hart Benton may also be familiar as the namesake for the noted American artist who was Benton’s great nephew. Today in Leiper’s Fork, there’s plenty of artistry in the way historic homes have been converted into antiques stores, cafes, and artists’ shops—or in one case, a Jailhouse where folks love hanging out in a town where frontier equals fun. Enjoy browsing or just “setting a spell” on a front porch or at the Lawn Chair Theatre at the Jailhouse.

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In nearby Franklin, the road leads to the site of a dramatic and decisive Civil War battle that has been called the “bloodiest hours” of the entire war. The Carter House, which served as Union headquarters, was also the scene of a family tragedy as one of the Carter sons was mortally wounded within yards of the house—the home he’d just seen for the first time in three years. Today, the house, a Registered Historic Landmark, with over 100 bullet holes in its sides, is open as a museum and interpretive center with a video presentation and a battlerama.

At the Carnton Plantation, only a few miles away, the scene was equally brutal, as wounded Confederates filled every available inch of the house, outbuildings and finally the lawn. After the war, when a neighbor’s field containing the remains of some 1500 soldiers was going to be plowed under, Carnton owners John and Carrie McGavock offered the services of their beloved Carnton once again, this time as a final resting place, making Carnton the largest privately held Confederate cemetery in the nation. In her “Book of the Dead,” Carrie McGavock recorded the name and rank of each soldier, and took such devoted care of her charges she became known as the Widow of the South.

A century and a half later, Carrie McGavock’s story would intertwine with the renaissance of the historic town of Franklin. History has always run deep here, through the quaint and charming downtown served by a trolley, with sites like the Carter House and museums like the McLemore House, chronicling African American life in the area. Today Franklin has reenergized through new ideas and new outlooks, best exemplified by the town’s conversion of its old stoveworks into The Factory, which retains many of the architectural features and feel of the old premises while providing a picturesque venue for dining, shopping, galleries and even theatre.

The Carnton Plantation, now meticulously restored, is another example of Franklin’s successful balance of old and new. Since the best-selling success of *Widow of the South*, Robert Hicks’ 2005 novel of Carrie McGavock’s life, visitors have come from all over the nation to take the “Widow of the South” tours covering the 48-acre estate, including the beautifully appointed mansion, ornamental garden and, of course, the famed resting place of Carrie McGavock’s precious charges.

After Franklin’s bridge of old and new, you’ll soon cross over an actual bridge linking the small-town charm behind you to the bright lights of Nashville ahead. This remarkably innovative double arch bridge, an architectural and engineering landmark, eliminates the use of spandrels, and is the only one of its kind in the world.

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The Trace ends near the campus of the world-respected Vanderbilt University, where in Centennial Park you can stand in awe before the replica of the Greek Parthenon; inside, you can look up for what seems like miles at the Athena Parthenos, the tallest indoor structure in the entire world.

Nashville's many other charms aren't as large as Athena, but the city's face is much more varied. With its most famous title as Music City, U.S.A., Nashville is the world's mecca for country music, where stars come to make their mark and fans come to see their idols and to hear some of the best live music in the world. From intimate and exclusive venues like the Blue Bird Café to the Ryman Auditorium, regarded as the "Mother Church of Country Music," to that Nashville institution, the Grand Ole Opry continuing its more than 80-year tradition, Nashville hums and strums with excitement. The County Music Hall of Fame and Museum is only one of the many unbeatable attractions on Music Row.

From hot country to high art, Nashville has it all, including world-class rotating collections of fine art at the Frist Center for Visual Arts, its facility a converted Art Deco former post office. At Cheekwood Botanical Gardens, 55 acres of botanical gardens, a sculpture trail and museum of art make for a captivating excursion.

But no trip up (or down) the Natchez Trace would be complete without a visit to the Hermitage, Andrew and Rachel Jackson's Nashville home. Perhaps no other single individual has been as closely associated with the history of the Trace as the man who was U.S. President as well as the namesake for Mississippi's capital. Jackson negotiated treaties with Native tribes on the Trace; he also showed one of his finest hours as a leader there. It was on the Trace that he earned his nickname "Old Hickory" when, after the Battle of New Orleans and after the government had cut off his army's funds, he led his men on a hard scrabble march homeward.

Today, the Hermitage looks very much as it did when Jackson returned to it after his second term as president. Costumed interpreters are stationed throughout the house to guide visitors and to provide context—though some of the best context a visitor might find would be on that road, the historic Natchez Trace Parkway, where Andrew Jackson, along with so many other Americans, found his way.

For visitor information: www.scenictrace.com