

Downtown Memphis – Guitars, Chinese Art, Firefighting and a Pyramid

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"If you are caught taking pictures inside the factory you will be removed from the tour and your pictures will be deleted." This was the general gist of a statement that I and a group of more than a dozen other tourists heard before we embarked on a guided tour of the Gibson guitar plant in Memphis.

I was three days into a sight-seeing trip to northern Alabama, northern Mississippi and southwestern Tennessee this past August when I found myself on the receiving end of this stern warning. After visiting several other sites in the Memphis area, I left my car at the Tennessee Welcome Center, located near the Mud Island tourist attraction, and rode the trolley to Main Street, where I disembarked.

I walked a few blocks to Beale Street to the Gibson facility. I have played guitar for nearly 40 years and I wanted to get an idea as to how my favorite instrument is made. Along the way I passed a commercial entertainment district, which featured BB King's Blues Club. A huge poster of King on the side of a building greeted passersby. It depicted the bluesman, his eyes shut tight and his face grimacing, playing 'Lucille,' his famous guitar. Another large wall poster featured a smiling Elvis. Yes, I was definitely in Memphis.

While waiting in the Gibson building for the 2:00 p.m. tour to begin, I browsed for several minutes in the factory store. Some of the prices took my breath away. One mandolin retailed for \$4,999.00. Ouch.

Each member of the tour group was handed a pair of goggles and was instructed to wear them while on the factory floor. As we walked through the factory, the young, casually-clad lady tour guide had to speak quite loudly so as to be heard above the noise of the myriad machines. A fine water mist sprayed constantly from the ceiling to maintain proper humidity levels for the delicate wood.

During the tour, which lasted for the better part of an hour, the young woman led us through the factory as she explained step by step how a Gibson guitar is made. We watched the craftsmen, live and in person, as they each carried out their specific tasks. If I were employed there I think the job I would probably prefer would be the official guitar tester.

After the tour I returned the goggles, browsed the store a few minutes more and then walked back to Main Street., along which I continued several more blocks until I reached a most interesting and singular museum, the Belz Museum of Asian and Judaic Art. It is located not in its own building, but rather in a storefront. Once inside I had to pass other businesses before reaching a flight of steps, which I had to descend before reaching the actual museum.

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The place is chock full of sculptures, paintings and other forms of art of a mostly Chinese origin. Most of the works are no older than a few hundred years, nothing really ancient. Strolling and observing all of the various pieces impressed upon me the great difference between Oriental and Western art. Many of the pieces are made from jade, ivory or porcelain. A smaller section of the museum, featuring modern Judaica and contemporary Israeli art, is dedicated to Jewish life.

After leaving the museum I walked several blocks through the rain back to my car. There was one more museum that I wanted to see and, if the weather had been clear, I could have walked to it as well.

I then drove four or five blocks and found an on-street metered parking space near the Memphis Fire Museum. It was late afternoon when I walked inside the museum, which is located in an old firehouse.

Some sort of party scheduled for that evening was in the preparation stages. Folding chairs had been set up. Refreshments, including fantastically delicious-looking brownies, sat on big trays covered with plastic wrap, calling out my name and begging me to eat them. Despite the temptation, I succeeded in refraining from breaking the ninth commandment.

The museum featured some antique fire trucks, including a very old horse-drawn pumper. A variety of fireman's hats hung from the wall. One particular display case would be most appealing to young boys - it was chock full of toy fire trucks.

After leaving the museum I drove west just a few miles, crossing the Mississippi River into Arkansas for no other reason than the fact that it was so close and that I could say that I had visited that state on my trip. As I neared the river I passed the Pyramid, a modern-day structure built in 1991 that was used for a time as a sports venue. At 321 feet in height, it is said to be the sixth tallest pyramid in the world. The retailer Bass Pro Shops is currently in the process of converting the former arena into a retail outlet.

I soon turned around and crossed back into Memphis and continued east on I-40, dealing with rain and rush hour traffic for several miles. In time I reached Brownsville, sixty-some miles east of Memphis, and checked into a hotel.

When I am on the road, after checking in for the evening, I like to find a nice \$10.00 buffet of some sort. The actual city of Brownsville was probably four or five miles due west and the only eateries near the hotel were a fast food joint and a Dairy Queen. I chose the Dairy Queen. I have nothing against Dairy Queen, mind you, it's just that I was hoping for something more substantial.

Final Installment – Traveling Home Through a Mindfield and a Forrest