

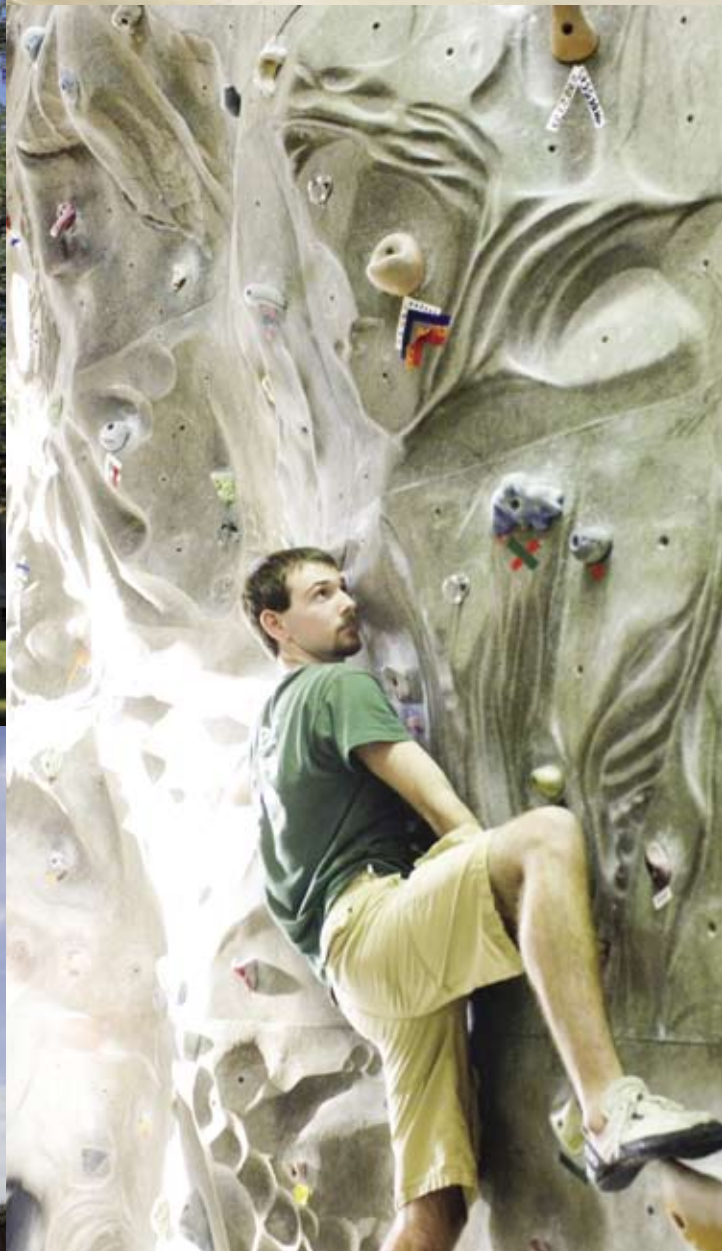
Readers share their number one picks for dining, shopping, and having fun around the Magnolia State.

best of mississippi 2007

Voters agree there is never a lack of exciting things to do in Mississippi. Our third annual “Best of Mississippi” poll offered 88 categories, including a few new ones, proving this state is anything but boring. From the rolling hills of north Mississippi to the glittering waters of the Gulf Coast, more *Mississippi Magazine* readers than ever selected their favorite restaurants, shops, and exciting locations to visit. While two- and three-time winners pepper this year’s choices, brand new winners demonstrate growing areas and evolving communities.

We hope this list will inspire you to visit new places and discover new things throughout the state in the coming year.

Clockwise from top left: Ajax Diner, Oxford; Longleaf Trace’s hub, Hattiesburg; Sanderson Center rock-climbing wall; MSU Riley Center, Meridian; Longwood, Natchez.



dining out

BEST BREAKFAST/BRUNCH SPOT AND BEST DESSERT:

Char Restaurant, Jackson

On Sundays from 10 a.m. until 2 p.m., this Jackson hotspot mixes an inventive brunch menu with traditional New Orleans-style jazz music by the Raphael Semmes Trio. Late risers mingle alongside the dressy after-church crowd to enjoy Char's festive atmosphere and impeccable cuisine.

Main courses like lump crabcake benedict and quiche with shrimp and smoked ham keep the brunch menu delectably interesting, while the meatloaf and fried chicken Sunday specials offer traditional lunch alternatives to the breakfast fare.

Their blueberry and white chocolate bread pudding dessert special is only available during Sunday brunch, but all Char-goers know there are plenty of sweet temptations on the regular menu for every other day of the week. The pecan caramel butter-crunch cake with Granny Smith apple sauce is their unwavering bestseller. The double-cut fudge brownie and homemade pecan pie are also well worth a momentary lapse in diet. But don't ask for two spoons—you won't want to share. —J.B.M

Highland Village, 4500 I-55 N., Ste. 142, Jackson; 601/362-5313; www.charrestaurant.com

BEST NEW RESTAURANT:

Sal and Mookie's, Jackson

From the owners of Broad Street and Bravo! comes Sal and Mookie's, a hip New York-style pizza and ice cream joint with pasta and burgers to boot. Sal and Mookie's: 565 Taylor St., Jackson; 601/368-1919; www.salandmookies.com

BEST SEAFOOD:

Steam Room Grille, Jackson

Freshness and variety reign as all seasonal specialties and lobsters are flown in from as far as Maine and the Pacific Northwest. 5402 I-55 NE Frontage Rd., Jackson; 601/899-8588; www.steamroomgrille.com

BEST STEAK (TIE):

Shapley's, Ridgeland;

Doe's Eat Place, Greenville

Shapley's offers its delectable steak cuts in an atmosphere of "comfortable elegance," while Doe's Eat Place serves up Southern hospitality with its famous steak. Shapley's: 868 Center St., Ridgeland; 601/957-3753; www.shapleys.ms. Doe's Eat Place: 502 Nelson St., Greenville; 662/334-3315. www.doeseatplace.com



BEST PIZZA:

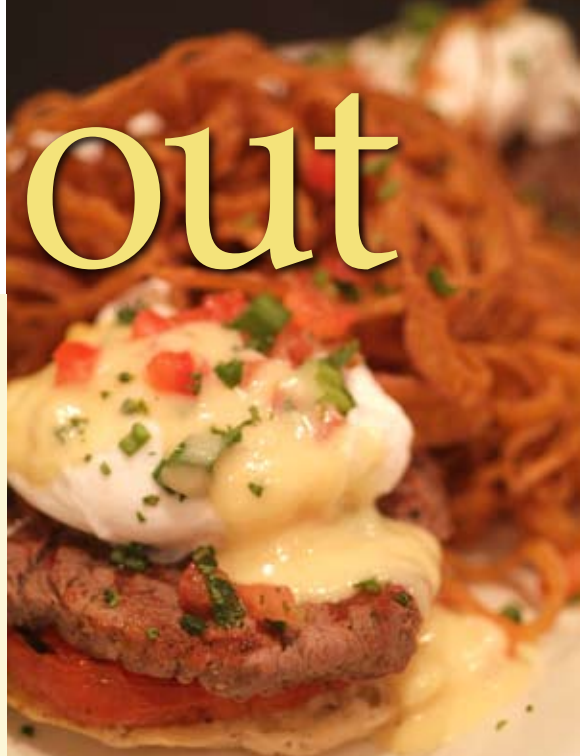
Old Venice, several locations

Greek and Italian family recipes passed down for generations are the inspiration for these made-from-scratch pizzas. For locations, see www.ovpc.com

BEST FRIED CHICKEN:

Julep, Jackson

Julep claims their famous staple, fried chicken, is the best in all 50 states and six foreign countries. 4500 I-55 N., Ste. 105, Jackson; 601/362-1411; www.juleprestaurant.com



PHOTOS COURTESY CHAR

Char's famous brunch (above) and their pecan caramel butter-crunch cake (below).

BEST HAMBURGER:

Mugshot's Bar and Grill, several locations

Kick back and relax in a mellow atmosphere, and Mugshot's claims their hamburger will keep you coming back. For locations, see www.mugshotsbarandgrill.com

BEST BARBECUE:

Leatha's, Hattiesburg

Ms. Leatha Jackson's tantalizing, secret-recipe sauces keep customers coming back for more delicious pork and beef ribs and chicken. 6374 US Hwy 98 West, Hattiesburg; 601/271-6003; www.leathas.com

BEST BREAD:

Broad Street Bakery, Jackson

From SugarBusters to Sourdough, Broad Street offers a mouth-watering array of freshly-baked breads. Banner Hall Shopping Center, I-55 N., W. Frontage Rd., Jackson; 601/362-2900; www.broadstbakery.com

BEST ITALIAN:

Amerigo, Ridgeland

With wood-fired grill and oven cooking, Amerigo puts American and Mediterranean twists on traditional Italian fare in a cozy, romantic setting. 6592 Old Canton Rd., Jackson; 601/977-0563; www.amerigo.net

BEST MEXICAN:

Papitos, Madison

Opened by the Garcia family in 2005, Papitos offers traditional Mexican fare in an authentic Mexico Viejo atmosphere. 111 Colony Crossing #400, Madison; 601/605-0275; www.garciarestaurants.com

BEST ASIAN:

Two Stick, Oxford

With Southern Sushi offerings like the Oxford Roll, Two Stick is truly at home in Mississippi. 1007 Harrison Ave., Oxford; 662/236-6639

BEST ETHNIC:

Volta Taverna, Oxford

Diners escape to Greece in Volta's relaxed atmosphere, traditional Greek fare, and authentic décor. 710 N. Lamar Blvd., Oxford; 662/236-1871

BEST FINE DINING:

The Purple Parrot, Hattiesburg

Under the leadership of renowned chef Robert St. John, The Purple Parrot serves up cutting-edge southern and New Orleans-style fare in neo-southern elegance. 3810 Hardy Street, Hattiesburg; 601/264-0656; www.nsr.com/purple.asp

BEST CONTEMPORARY CUISINE:

Julep, Jackson

Julep puts irreverent, unlikely, and ingenious twists on traditional southern fare, like butterbeans in hummus and shrimp in grits. 4500 I-55 N., Ste. 105, Jackson; 601/362-1411; www.juleprestaurant.com

BEST BUFFET:

The Southern Grill, Cleveland

The Southern Grill offers good, old-fashioned southern cooking buffet-style for breakfast and lunch. 120 North St., Cleveland; 662/843-1317

BEST DELI:

McAlister's Deli, several locations

This Mississippi deli boasts an evolving menu, famous sweet tea, and irresistible cookies. See www.mcalistersdeli.com for locations

BEST LUNCH SPOT:

The Cottage Tea Room, Aberdeen

With an array of loose-leaf teas and teabags, The Cottage Tea Room serves southern-style cooking in a cozy dining room. 109 E. Washington St., Aberdeen; 662/369-1157

BEST OUTDOOR DINING:

The City Grocery, Oxford

With a charming view of Oxford's square, diners enjoy new-Southern cuisine like the menu staple shrimp and grits. 152 Courthouse Square, Oxford; 662/232-8080; www.citygroceryonline.com

BEST RESTAURANT WITH A VIEW:

Tie: Cock of the Walk, Ridgeland and Natchez; The City Grocery, Oxford

In contrast to The City Grocery's view of the square in Oxford, Cock of the Walk offers views of the Barnett Reservoir (in Ridgeland) and the Mississippi River (in Natchez). The City Grocery: 152 Courthouse Square, Oxford; 662/232-8080; www.citygroceryonline.com. Cock of the Walk: 141 Madison Landing Cir., Ridgeland; 601/856-5500 and 200 N. Broadway St., Natchez; 601/446-8920

BEST ROMANTIC SPOT:

Giardina's, Greenwood

This "Delta casual" restaurant in The Aluvian Resort was originally founded in 1936, and the restaurant preserves the old southern elegance of the original Giardina's. 318 Howard St., Greenwood; 662/455-4227; www.thealuvian.com/giardinias

BEST DOWNHOME/SOUL FOOD:

Ajax Diner, Oxford

Since its grand opening almost 10 years ago, Ajax Diner has been a consistent favorite with locals, tourists, and students alike. Located on Oxford's historic courthouse square, Ajax is a comfortable good-eats alternative to the upscale see-and-be-seen restaurants surrounding it. Its laidback atmosphere and yellow and red décor ("the colors of mustard and barbecue sauce," says chef/co-owner Amy Lott Crockett) give this diner the cozy feel of a good friend's kitchen.

Popular dishes include: "Matty's Mom's Meatloaf" (Chef Crockett's mother-in-law's family recipe), the fried pickles appetizer with comeback sauce, and the good ol' Southern standby: fried catfish. While their Southern-fried specialties continue to please their patrons, Ajax is also known for a wide selection of delicious vegetable side dishes, a hand-cut rib eye dinner entrée, as well as a variety of po-boys.

Many celebrities traveling through Oxford have shoveled a fork through Ajax's Southern fare. Chelsea Clinton, Jason Alexander (Seinfeld's George Costanza), and the Manning men are just a few fans. Musicians Elvis Costello and David Byrne have also dropped by for a little down-home comfort food. —J.B.M

118 Courthouse Sq., Oxford; 662/232-8880



BRUCE NEWMAN



COURTESY NEWCO DINING, LLC

BEST SALAD:

Newk's Express Café, Oxford, Flowood, Hattiesburg, and Southaven

This popular Mississippi eatery takes "express casual dining" to a whole new level. With everything from oven-toasted sandwiches to fresh-baked California-style pizzas, Newk's offers quick, healthy options for lunch and dinner served in a chic atmosphere. The Grab-n-Go options are great for those in a hurry, but the homemade cakes and excellent wine selection will make others want to linger for a relaxing meal.

As a two-time "Best Salad" category winner, Newk's' fresh-tossed salad creations have kept their devotees coming back for more. The continuing best-seller is still "Newk's Favorite," a combination of mixed greens, grilled chicken breast, gorgonzola cheese, dried cranberries, grapes, artichoke hearts, and pecans. But with six other gourmet salad choices and a "round table" packed with more fresh toppings, Newk's offers a unique salad for every possible taste.

Mississippi-based restaurant developers Don Newcomb, Chris Newcomb and Debra Bryson of Newco Dining, LLC (the founders of McAlister's Deli) continue to delight their customers with reliable cuisine and casual ambience. They're also creating a buzz in the restaurant industry. Franchise units are already popping up throughout Mississippi, with locations in Hattiesburg and Southaven, and one opening in Clinton in August 2007. —J.B.M

1309 University Ave., Oxford, 662/513-5303; 379 Ridge Way, Flowood, 601/919-8303; 4700 Hardy St., Hattiesburg, 601/602-0189; 3075 East Goodman Rd., Southaven, 662/536-4307; www.newkscafe.com

BEST PLACE TO CELEBRATE A SPECIAL OCCASION:

The Bourbon Mall, Leland

Originally a general store, this 80-year-old establishment offers fried hot tamales and live Delta blues in a relaxed setting. 105 Dean St., Leland; 662/686-4389

BEST KID-FRIENDLY RESTAURANT:

Season's, Hattiesburg

The self-proclaimed "all occasion eatery" offers a variety of menu selections, including "This and That" and, of course, a children's menu. 6555 US Hwy 98 #1, Hattiesburg; 601/450-4090; www.seasonshattiesburg.com

BEST PLACE TO RUIN YOUR DIET:

Pearl Street Pasta, Oxford and Natchez

With American and Italian-style pasta dishes and "to die for" house dressing, Pearl Street Pasta's fare is devilishly delicious. 105 S. Pearl St., Natchez; 601/442-9284; and 308 S. Lamar St., Oxford; 662/234-7525

BEST DÉCOR:

Tie: Season's and 206 Front, Hattiesburg

Season's atmosphere is eclectic, while 206 Front's downtown atmosphere is "casually classy." Season's: 6555 US Hwy 98 #1, Hattiesburg; 601/450-4090; www.seasonshattiesburg.com. 206 Front: 206 W. Front St., Hattiesburg; 601/545-5677

BEST CHEF:

Robert St. John

The award-winning Robert St. John of Hattiesburg's Purple Parrot and Crescent City Grill is a chef, restaurateur, author, and self-proclaimed "world class eater." www.robertstjohn.com

BEST WAIT STAFF:

K.C.'s, Cleveland

American fare with "funky but fabulous" global influences characterizes K.C.'s food and décor, with equally fabulous service. 400 US Hwy 61 N., Cleveland; 662/843-5301; www.kcsrestaurant.com

BEST BAKERY:

Bottletree Bakery, Oxford

Oxford's unique, just-off-the-square bakery offers irresistible European-style breads and pastries, as well as deli sandwiches and specialty coffees. 923 Van Buren Ave., Oxford; 662/236-5000

BEST SPOT FOR TEA:

Simply Teavine, Hattiesburg

Created to be a haven from society's frenetic pace, Simply Teavine offers themed tea rooms and a selection of teas for every taste, including children. 1604 S. 28th Ave., Hattiesburg; 601/268-5523; www.simplyteavine.com

BEST COFFEE/CAFÉ:

Strange Brew Coffeehouse, Starkville

With traditional coffeehouse fare including specialty brewed coffees, smoothies, and baked goods, Strange Brew thrives in a college town. 605 E. Hwy 12, Starkville; 662/320-7022; www.strangebrewcoffeehouse.com

seeking out

BEST PLACE TO FIND ANTIQUES:

The Mustard Seed Emporium, Oxford

From antique furnishings and home accessories to vintage clothing and jewelry, The Mustard Seed Emporium offers a multi-dealer selection with small-town charm. 1737 University Ave., Oxford; 662/281-8004

BEST PLACE TO FIND NEW COLLECTIBLES AND HOME ACCESSORIES:

Southern Breeze Gallery, Jackson

The self-proclaimed “gallery of southern artists,” Southern Breeze features the works of local and regional artists in a variety of media, from paintings to metal and ceramics. Highland Village, 4500 I-55 N. Ste. 160, Jackson; 601/982-4222; www.southernbreeze.net

BEST PLACE TO FIND GREAT FURNITURE:

Interior Spaces, Jackson

With everything from stately furniture pieces to exquisite antique plates, Interior Spaces is a true collector’s heaven. Maywood Mart, 1200 E. Northside Dr. Ste. 120, Jackson; 601/981-9820

BEST PLACE TO FIND A SPECIAL FLORAL ARRANGEMENT:

Green Floral, several locations

Fresh flowers for the dinner table and arrangements delivered to faraway loved ones are all at Green Floral stores throughout the state. For locations, see www.greenfloral.com

BEST PLACE TO FIND A GREAT BOOK

Lemuria, Jackson

Lemuria offers something for everyone’s literary tastes, from local authors’ collections to book signings to Harry Potter parties. Banner Hall, 4465 I-55 N., Ste. 202, Jackson; 601/366-7619; www.lemuriabooks.com

BEST SOURCE FOR THE WELL-DRESSED WOMAN:

TIE: Harry Mayer, Meridian; Steven McB’s, Hattiesburg

Harry Mayer boasts more than 30 years of personal customer service and top designer labels, while Steven McB’s in Hattiesburg offers a fresh spin on contemporary high fashion. Harry Mayer, 3129 Hwy 39 N., Meridian; 601/693-1135; harrymayerclothier.com; Steven McB’s, 6555 Hwy 98 W., Ste. 18, Hattiesburg; 601/450-6227; www.stevenmcbs.com

BEST PLACE TO FIND A PERFECT GIFT:

Oxford Floral Co., Inc., Oxford

Since 1924 this Oxford florist has evolved from small town floral design to a chic one-stop shop for any occasion. Oxford Floral carries everything from tea towels and candles to the most exquisite place settings imaginable. While their floral design business is still flourishing, their assortment of gifts—ranging from fun and funky to understated and classic—offers something for everyone.

Mississippi-made pottery, like Gail Pittman and McCarty Pottery of Merigold, rounds out Oxford Floral’s vast collection of artistic pieces. Distinctive items for the home include everything from imported hand-painted china patterns to luxurious hand-cut crystal. The recently added “baby area” features special gifts, clothes, and toys for little ones. Yet with all of these choices, many patrons still agree the unique gift baskets are a favorite standby.

Oxford Floral’s comprehensive website with an online bridal registry allows shoppers to purchase and ship gifts to their recipients from the convenience of home, proving this 83-year-old local company is truly ahead of its time. —J.B.M.

1103 Jefferson Ave., Oxford; 800/748-8917; www.oxfordfloral.com



COURTESY OXFORD FLORAL CO.



BONNIE DICKERSON

BEST PLACE TO FIND AN INTERESTING PIECE OF JEWELRY:

Turkoyz, Jackson and Oxford

Even the entrance of this hip boutique calls for a moment of admiration. Once inside, the one-of-a-kind metal and semi-precious stone creations make the hunt for that perfect accessory a joyous experience. Creatively elegant necklaces and other accessories—made with stones like coral, freshwater pearls, black onyx, and turquoise—beg to be touched and tried on.

Turkoyz's co-owner and jewelry designer Alan Weeks says he draws inspiration from his travels all over the globe. Weeks has been everywhere from New York City to Paris and Los Angeles to China while working in the fashion industry, where he spent past career stints with renowned labels like "1928 Jewelry" and Tommy Hilfiger. As a Mississippi native who graduated from the University of Southern Mississippi in Hattiesburg, Weeks says he's always kept his roots grounded in his home state. At the same time, he's managed to keep his artistry in tune with the pulse of the ever-changing trends in fashion.

As one of Mississippi's hottest jewelry designers, Weeks is expanding his creative entrepreneurial skills with a new wholesale line called XCESS, which will be available in specialty boutique stores across the Southeast. —J.B.M

Highland Village, 4500 I-55, Ste. 123, Jackson, 601/981-4000; 1105 Van Buren, Oxford, 662/234-3427

BEST SOURCE FOR THE WELL-DRESSED MAN:

The Rogue & Good Company, Jackson

With forty years of timeless styles and flawless fit, the Rogue offers male shoppers high-end designers and a relaxing club atmosphere. 4450 I-55 N., Jackson; 601/362-6383; www.rogueandgoodcompany.com

BEST PLACE TO FIND GREAT SHOES:

Joycey Baby, Jackson

Joycey Baby's claims that changing your shoes will change your life, and their selection of women's shoes is sure to please. Canton Mart Square, 1491 Canton Mart Rd., Jackson; 601/977-9989; www.joyceybaby.com

BEST BRIDAL SHOP:

The Bridal Path, Jackson

Brides-to-be find a dazzling array of designer gowns and accessories from top names like Vera Wang, Christos, and Monique L'Huillier at this family-owned bridal shop. Banner Hall, Ste. 104, I-55 N., Jackson; 601/982-8267; www.bridalpathinc.com

BEST SOURCE FOR MOTHER OF THE BRIDE:

TIE: Deedy's Dress & Bridal Gallery, Ocean Springs; Imagi-nations, Brookhaven

In addition to selections for mother of the bride dresses, Deedy's offers nearly every other wedding service, while Imagi-nations boasts an expanse of dresses and accessories. Deedy's Dress & Bridal Gallery, 1072 Thorn Ave., Ocean Springs; 228/875-2011; Imagi-nations, 131 W. Cherokee St., Brookhaven; 601/833-6280; www.imagi-nations.com

BEST PLACE TO FIND HIGH-END JEWELRY:

Juniker, Jackson

From large diamonds to antique jewelry and an exclusive Mississippi Heritage Collection, Juniker offers more than sixty years of expertise. Highland Village, 4500 I-55 N., Ste. 116, Jackson, 601/366-3754; www.junikerjewelry.com

BEST MAKEUP AND SKIN CARE PRODUCT RESOURCE:

Amy Head Studio, Ridgeland

Amy Head offers women's beauty products from casual to glamorous with personalized instruction and emphasis on healthy skin. 175 Ridgeland Plaza, Ridgeland; 601/853-3098; www.amyheadstudio.net

BEST PLACE TO FIND GREAT BABY OR CHILDREN'S ITEMS:

Sweet Dreams Interiors, Madison

Make your ideas for the nursery and playroom a reality with Sweet Dreams' custom designs and decorating tips. 1896 Main Street, Madison; 601/856-2080

BEST PLACE TO FIND GREAT TOYS:

Olde Tyme Commissary, Jackson and Flowood

Olde Tyme Commissary's irresistible toys and whimsical games delight both children and the young at heart. Highland Village, 4500 I-55 N., Jackson; 601/366-1849; Dogwood Festival Market, 254 Dogwood Blvd., Flowood; 601/992-6243; www.commissarytoys.com

BEST PLACE TO FIND GREAT MUSIC:

Be-Bop Record Shop, Jackson and Ridgeland

With an incredible selection of nearly every kind of music imaginable, there's something for every music lover at Be-Bop. Maywood Mart, Northside Dr., Jackson; 601/981-5000; 3887 Metro Dr., Jackson; 601/969-3181; 900 E County Line Rd. #140, Ridgeland; 601/977.0899

BEST SPORTING GOODS:

Academy Sports, several locations

Academy offers an expansive selection of sporting goods, apparel, outdoors accessories, and fitness supplies. For locations, see www.academy.com

BEST PARTY DECORATIONS AND ACCESSORIES

Party Girls, Ocean Springs

Plan the perfect party and cover all the details with the resources and helpful staff at Party Girls. 636 Washington Ave., Ste. B, Ocean Springs; 228/872-3576

BEST SHOPPING MALL:

Dogwood Festival, Flowood

This outdoor shopping mall offers an ever-growing selection of stores, ranging from Gap and Ann Taylor Loft to Belk department store. 120 Promenade Blvd.; Flowood; 601/919-3877

BEST SALON OR DAY SPA:

Trio Medi Spa and Wellness Center, Flowood

Trio offers a total, head-to-toe relaxation and rejuvenation experience with professional service and luxurious products. 4810 Lakeland Dr., Flowood; 601/608-8746; www.triospa.com

BEST FITNESS CENTER:

Joe Frank Sanderson Center, Starkville

To refer to the Joe Frank Sanderson Center as a “gym” would be an extreme understatement. The 150,000-square-foot fitness facility features a 1/8-mile indoor track, a 10,000-square-foot strength and aerobic conditioning room, and a 28-foot high indoor rock-climbing wall. And that just scratches the surface. This Mississippi State University fitness complex rivals the most elaborate big-city facilities across the nation.

Since opening in June 1998, at a cost of nearly \$20 million, the Sanderson Center has kept many Mississippi State students and employees off of their couches and into an exciting array of fitness possibilities. For those who crave a more structured workout, on-staff personal trainers are available to help. As many as 20 different fitness classes—from power yoga to kickboxing—rotate on new schedules every semester.

Runners who prefer the fresh air love to jog off the beaten path around nearby Chadwick Lake, where licensed sportsmen often fish for bass and catfish. Not exciting enough? Sign up for one of the many “Outdoor Adventures”—scheduled trips where thrill-seekers can go rappelling, mountain biking, whitewater rafting and more. —J.B.M

Mississippi State University, Lakeview Dr., Starkville; 662/325-7529; www.recports.msstate.edu/facilities/sanderson.php

BEST NEW REAL ESTATE DEVELOPMENT:

Aspen Ridge, Oxford

Set in the rolling hills of north Mississippi, new and affordable homes are located just minutes from Oxford’s many attractions. 41 Aspen Loop, Oxford; 662/513-0011; www.aspenridgeoxford.com

BEST PLACE TO HAVE YOUR PET GROOMED:

Petsmart Custom Pet Grooming, several locations

Treat your pet to a pampering with professional groomers and an array of grooming supplies at Petsmart. For locations, see www.petsmart.com

BEST PLACE TO FIND A BARGAIN:

Hudson’s, several locations

Originally a fire sale after a grocery store burned, Hudson’s has grown to encompass several stores with vast selections of merchandise from clothes to rugs to cleaning supplies, and all at a discount. For locations, see www.hudsonsalvagellc.com

BEST LOCAL TV NEWSCAST:

TIE: WLBT, Jackson; WLOX, Biloxi, Gulfport, Pascagoula

Viewers in the capitol area tout the NBC affiliate, while Gulf coast viewers prefer their ABC affiliate for their daily news. WLBT, Channel 3; 601/948-3333; www.wlbt.com; WLOX, Channel 13; 228/896-1313; www.wlox.com

BEST RADIO STATION:

WUSM, Hattiesburg

Catch the latest local news, including podcasts of events, as well as a variety of programs and music on USM’s radio station. FM 88.5; 601/266-4287; www.usm.edu/wusm

BEST MEDIA PERSONALITY:

TIE: Barbie Bassett and Maggie Wade, WLBT

Whether it’s news with Maggie Wade or the daily forecast with Barbie Bassett, WLBT viewers are impressed with these anchors. WLBT, Channel 3; 601/948-3333; www.wlbt.com



COURTESY MSU/RUSS HOUSTON

getting out

COURTESY MERIDIAN LITTLE THEATRE



BEST GOLF COURSE:

Dancing Rabbit Golf Club,
Choctaw

The Choctaw Indians' sacred ground has become a paradise for golfers, offering two par-72 courses in a lavish setting of flowers and streams. Pearl River Resort, Choctaw; 601/663-0011; www.dancingrabbitgolf.com

BEST PERFORMING ARTS VENUE:

MSU Riley Center, Meridian

This recent restoration project includes a 1,000 seat, 1890s-style Grand Opera House, a 200 seat studio theatre, meeting and conference facilities, and a broadcast studio. 2200 5th Street, Meridian; 601/696-2200; <http://rileycenter.msstate.edu>

BEST LIVE MUSIC VENUE:

Proud Larry's, Oxford

Just off the square in Oxford, Proud Larry's boasts great food to accompany great music, whether it's local performers or up and coming artists. 201 S. Lamar St., Oxford; 662/236-0050; www.proudlarrys.com

BEST HOMEGROWN BAND:

3 Doors Down

The 2005 album "Seventeen Days" is just one of these Escatawpa natives' big hits since their 2000 debut. www.3doorsdown.com

BEST FAIR OR FESTIVAL:

Neshoba County Fair, Philadelphia

From political speeches to horse racing, the Neshoba County Fair is a place for food, fun, and of course people-watching. Neshoba County Fair Association, 16800 Hwy 21 S., Philadelphia; 601/656-8480; www.neshobacountyfair.org

BEST LIVE THEATRE:

Meridian Little Theatre, Meridian

For two years in a row, readers agree this thriving community theatre is the best around. This season Meridian Little Theatre will celebrate its 75th Anniversary by bringing back a favorite production to be determined by the votes of their members. Some recent popular productions include the Tony-award-winning musical Cabaret and the family favorite Disney's Beauty and the Beast (which sold out every single performance this past season).

As the only theatre in the state with a Youth Division, Meridian Little Theatre continues to offer educational outreach and cultural enrichment to local young people. Last year's production of the Wizard of Oz attracted 300 hopefuls to try out for roles. With the selected cast of 130 kids, ages 6 to 17, the Youth Division put on an exciting run of shows for 8,000 children who were bussed in from local schools. In January 2008, the Youth Division looks forward to performing an exciting production of Peter Pan.

With over 22,000 patrons, this subscription-based community theatre continues to impress their viewers with a variety of well-presented productions. —J.B.M.

4334 Hwy. 39 N., Meridian; 601/482-6371; www.meridianlittletheatre.com

BEST ANNUAL EVENT:

Doubledecker Arts Festival, Oxford

Each spring brings a new celebration of food, music, and arts as locals and Ole Miss students gather for a day of fun on the square. Oxford CVB, 102 Ed Perry Blvd., Oxford; 662/234-4680 or 800/758-9177; www.doubledeckerfestival.com

BEST CAMPGROUND:

Roosevelt State Park

With rolling hills and plenty of recreational opportunities, Roosevelt State Park affords a breath-taking view of the Bienville National Forest. 2149 Hwy 13 S., Morton; 601/732-6316; www.mississippi.gov —type Roosevelt State Park in the "Search Box"

BEST WATERFRONT DESTINATION:

Biloxi

This Gulf coast city is truly coming back, offering a variety of recreational activities, museums, and a charming Main Street District for shopping. Biloxi Visitor Center, 228/374-3105

BEST RIVER VIEW:

Vicksburg

With its rolling hills and famous bluffs, Vicksburg affords a breathtaking view of the mighty Mississippi River. Vicksburg CVB, 3300 Clay St., Vicksburg; 601/636-9421; www.vicksburgcvb.org

BEST PLACE TO FISH:

Ross Barnett Reservoir

Fish from a boat or from the shore of one of the Reservoir several campgrounds like Goshen Springs, a popular site for fishing tournaments. Pearl River Valley Water Supply District, 115 Madison Landing Circle, Ridgeland; 601/856-6574; www.rossbarnettreservoir.org

BEST HIKING DESTINATION:

Bonita Lakes, Meridian

With 3,300 acres and three lakes, Bonita Lakes offers jogging and walking trails, bike trails, picnic areas, horseback riding, campgrounds, and fishing. Hwy 19 S., Meridian; 601/485-1920; www.visitmeridian.com/attractions.htm

BEST PLACE TO EXERCISE:

Longleaf Trace, Prentiss to Hattiesburg

A former railroad bed, the Longleaf Trace offers a 41-mile, fairly flat biking and pedestrian trail and beautiful nature scenery. www.longleaftrace.org

BEST WEEKEND TRIP:

Natchez

Antebellum landmarks, like the famous Monmouth and Dunleith Plantations, are the white-columned pillars of tourism in this captivating river town. Visitors from all over the world come to Natchez in search of a romantic getaway and Old South charm, but many are delighted to discover a lot more than just the breathtaking scenery.

Shoppers will love Franklin Street in the historic downtown district, where old buildings have been transformed into charming storefronts. Stroll down Antique Row where hidden treasures await, or peek into Natchez Needlearts where crayon-colored yarn and fiber arts supplies will inspire even the most craft-challenged hopefuls. Linger awhile in Turning Pages Books at their new Franklin Street location, now complete with a cozy fireplace and outdoor courtyard.

Locals and tourists alike hang out at Natchez Coffee Co. for a cup of java, a bite to eat, or a refreshing scoop of Blue Bell ice cream. Many enjoy dining while taking in the river views at Natchez Under-the-Hill.

Special events fill a year-round schedule of festivities, like the Food and Wine Festival (August 3-4), the Fall Pilgrimage Tours (September 29-October 13), and the annual River Balloon Race (October 19 – 21). —J.B.M

Natchez CVB; 800/647-6724; www.natchezms.com

BEST PLACE TO WATCH A SUNSET:

Natchez Bluffs

Don't miss a sunset with a stunning view from the history-filled bluffs overlooking the Mississippi River in charming Natchez. Natchez CVB, 800/647-6724; www.natchezms.com

BEST SPOT FOR SWIMMING:

Ross Barnett Reservoir

Join thousands of other Mississippians on the Reservoir's 33,000 acres for boating and swimming. Pearl River Valley Water Supply District, 115 Madison Landing Circle, Ridgeland; 601/856-6574; www.rossbarnettreservoir.org

BEST PLACE TO GET MARRIED:

Dunleith Plantation, Natchez

The majestic grounds and elegant facilities of the Dunleith Plantation make a bride's dreams come true. 84 Homochitto St., Natchez; 601/446-8500; www.dunleith.com

BEST SPOT FOR TAILGATING:

The Grove, Oxford

Tailgating is an art and a sport in itself under the beautiful trees in the Grove during Ole Miss football season. www.olemiss.edu/gameday

BEST GARDEN OR PARK:

Mynelle Gardens, Jackson

Tucked away in south Jackson is a seven-acre gem of colorful Southern garden inspiration. 4736 Clinton Blvd., Jackson; 601/960-1894

BEST HISTORIC SITE:

TIE: Beauvoir, Biloxi; Longwood Plantation, Natchez; National Military Park, Vicksburg

Beauvoir, Jefferson Davis' home and library, is seeking support to restore this Katrina-damaged building, while the antebellum, Arabian palace-inspired Longwood Plantation home remains unfinished to this day. Vicksburg's National Military Park is a striking reminder and solemn tribute to the pivotal Civil War battle. Beauvoir: 2244 Beach Blvd., Biloxi; 228/388-4400; www.beauvoir.org; Longwood Plantation: 140 Lower Woodville Rd., Natchez; 601/446-6631; www.natchezpilgrimage.com; National Military Park: 3201 Clay St., Vicksburg; 601/636-0583; www.nps.gov/vick

BEST MUSEUM:

Walter Anderson Museum, Ocean Springs

View firsthand the works of American master and Mississippi native Walter Anderson, including the current "Jewels of the Sea" exhibit featuring Anderson's aquatic-inspired works. 510 Washington Ave., Ocean Springs; 228/872-3164; www.walterandersonmuseum.org

BEST HOTEL/RESORT:

The Alluvian, Greenwood

In the heart of the Mississippi Delta, the Alluvian is a mélange of high fashion, eclectic modernity, and Southern traditions. 318 Howard St., Greenwood; 866/600-5201; www.thealluvian.com





BEST ATTRACTION FOR KIDS:

The Lynn Meadows Discovery Center, Gulfport

It's no surprise Lynn Meadows Discovery Center is one of the nation's Top 50 Children's Museums. This 15,000-square-foot indoor/outdoor wonderland offers fun for the entire family. Don't miss the main building's centerpiece exhibit, an imaginative two-story climbing structure simulating the sea, where small explorers climb their way up carpeted "waves" to reach the surface. At "Dolan Avenue Depot" young travelers dress up in turn-of-the-century costumes and board a pint-sized steam engine train.

Interactive exhibits about Mississippi teach children about their immediate environment. Old treasures of Mississippi City in 1898 are revealed at "History Hotel," while the "Porthole" exhibit allows children to steer a boat and hoist a net full of gulf shrimp. The elaborate outdoor Tree House Village offers elevated adventures amidst towering oak trees and shimmering glimpses of the Gulf of Mexico.

"Bear Cub Club," a large gated area for toddlers under the age of four, provides a whimsical playing space filled with educational toys and books, as well as scheduled special events for younger children. Older kids will love the "Wonder-full Wetlands" television studio and the hands-on science exhibit. Costumes and kid-friendly props throughout the museum serve as a playful educational outlet for all ages.

Watch for Dora the Explorer (July 25–28) and Bob the Builder (Oct. 11–13), coming to visit Mississippi's favorite place to learn and play. —J.B.M.

246 Dolan Ave., Gulfport; 228/897-6039; www.lmdc.org

BEST BED AND BREAKFAST:

Monmouth Plantation, Natchez

Escape to antebellum luxury in the elegant rooms and beautiful grounds of the Monmouth Plantation. 36 Melrose Ave., Natchez; 601/442-5852; www.monmouthplantation.com

BEST SMALL TOWN:

Ocean Springs

Ocean Springs is home to unique shopping, natural beauty, rich history, and quaint, small-town charm even as it continues to rebuild and grow stronger. www.oceansprings-ms.gov

BEST DAY TRIP:

Vicksburg

This city's rich history, well-kept and informative military park, and famous bluffs make it well worth a day trip. Vicksburg CVB, 3300 Clay St., Vicksburg; 601/636-9421; www.vicksburgcvb.org

BEST FREE ACTIVITY:

Singing Christmas Tree, Meridian

Set for December 7-9 this year, Highland Baptist Church's annual Singing Christmas Tree is a staple holiday event for the community. Highland Baptist Church, 3400 27th St., Meridian; 601/482-0191; www.highlandbaptist.net

BEST OFFBEAT DESTINATION:

Graceland Too, Holly Springs

View a jaw-dropping collection of Elvis Presley memorabilia in this antebellum mansion-turned shrine to the King. 200 E. Gholson Ave., Holly Springs

Thanks to everyone who participated in our Best of Mississippi survey. The randomly drawn winners of our *At the Table* cookbooks and Mississippi T-shirts are Courtney Evertt of Wiggins, Chase Jordan of Starkville, Jan Campbell of Hattiesburg, Enley Long of Meridian, and Carolyn Boteler of Florence.

best reason to love mississippi

Temperatures in winter; not much crime;
hospitality; and we have sweet tea!

—Beverly Davidson, Meridian

The people, the scenery, and the rich cultural
heritage. This is truly God's country!

—Betsy Rowell, Hattiesburg

My husband votes for the women.
They have sophistication, class, style, charm, and hospitality.

—Rebecca Forrester, Somerville, Tennessee

Catfish! —Will Nobile, Moorhead

Our good people have
kind hearts and kindred spirits.

—Anne McKee, Meridian

Small enough to make a difference! —Tom Sikes, Meridian

Where else would Southern Belles live?

—Barbara Harrington, Aberdeen

Nice place to raise kids. —Dawn Lowe, Hattiesburg

The most resilient and
best people in the world live here.

—Debbie Batia, Biloxi