

Festival (now named SoundLand)—so I shall reserve judgment about the musical act I saw that night.

On the next night, however, I was stone cold sober for our visit to Jack White's Third Man Records and stunned by the music that awaited us there. Our jaws dropped as we watched Brittany Howard sing like Aretha, Adele and Janis all rolled into one, play guitar like Bo Diddley and give the performance of her life with her band of exquisite young men. "Who is she?" was mouthed at many different times against this din of passionate, sweat-and-tears rock. Her band is called Alabama Shakes—watch out for it.

Three other places in Nashville are simply stunning. Frist Center for the Visual Arts, originally a Hoover-era post office, has been transformed into a wonderful art gallery and museum with a world-class calendar of events and exhibitions. Even more striking is the Schermerhorn Symphony Center, home of the Nashville Symphony; it's a new building designed in the style of a 19th century European concert hall. When I went, Bela Fleck was playing banjo with the Nashville Symphony. The third place you have to see is Gruhn Guitars on Broadway, just down from all the honky-tonk bars. I got to go upstairs—that legendary floor where only the big-time guitar collectors get to go—and saw hundreds of the most beautiful and expensive guitars ever made. There was a 1960 Sunburst Les Paul with a price tag of \$150,000. You get the picture. I didn't dare ask if I could play one!

The best show in this town might just be a jam on someone's back porch, but two regular shows that cannot be missed if you are in town early in the week are both at the Station Inn—Monday nights it's the Time Jumpers with Vince Gill, and Tuesday nights it's the funny and clever Doyle and Debbie Show. Of course, you can't leave town without visiting the Country Music Hall of Fame.

Nashville has many of the benefits of a big city, while feeling like a small town. It's a place that gives you time to think, hear, listen, dream. You can grow your own vegetables and raise chickens, if you want to. Friendly conversation between strangers has not yet gone the way of the dodo, as it has in most cities. Drivers, in general, go a little slower, and there is a whole lot less traffic. It is peaceful and quiet—a must for song catchers if they want to hear those songs in the ether—and plenty of songs are floating down to Nashville every day. Because it's the music and musicians that make this place tick—and make a guitar-toting sheila from Australia feel real welcome! You'll feel real welcome too, if you get the chance to visit Music City. (visitmusiccity.com) ■

FLORIDA'S LESBIAN BEACH TOWN

MORE THAN LESBIAN-FRIENDLY, GULFPORT IS FULL OF FRIENDLY LESBIANS. BY GILLIAN KENDALL

Like many other tourist destinations, Gulfport claims to be Florida's last undiscovered secret. But there's nothing undiscovered and not many secrets in this 2.8 square mile beach town (population 13,000). It's also said to have a "Key West flavor," but it's more densely dykey than Key West. Out gay city council member Barbara Banno estimates the lesbian-household population of Gulfport at about 35 percent. Furthermore, Gulfport proudly lacks two things that clutter too many beach towns: chain stores and parking metres.

In all of Gulfport—even on the main drag, Beach Blvd. South; even in front of the pier and O'Maddy's Bar and Grille; even by the beach near the converted casino where women play volleyball on Sunday mornings and then cross Shore Blvd. to party at Neptune—parking is free. There are no meters, no valets, no parking garages and no parking tickets anywhere in town.

Even better, once you've ditched your car to stroll, maybe for the twice-monthly ArtsHop, or just for an afternoon of shopping, beach-going and eating out, you won't see a single chain store or restaurant. No green-and-white Starbucks signs mar the pretty, white-lit downtown blocks; no nasty 7-11 neon breaks up the lighting from the little bulbs in the trees and the candles on outdoor tables. It's refreshing just to see the original signage, and even more refreshing to step inside to browse through original artwork and hand-made gifts, or sit down to food prepared and served by residents. Every shop in town and virtually every stall at the market is owned by a local.

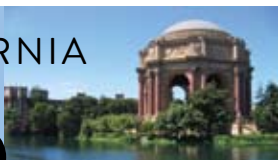
An example of the kind of trust this spirit engenders: at the end of the weekly Tuesday market I was out of cash, and the artist selling the handmade brooch I wanted, Judy Greer, didn't take credit cards. She offered to take a check and, when I said I had none, asked me to mail her one "sometime," and cheerfully wrapped up my small purchase in a one-of-a-kind cloth bag.

The market was like the craft stalls at Michigan Womyn's Music

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parcs, play volleyball on the beach on Sunday mornings, hear regular gigs by lesbian band Karmic Tattoo at Oar House or On the Rocks, join the beach drum circle Friday nights, and attend fundraisers at area restaurants for AIDS support group ASAP or the Sonia Plotnick women's health fund—not to mention eating at the gay-owned and gay-friendly cafes all around town, such as Stella's Deli.

For drinking and dancing, The Oar House is popular with lesbians, Pepperz has drag shows, and the old, renovated Casino hosts

Festival, only without the mud and with men (note: friendly, and often gay, men). Booth after booth is staffed by smiling, short-haired craftswomen in hand-made T-shirts or jewelry, who seem more interested in chatting with everyone than making sales, although sales are good.

Marsha Warner, a Chamber of Commerce volunteer who shows me around, knows just about everyone, because she lives on 22nd St. South, known as "Lesbian Lane." And most everyone is a lesbian, and "a really nice person," according to Warner. "See her on the bike? That's T., she's my neighbour. She used to date K., who runs that booth over there. Now she lives with S., over there, talking to N." And so it goes as we wend through the stalls of home-made crafts, local produce and real art.

Warner introduces me to the token straight couple who've moved onto her street, who say that despite their minority status, they feel embraced by their new neighbors. Everyone, it seems, is welcome in Gulfport as long as they don't try to divide the community.

So wholesomely united is this town that the one attempt to open a categorically "gay bar" (the Dive Bar and Grill) petered out. Many people went to the opening, says Daniel Hodge of the Gulfport Fresh Market. "Everyone went—gay, straight, old ladies, young bikers, everyone, because that's the way it is here. We support local businesses." But the overt determination of the owners to create a gay-male environment backfired, and the locals returned to drinking and mingling happily at O'Maddy's, Neptune and Back Fin.

In Gulfport, even a casual visitor can spend her days surrounded by sisters. Join in dog-walks in the two dog

dances of various kinds nearly every night of the week. A recent lesbian Halloween dance party attracted some 250 costumed women; the Valentine's Dance has drawn up to 700 lady-lovers.

For event listings, reach for the tabloid called *Gabber*, or *Womyn's Words*, said to be the oldest gay publication in Florida, and be sure to sign up online to ProSuzy List (prosuzy.com). "Suzanne is the glue," says long-time Florida resident Marie Corbett. She's speaking of Suzanne Noe (featured previously in *curve's* "Women We Love") who singlehandedly puts out the regular e-newsletter and organizes frequent bike trips, games nights, parties, card-exchanges and more every month.

In this whole sweet small town there are only a few dozen hotel rooms. The superbly comfortable, multiple award-winning Sea Breeze Manor B&B is only steps from the beach and the main shopping area. All the rooms are spacious suites, and downstairs is an expansive library/lounge/veranda. My suite had a bath overlooking the beach and wraparound veranda overlooking everything. Winner of Rand McNally and USA Today's Best Romantic Hotel award, this queer-friendly B&B is run by mover and shaker Lori Russo, a D.C. transplant who also heads the Chamber of Commerce. Other overnight or dining options include the gracious, handicapped-accessible Peninsula Inn and Spa on Beach Blvd., an area landmark and host to occasional lesbian events.

Gulfport makes a great overnight for dykes driving through Florida, or a good destination for anyone looking for a taste of San Francisco or Provincetown without the winter weather. (visitstpeteclearwater.com) ■



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