



TUNICA CONVENTION & VISITORS BUREAU; HORSESHOE TUNICA

TUNICA, MISSISSIPPI

# horseshoe tunica hotel and casino

By Bret Love

**I**t's Saturday night at Horseshoe Tunica Hotel & Casino in Tunica, Mississippi, and the joint is jumping. The casino floor is bustling with activity, from slot machines on one end to a \$50,000-prize poker tournament on the other, with a seemingly endless array of table games in between. But as the clock ticks toward 9 p.m., an anxious crowd begins to form around a small stage in the middle of the casino.

"1 Winner. \$1 Million. Every Saturday." You begin to see billboards touting the Caesars Entertainment promotion from the moment you cross over the state line from Memphis, Tennessee, into Mississippi. The outskirts of Tunica County aren't much to look at, with patches of kudzu offset by massive fields of soybeans, wheat, and corn. So those glittering "Millionaire Maker" ads grab your attention immediately.

The promotion, which ran at Caesars's three Tunica properties (Horseshoe, Harrah's, and Tunica Roadhouse) earlier this year, is simple: Sign up for their Total Rewards loyalty program, swipe your card, and you're automatically entered to win a weekly drawing for a million bucks.

The strategy works, drawing thousands of visitors from the South and Midwest. Though I'm not much for gambling, even I sign up, smiling hopefully as the woman behind the counter wishes me what seems to be a genuine "Good luck to you!"

Unfortunately, the name announced to great fanfare is not mine, but that of Frank Davis from Fayetteville, Tennessee. When asked how he feels, Davis says he's been coming to Horseshoe for ten years and loves the place. "It probably won't sink in for a few days," he adds with a dazzled grin, holding an oversized check as colorful confetti falls all around him.

## RESORT AMENITIES



Harrah's Tunica features **The Links at Cottonwoods**, an eighteen-hole championship course designed by Hale Irwin. Partly inspired by various British Open courses, The Links includes three lakes, gently rolling fairways, and gorgeously landscaped paths.



Just as winning that million dollars will change Davis's life, the nine casino hotels that cropped up in the area known as Tunica Resorts have had a remarkable impact on the local economy. Until the 1990s, Tunica was one of the most impoverished places in the United States. Jesse Jackson made national news during a 1985 visit, when he described the town as "America's Ethiopia." Like much of the Delta running between the mighty Mississippi and the Yazoo River, Tunica had been on the decline since the 1930s, when the Great Depression and subsequent mechanization of agriculture sent 6 million African-Americans heading north for better jobs during the Great Migration.

Arguably Mississippi's greatest contribution during the interim was the Delta Blues, an art form rooted in the misery of poverty, which gradually evolved into rock 'n' roll. The list of legendary musicians who lived in tiny towns like Tunica and nearby Clarksdale is staggering, including Robert Johnson, Charley

Patton, Son House, John Lee Hooker, Muddy Waters, and B.B. King. Now, heading south along Old Highway 61 (aka the Blues Highway), you'll see signs proclaiming the state "The Birthplace of America's Music."

The blues and gambling historically went hand in hand here. African-American entrepreneur Harold "Hardface" Clanton ran cafes and juke joints for decades, offering games of chance, bootleg liquor, and live music from future legends like Ike Turner, Bobby "Blue" Bland, and Howlin' Wolf. Some say that Clanton's ventures, which fueled the local economy, helped pave the way for Tunica to become the first county along the Mississippi River to legalize casino gambling in 1991.

Visiting today, it's impossible to ignore the improvements \$2.1 billion of casino revenue (over \$700 million of which remained in Tunica) has afforded the area, including attractions such as Tunica


Riverpark and Tunica National Golf & Tennis, as well as various other infrastructure investments.

But other than the Visitors Center and some markers for the Mississippi Blues Trail, there's nothing in Tunica to suggest the role the blues has played in its history: There are no blues clubs or juke joints, and historic artifacts from a blues museum formerly housed in the Horseshoe Casino currently sit in storage.


At its height, the casino industry drew more than 12 million visitors a year to Tunica. But with casino revenues hitting a plateau, local leaders are looking to the blues to lure still more visitors and maintain the area's status as a top Southeastern travel destination. (Continued on p. 90)

## By the Numbers

 **SLOT MACHINES (AND VIDEO POKER)**  
2,000-plus

 **TABLE GAMES**  
70 (plus 27 poker tables)

 **GAMING SPACE**  
65,000 square feet

 **ANNUAL VISITORS**  
2,946,528



With room for 1,400 people, **Bluesville** is one of the area's largest music venues, attracting big-name country and rock artists. It also boasts an intimate Founders Club on the second floor, which offers VIP seating for 300. This fall the club welcomes Trace Adkins and Willie Nelson.



Located just off the main casino floor, **Jack Binion's Steak House** offers expertly prepared dry-aged USDA Prime beef, the freshest seafood and an extensive wine list, in a decidedly upscale setting that's miles away from the typical casino buffet.



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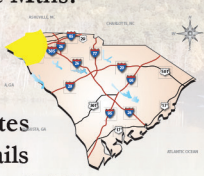
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(Continued from p. 79) "The culture related to music is what makes the Mississippi Delta unique," says Webster Franklin, president and CEO of the Tunica Convention and Visitors Bureau. "The Mississippi Blues Trail has been hugely successful, but those are just markers on the road. Where do you go from there? We want to be the first stop along the blues trail, and we want our Gateway to the Blues Museum to be a primer for the musical history to be found elsewhere in the Mississippi Delta."

That attraction, currently slated to open in 2014, represents a multi-million dollar investment funded in part by the Mississippi Department of Transportation. Together with Clarksdale's Delta Blues Museum and Indianola's B.B. King Blues Museum & Delta Interpretive Center, it should establish Tunica as a true gateway for Delta Blues lovers, working hand in hand with casinos like the Horseshoe to bolster tourism.

In the end, a museum may not boast all the glitz and glamour of those eye-catching "Millionaire Maker" billboards. But Tunica is willing to wager big on the blues as its key to hitting the twenty-first-century travelers' jackpot.



#### AREA ATTRACTIONS

##### Clarksdale

Located thirty-seven miles south of Tunica, Clarksdale is a hot spot for Delta Blues lovers. It was here (at the crossroads of highways 61 and 49) that Robert Johnson supposedly sold his soul to the devil. It's also home to the Delta Blues Museum, Morgan Freeman's Ground Zero Blues Club, and the Juke Joint Festival. [visitclarksdale.com](http://visitclarksdale.com)

##### Mississippi Blues Trail

The Tunica Visitors Center on Old Highway 61 marks the entrance to "America's Blues Highway," with five of the historical markers spread across Tunica County. Follow them to learn more about colorful characters

like Son House, James Cotton, and Harold "Hardface" Clanton. [msbluestrail.org](http://msbluestrail.org)



##### Tunica Queen Riverboat

The *Tunica Queen* is modeled after the historic paddleboats that once ferried folks up and down the mighty Mississippi. Departing from Tunica River Park, daytime cruises are a great way to get "rolling on the river," and the dinner cruise offers live music and excellent sunset views. [tunicaqueen.com](http://tunicaqueen.com)