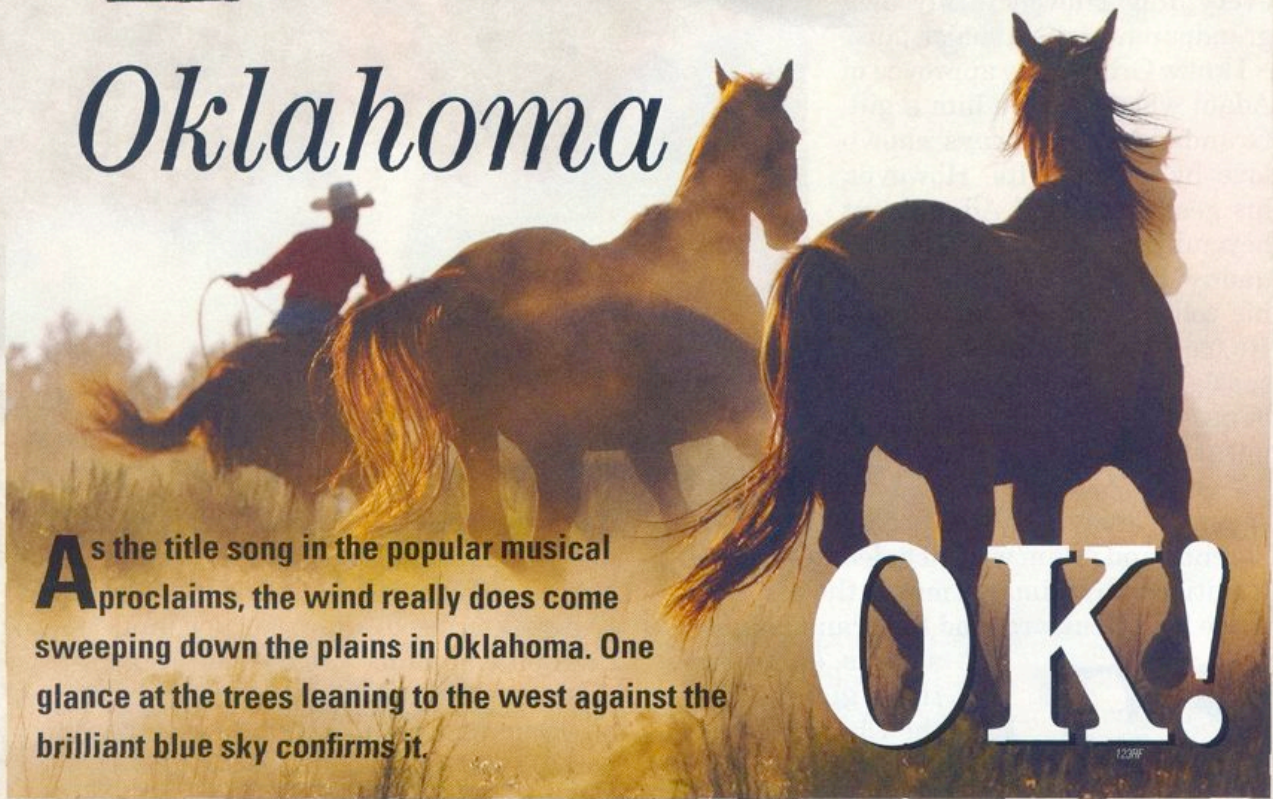




Oklahoma



As the title song in the popular musical proclaims, the wind really does come sweeping down the plains in Oklahoma. One glance at the trees leaning to the west against the brilliant blue sky confirms it.

But the “Sooner State” is much more than wide open spaces dotted with the occasional oil rig bobbing slowly in the red clay earth. The capital, Oklahoma City, and its environs boast several interesting museums that make the history of the West come alive as no textbook can.

A Fascinating History

The Indian Removal Act of 1830 set the stage for herding almost 100,000 American Indians into the designated Indian Territory within the Oklahoma Territory. The beginning of the end of even that provision of land came on April 22, 1889, when 10,000 pioneers massed along the Oklahoma Territory border.



They were ready to stake their claims after the federal government opened the two million acres of “unassigned lands.” The nickname “Sooner”

was given to settlers who sneaked in before it was legal to do so; “Boomers” were the folks who played by the rules. By 1895, Indian Territory existed in name only, and the two areas combined to become the 46th state on November 16, 1907.

Start with the Oklahoma History Center

If it happened in Oklahoma, you can learn about it in detailed displays at the Oklahoma History Center in Oklahoma City. One entire gallery is dedicated to all 39 tribes associated with Oklahoma, and there’s even a section devoted solely to Wild West shows. A Land Run wagon, stagecoach, Civil War cannon, and replica of a typical lunchroom connected to civil rights sit-ins are among the displays in the immense space.

James Earle Fraser’s imposing sculpture, “The End of the Trail,” dominates the light-filled atrium of the National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum. The statue, commissioned

for the 1915 Panama-Pacific Expo, was intended as a reverent memorial to the Indians, although some American Indians see it as an unpleasant reminder of their defeat and subjugation.

But the monument serves as an introduction to the museum's thorough examination of anything connected to the American West. Here you can learn the difference between a cowboy and a buckaroo and visit a room filled with 1,300 types of barbed wire. The American Indian exhibits showcase elaborate beadwork and provide fascinating insights into Indian life and lore. Prosperity Junction is a circa-1900 Western cattle town with a school and a church.

An unexpected delight is the museum's Dining on Persimmon Hill restaurant, featuring good food (especially the robust chili and bread pudding) and reasonable prices.

World War II buffs can check out the free 45th Infantry Division Museum and its huge outdoor collection of vehicles, weapons, and aircraft. Exhibits include an assortment of Hitler's personal articles and a graphic account of the liberation of the Dachau concentration camp. In



the back is a display of more than 200 original Bill Mauldin "Willie and Joe" cartoons. The Pulitzer Prize-winning artist's war-weary humor is as relevant today as it was then.

For the Young and Young-at-Heart

The nearby Oklahoma Railway Museum is a must for anyone who loves trains. While the museum is open every Saturday year-round, rides aboard the vintage cars are scheduled only on the first and third Saturdays.

Kids can run around to their hearts' content, trying all the experiments at the Omniplex Science Museum. There's also plenty to grab adults' attention, such as vintage bicycles, a restored full-sized parlor car, and a huge model train layout. The International Photography Hall of Fame and Museum, tucked into an upstairs corner, has a mounting of *Life* magazine covers sure to evoke memories of the publication's heyday.

But it would be a mistake to think that Oklahoma City is all museums. The Myriad Botanical Gardens and Crystal Bridge Tropical Conservatory, a downtown oasis, is a refreshing

Oklahoma History Center



delight to the senses. Lush foliage, a raucous pair of beady-eyed double yellow-headed Amazon parrots, and a skywalk for a literal bird's-eye view of the tropical canopy are part of its pleasant features.

Sports fans will want to see the statues of Oklahoma's Major League baseball stars — Mickey Mantle, Allie Reynolds, Bobby Murcer, Johnny Bench, and Warren Spahn — in front of the SBC Bricktown Ballpark, home of the minor-league Redhawks. A nearby canal ride winds through the district named for its most prominent building material.

Remembering a Recent Tragedy

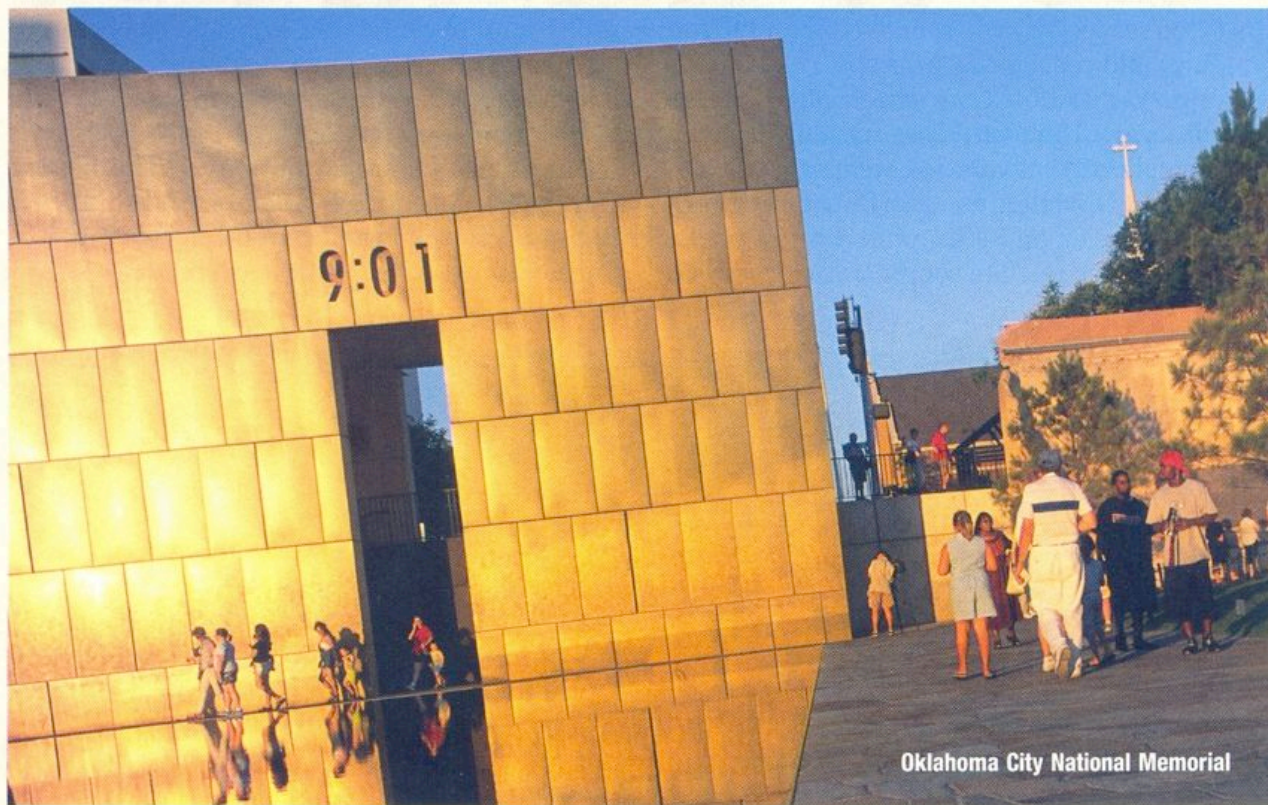
A few blocks away is a more sobering sight, the open-air Oklahoma City National Memorial. April 19, 1995, was the terrible day a bomb tore off the face of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building. The Gates of Time — 9:01

on the eastern end, representing the innocence before the attack, and 9:03 on the West Gate symbolizing the moment the city and the nation were changed forever — frame the surprisingly peaceful site.

Located on what was the footprint of the building, 168 chairs honor the men, women, and children who lost their lives that day. Only one harsh element intrudes into this tranquil scene: the scarred wall of the adjacent Journal Record building, with its spray-painted message left by a rescue worker. The museum inside that building tells the story of that fateful day and the years following, ending on a note of hope.

Get Out of Town

If time permits, it's worth the drive outside the city to several other sites. Fort Sill Military Reservation, an hour away, is home to a small Indian Territory museum, along with



Oklahoma City National Memorial



Corbis

the graves of Geronimo and other Indians and U.S. soldiers killed during long-ago skirmishes. The nearby town of Lawton features

the Museum of the Great Plains. A ribbon of back roads leads to Anadarko and the Southern Plains Indian Museum, operated by the Indian Arts and Crafts Board. Also Indian City USA features a recreated Plains Indian Village.

A trip south on Interstate 35 leads to Norman and the Sam Noble Oklahoma Museum of Natural History on the University of Oklahoma

campus. The Hall of the People of Oklahoma has an American Indian dwelling, and the Hall of Natural Wonders includes a walk-through limestone cave.

All in all, a visit to Oklahoma is something to consider “sooner” rather than later.

Where to Stay

Oklahoma City has a number of hotels ranging from the upscale in Bricktown to more moderately priced accommodations in the northwest and western parts of the city. Go to *www.visitokc.com* for information.

Penny Musco from Montclair, N.J., is a freelance writer whose young adult daughter is on a quest to visit all 50 states — and she's taking her mother along for the ride.

For comprehensive information about Oklahoma, visit www.travelok.com.