

America's Newest Minor League Ballparks Are Major Attractions



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I travel to learn, eat, golf and ski, but mostly for travel's sake

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The new MGM Park in Biloxi, MS overlooks the Gulf of Mexico and its glorious sunsets, and is just a short walk from the luxurious Beau Rivage casino resort. Photo: Benton Reed Photography

Minor League Baseball games are one of the purest remaining spectator sports experiences in America. They are inexpensive, extremely family friendly, and all about the game and the entertainment, not celebrities or status. Watching Major League Baseball games the past couple of seasons, especially when played at new or revamped parks like Yankee Stadium, I noticed a disturbing trend: the best seats in the house, the ones you see on TV, behind home plate, are often empty, and the few folks there are on their phones the entire time, apparently oblivious that they are at a game at all. I presume part of the reason is that tickets have been priced beyond the means of actual fans, and these are corporate giveaways to employees or clients taking them for the novelty rather than an interest in baseball. And it is not just

baseball: watch an NBA or NFL game and the cameras will inevitably pan the crowd for celebrities. That's not the case in the Minors, where there is far less glitz and glamor, but plenty of fun. And in many cases, a family can have an entire multi-day road trip vacation with their games for just the cost of tickets to the Big Leagues.

Minor League Baseball is professional sports' version of backyard barbecue meets county fair, a laid back time spent outdoors in a fun atmosphere. Not only are these games much cheaper (sometimes under ten bucks), they tend to be much more local in flair.

Many MLB, NFL and NBA stadiums have generic, overpriced concessions, with low quality foods that could be anywhere. In sharp contrast, Minor League ballparks tend to celebrate their sense of place, and Coca Cola Field in Buffalo, home of the Bisons, is a renowned example. The stadium sports a slew of outposts from well-known area eateries, including the city's signature sandwich, Beef on Weck, from its most famous purveyor, Charlie The Butcher's. You are not going to get that in the Big Show. The Bisons also host Friday night craft beer happy hours and much more (to be fair, some newer MLB parks, such as the rebuilt Yankee Stadium and San Francisco's AT&T Park have taken this same local restaurant/specialty approach).

This is a banner time for Minor League Baseball, with three brand new ballparks of note across the USA.

The most interesting is MGM Park in Mississippi, the new home of the Biloxi Shuckers, a Milwaukee Brewers affiliated AA team. The Mississippi Gulf Coast is one of the country's great unsung tourism destinations, home to many top quality but value priced golf courses, the country's largest manmade beach – 26 miles long, numerous major casino resorts, excellent inshore and offshore fishing, and a wealth of cultural attractions, from a new Frank Gehry designed art museum to NASA's newest visitor

center. The park is so named because it sits a short walk from the premier casino resort in the entire Southeast, MGM's Beau Rivage, the Bellagio of the East. The Gulf of Mexico is the seafood bread basket of the lower 48, and produces the highest quality wild shrimp in the world, first rate oysters and much more. The region is teeming with delicious affordable local eats, and the team is named for the long established oyster industry. The vast 26-mile beach is right across the street from the stadium, with the ocean and the sporting marina of Biloxi just beyond that. There are 2,500 hotels rooms and numerous standout restaurants within two blocks.

The Biloxi Shuckers won the 2015 Southern League South Division Championship, and Baseball America named them the 2015 Minor League Team of the Year. The park opened mid-season last year, but this spring will mark the first true opening day and full season, and to celebrate the Shuckers will play the actual MLB Brewers. MGM Park offers a much more intimate fan experience than the Majors, and seats just 6,067 for baseball (and up to 15,000 for outdoor concerts). The stadium is oriented so that most seats face south to capture the stunning nightly sunsets over the waters of the Gulf. The park has two "Party decks" and a tiered "Party Patio" with high top tables. It was designed so fans always have a view of the field or two big outfield video monitors, even from the concession stands, to never miss a second of the action. Hometown favorite foods include a Who's Who of regional specialties: Po' boys, oysters, BBQ, shrimp and local ice cream, along with Mississippi craft beers like my favorite, Lazy Magnolia's Southern Pecan (the pecans are all roasted at the brewery, using old ovens repurposed from making biscuits at Popeye's). There is an open air Beer Garden on one side of the infield. Despite all the fun and all these offerings, tickets start at just \$10 and the most expensive Club Level seats are \$25. Thanks to the value proposition the big casino hotels offer, you could easily spend a weekend on the coast enjoying the sun, fun, surf,

fishing, golf, food and baseball for what it would cost to buy your family the best seats at a big city MLB game.

The Shuckers are not alone and there are two other major new stadiums of note. First Tennessee Park opened last year as the new home of the Nashville Sounds, the AAA affiliate of the Oakland A's. The ballpark is part of the city's wonderful downtown ([read more about why Nashville is such a great weekend escape here at Forbes](#)) and sits on the site of the last pro baseball stadium here, which closed the same year we first sent men to the moon, nearly half a century ago. The stadium has LEED Silver certification, and the developers partnered with a prominent local restaurant group that operates some of Nashville's most acclaimed eateries (like the Catbird Seat). Local specialties include Nashville's most distinctive signature cuisine, Hot Chicken, along with plenty of Southern BBQ.

All new this season is Dunkin' Donuts Field in Connecticut, home of the Hartford Yard Goats, the AA affiliate of the Colorado Rockies. Dunkin Donuts is a New England born company and snatched up the naming rights, but the new park offers more than donuts (though they will have plenty of those), including an outpost of Bears Smokehouse, Hartford's favorite BBQ spot, as well as a microbrewery planned for the stadium complex, which includes surrounding residences and retail. More details are still coming in the near future, as the park is scheduled to open on May 31.

Play Ball!