

Neon and nature combine in Branson

BY NORMA AND WENDY SCHONWETTER
CORRESPONDENTS

How does a city with a population of 6,000 attract seven million visitors every year? Could it be the more than 40 theaters and nearly 80 different shows per day? Or is it the combination of neon and nature set amid the rolling Ozark Mountains? Or the fantastic water activities, golf courses, amusement parks and campgrounds?

Branson, Missouri, is the live entertainment capital of the world and a year-round vacation destination.

Blasting more theater seats than Broadway, Branson is home to big-name entertainers and world-class shows from every entertainment genre, dispelling the myth that Branson mainly sports entertainers who are past their prime or into country and gospel.

There are up to three shows per theater per day with diverse entertainment offerings — pop, country, swing, '50s rock 'n' roll, gospel, patriotic, classical and Broadway show tunes combined with magic and comedy. The informality and friendliness of the entertainers will amaze you.

They come into the audience, then linger in the lobby after performances to greet fans, sign autographs and have pictures taken. There's a wonderful personal touch, even to announcing different groups, anniversaries and birthdays. Many shows end with patriotic music, singing *God Bless America*.

Prices for shows are reasonable, around \$20 to \$30 for adults with the dinner shows slightly higher.

It's amazing how many of the shows are made up of very talented families including the Lennon Brothers, the Lennon Sisters, the Presleys (five generations), the Duttons, the Hughes Brothers, the Gatlin Brothers, and the Osmond Brothers. A few of the other popular shows are Bobby Vinton joined by the Glenn Miller Orchestra, Yacov Smirnoff, Jim Stafford, Andy Williams and Sheji Tabuchi. The latter is one of the most popular shows in one of the most elaborate and expensive theaters, right down to the crystal chandeliers in the women's restroom. Sheji takes the audience on a musical tour around the world. He amazes audiences with his incredible talent and versatility.

The Branson Belle Showboat and Dixie Stampede are good examples of shows that include great dinners in the price. These two get our vote for dinner combined with best all-around show. The Showboat Branson Belle show has one of the most fascinating ventriloquist acts with a live talking dog, a Russian ballet and acrobatic team, singing, dancing and comedy with a gourmet three-course dinner.

EQUESTRIAN SHOW

The Dixie Stampede has 32 magnificent horses doing marvelous tricks and competitions pitting North against South in a friendly rivalry. There are ostrich and pig races, fabulous costumes, a barrel of music, special effects, comedy and a delicious four-course feast in a 35,000-square-foot arena. All this and fireworks, too!

Other entertainment activities include the Ima Entertainment complex that features the *Ozark's Legacy and Legend*, dozens of wet family fun rides at the 12-acre White Water Park, three factory outlet malls, and year-round tours and wine tasting at Stone Hill Winery. For

IF YOU GO

Contact Visitor Information:
(800) 214-3661 or Web site:
www.explorebranson.com

The nearest airport, about an hour by car, is Springfield, served by American, United, Northwest and U.S. Airways. Shuttle service is available for about \$60 per person.

great family fun, ride through town on Ride the Ducks' amphibious vehicles while getting a taste of history, then dive into Table Rock Lake with a splash.

Speaking of lakes, there are three scenic lakes and some incredible natural beauty in the surrounding area that provide year-round outdoor opportunities including water sports, which include trout and bass fishing, jet skiing, parasailing, boating and scuba diving.

Dogwood Canyon Nature Park is an Ozark Wilderness Area with more than 10,000 scenic acres to experience. Open-air tram tours allow you to see tree-covered ridges, beautiful waterfalls, towering bluffs, creek beds with stone-covered bridges, and abundant wildlife. There are six miles of paved trails that follow the canyon floor for walkers and bikers.

The Wonders of Wildlife Museum in Springfield has captured the sights and sounds of the Ozarks, complete with forests bursting with color, tranquil ponds, glorious rivers and waterfalls. There are birds, fish, waterfowl, and river otters to greet you. In realistic exhibits, wildlife native to Missouri is set in natural habitats. Two large aquariums make it easy to compare salt water and fresh water fish. The fresh water aquarium contains fish native to the Ozarks.

There's even a walk-through replica of a largemouth bass showing how they breathe, what they eat, and more. Since Missouri has the most caves in the country it's not surprising to find a reproduction of a cave. This newly built interactive museum, located next to the Bass Pro Shops Outdoor World is well-worth a visit.

CRAFTERS AND CAVERNS

Learn about the history of the Ozarks at Shepherd of the Hills both an attraction and a theater. Silver Dollar City depicts the Ozarks in the 1880s with 100 resident crafters demonstrating their skills, more than a dozen rides to delight the kids and wonderful culinary treasures. This turn-of-the-century park provides traditional ambience, food, costumes, music and crafts. Fantastic Marvel Cave, beneath Silver Dollar City, started it all in 1894 with cave tours. The cave has one of the largest unsupported cathedral rooms. At 400 feet long and 200 feet high, it's large enough to house a 20-story building.

The Festival of Lights, with spectacular lighting displays and holiday-theme shows, sparks the magical Christmas season, which began Nov. 1. The Trail of Lights display at Shepherd of the Hills is a fun drive-through experience. Or consider visiting in the spring when the Ozarks come to life with a profusion of flowering dogwood and redbud trees and other flowers.

"Celebration City," a new theme park opening in late spring 2003, will highlight the colorful and entertaining era of 20th-century America.

Most visitors come from within a 300-mile radius. Branson is a vacation destination for all ages. It is the 16th most visited overnight domestic destination as well as the top motor coach destination in the U.S. There are 22,600 rooms to fit every preference and price category, including motels, inns, family campgrounds, upscale resorts and hotels. Chateau on the Lake Resort perched on top of a hill overlooking Table Rock Lake is a beautiful 300-room hotel with all the luxury amenities.

Branson has endless buffets and family-style restaurants totaling more than 380 with 33,930 seats. For a gourmet treat combined with a breathtaking view, go to the Top of the Rock restaurant.

Branson is a refreshing family-value locale, with no gambling or off-color remarks and no alcohol served in theaters. In fact, there's only one pub in town. If your family is still craving entertainment after all of this, see how many different state license plates you can find, since tour buses and motor homes from all over North America fill the parking lots. Singing, dancing, comedy, nature, eating and counting license plates — it doesn't get any better than this!



Branson is a major entertainment center for country acts and more.

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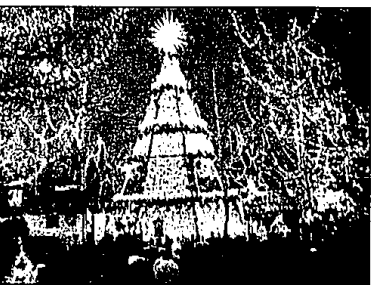
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Branson sparkles during the Christmas season.