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Branson: That's Entertainment

Charming hospitality plus a great mix of family shows and attractions combine for a satisfying vacation in southwest Missouri.

BY JACKIE TUCKER

At the Branson Café located on Main Street in downtown Branson, Mo., the delicious diner fare does more than appease rumbling stomachs. It satisfies in a way that only comfort food can, evoking feelings of home, warmth, and family around a table. That same sense of family and hospitality permeates the entire town that has been welcoming visitors with friendliness and a generosity of spirit for more than 100 years.



SIX, above, and Jonah, below, are two of the more than 100 live shows to enjoy in Branson. Branson CVB photos



gifted musical talents night after night.

At the Mickey Gilley Theater on Country Music Boulevard, SIX—featuring the Knudsen brothers (Barry, Kevin, Lynn, Jack, Owen, and Curtis)—delivers a high-octane, electrifying a cappella performance that captivates audiences with their remarkable vocal talents. After the show, they head out to the lobby for a meet-and-greet with the fans, posing for pictures, signing autographs, and showing a genuine appreciation for their fans.

Post-show receptions are commonplace among all of the entertainers in Branson, creating an approachable and inviting atmosphere for audiences.

Marty Scott, who performs as George Harrison in the Beatles tribute band, Liverpool Legends, says, "It's great to meet Beatles fans. They tell us their stories about what the music means to them."

The Liverpool Legends headline the Caravelle Theater beginning in June. Louise Harrison, sister of the late George Harrison, handpicked the band.

"They are the best portrayal of the Beatles I have ever seen. And we are happy to be in Branson. It's lovely to see fans come and continue to enjoy the music," she said.

Of course, if country music is what you're looking for, Branson has it in spades. Clay Cooper's Country Express, The Petersen Family Bluegrass Band, and country music star Billy Dean are a few of the many talented country artists who take to the stage.

MORE MUSICAL VARIETY

Surrounded by the natural beauty of the Ozarks, Branson is a haven for outdoor lovers with enough attractions to keep everyone interested. You'll find museums, shopping, amusement parks, championship golfing, pristine lakes, and of course, live entertainment. With more than 100 shows seating more than 57,000 people, performances run the gamut from Broadway-quality productions and rock 'n' roll concerts, to magicians, comedians, and acrobats. The sheer volume of talent is astounding, and a lot of the theaters are entertainer-owned.

So, what is the draw to Branson for the entertainers themselves? It's the same reason nearly 8 million people visited last year.

"There's a simplicity and purity that people connect to, a contagious friendliness. I've worked in other industries, but as a professional entertainer, it's nice to work in a wholesome place where I can raise my family," said Jason Robinson of Grand Jubilee, the show at Grand Country Music Hall.

MUSIC & LYRICS

Entertainment has been part of Branson for 55 years. Family shows are a recurring theme: here, parents, grandparents, and siblings take family togetherness to a whole new level. Groups like The Haygoods, The Bretts, and The Duttons show off their genetically

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BEFORE YOU GO

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Taking the show off land and onto Table Rock Lake, the Showboat Branson Belle harkens back to the days of grand riverboat adventure, keeping you entertained with a dazzling variety show all while serving a three-course meal. Hosted by Christopher James, who amazes with his sharp-witted comedy and magic act, the "Celebrate" show will be ready to fete the showboat's 20th anniversary in 2015.

The Sight & Sound Theatre gives a Broadway-style production with the inspirational Biblical story of Jonah. It is grand pageantry at its finest with original musical compositions, 71 set pieces designed by the Sight & Sound Theatre staff, 550 costumes, 41 professional actors, and 30 live animals.

MORE TO SEE

While you're in town, you'll want to check out Silver Dollar City, named one of the world's Top 10 theme parks by Amusement Today. A significant park expansion, an area called Fireman's Landing, debuts this spring. Five new rides plus interactive play areas will be located inside the area. And as part of the Star-Spangled Summer starting in June, the Harlem Globetrotters will present daily shows for a six-week engagement.

The park has plenty of music, food, and wares from more than 100 master craftsmen. Watch artisans as they work, creating everything from candy and pottery, to woodwork and hand-blown glass.

For lodging options, Branson has more than 18,000 rooms among hotels, motels, and resorts along with RV parks and campgrounds. The Hilton Promenade (AAA Three Diamonds) is conveniently located at Branson Landing, a scenic and vibrant boardwalk along the lakeshore, with access to shopping, dining, and a spectacular fountain show that displays a dramatic combination of water, fire, and music.

Chateau on the Lake is a AAA Four Diamond hotel that overlooks Table Rock Lake. At the Hotel Grand Victorian (AAA Two Diamonds) on state Highway 76 (The Strip), guests can enjoy afternoon tea. Another option along The Strip is the Lodge of the Ozarks, which has several theaters, museums, shopping, and attractions within walking distance.

If you are looking for a one-of-a-kind family vacation destination with an incredible value, you'll find it in Branson.

Jackie Tucker is a new contributor from St. Louis, Mo.

Branson area named one of the best travel deals for 2015

Branson recently was named one of the top deals in U.S. travel for 2015 by trivago.com. The southwest Missouri destination ranked No. 2, behind Macon, Ga. The average hotel room in Branson, according to trivago.com, is \$84. Springfield, Mo., also appeared within the Top 10 list, coming in at No. 8 with an average hotel room cost of \$89.

While visiting Springfield this year, don't miss one of the city's jewels, the Mizumoto Japanese Stroll Gardens at the Springfield Botanical Gardens, Nathanael Greene/Close Memorial Park, 2400 S. Scenic Ave. This year, the Japanese gardens celebrate its 30th anniversary.

The 7.5-acre Japanese gardens features a large koi pond, graceful moon bridge, meditation garden, and more. It opens April 1 for the season, and the annual Cherry Blossom Kite Festival will be April 11.

Admission to the Japanese gardens is \$3 for adults and free for visitors 12 years and younger. For more information, call the garden at (417) 891-1515.

What Else is New in Branson?

Big names are coming to Branson this year, and one of the concerts is just around the corner.

Rick Springfield will bring his "Stripped Down" tour to the Andy Williams Moon River Theatre on Saturday, April 11. Other concerts will include B.J. Thomas; Moe Bandy and Joe Stampley with guest Jeannie Seely; and Ronnie Milsap with his "Farewell Tour." Comedian and impressionist Terry Fator (winner of the second season of America's Got Talent) is the most recent addition to the theater's lineup, which includes the Osmond Brothers, Lennon Sisters, and Mary Wilson of The Supremes. For details, contact the box office, (417) 334-4500.

The Oak Ridge Boys Theatre will welcome Charlie Daniels, Johnny Mathis, the Little River Band, and Bill Cosby. The Oak Ridge Boys perform at the theater throughout the season. For details, contact the box office, (417) 335-2000.

The Welk Resort presents a long run of the award-winning Broadway musical, Million Dollar Quartet, that brought Elvis Presley, Johnny Cash, Jerry Lee Lewis, and Carl Perkins together for one incredible night. The show opens in June and runs through October. For details, contact the box office, (417) 337-SHOW (337-7469).

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Moon River Theatre

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