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Smooth Traveler:
Holiday in Branson

By Renée S. Gordon

"On the first day of Christmas my true love gave to me, a ticket to Branson, Missouri." The first gift was all I needed because the remaining eleven days were filled with enough choices to satisfy even the most jaded holiday traveler. Branson is consistently listed in top publications as one of the ten best places to celebrate the season and the excitement and pleasure visitors derive here is not dependent upon religious persuasion or philosophical beliefs about Christmas. Branson is an entertainment filled oasis, decked out to reflect the joy and hope that the country celebrates at this time of year. It is family-oriented and, best of all in these economic times, affordable.

A recent survey of what travelers want in a vacation destination revealed that they want a casual atmosphere with a variety of things to do. Branson more than meets these criteria and from the beginning of November through the start of the new year the 20th "Ozark Mountain Christmas" spirit offers an additional dimension that should be experienced.

There are more shows in Branson than there are on Broadway and every one of them puts a special holiday spin on their show with internationally famous performers and specially designed thematic sets. The most renowned seasonal show is the "Andy Williams' Christmas Show," patterned after the one millions of people enjoyed on television for eight seasons, featuring some of the songs from his top-selling Xmas album. Performances are held in his \$11 million Moon River Theater, completed in 1991, the first theater not to showcase country music. The Moon River Grill, is located nearby and features homemade meals based on Andy's mother's personal recipes and word has it that he eats lunch there every day. www.andywilliams.com

Many of the theaters are family operations and that makes their holiday performances even more exciting. Last year's "America's Got Talent" featured the multitalented Duttons and there are a score of other families, the Bretts, Six, the Hughes Brothers, the Presleys and the Haygoods among them, showcased along Branson's Strip.

No celebration would be complete without lights, lots and lots of them, millions in fact. The entire city is adorned with intricate and colorful displays but beyond that are the spectacular presentations mounted by Silver Dollar City and the Shepherd of the Hills.

Silver Dollar City 's Old Time Christmas lets visitors step back into an 1880s holiday complete with strolling carolers and chestnuts roasting. A 17-foot, talking Christmas tree is the centerpiece of their seasonal extravaganza, along with another, musically enhanced tree, with special effects that play out 7-stories into the sky. If 8 million lights are not enough to enchant children of any age, there are also 35 rides and attractions, 40 shows and more than 20 restaurants.

In 1907, Harold Bell, a Kansas minister who spent a substantial amount of time in the Ozarks because of the cleaner air published "Shepherd of the Hills," a story of life in the Ozarks, the book was an instant success and immediately the area was flooded with tourists who found the hills as beautiful and serene as described. The visitors have never stopped coming.

FREE TICKETS



Eagles vs Cowboys



COLLEGE





Today the locations in the book form the Shepherd of the Hills Homestead that includes a museum, nature trails, a tower and an historic outdoor drama. At Christmas The Shepherd of the Hills presents two seasonally inspired activities. The Trail of Lights, a 2.5-mile tour that winds its way through the 160-acre complex, showcases millions of lights and animated displays. The

drive ends at 230-foot Inspiration Tower where visitors can get a panoramic view of the Ozarks and Branson. "Christmas on the Trail" is for the inner cowboy and girl in all of us. Guests dine on cowboy cuisine from an authentic 19th-century chuckwagon, sit around a campfire and sing and share the holiday spirit.

Stone Hill Winery, the oldest in the state, has won more than 2,300 awards since 2003. Free one-hour winery tours of the 12,000 sq. ft complex are offered daily and include demonstrations and tastings.
www.stonehillwinery.com

Branson's Mount Pleasant Winery offers the unique opportunity for guests to take a 40-minute tour of the property, watch an orientation video and bottle their own dessert wine in their new 9,200 sq-ft facility.
www.mountpleasant.com

More often than I should, I hear about people who visit Branson and never visit one of their wonderful museums. In one weekend you can't visit them all, but the big four are the Titanic Museum, the World's Largest Toy Museum, Ripley's Believe it or Not! Branson-Odditorium and the Veteran's Memorial Museum

The Titanic Museum is moored beside an iceberg and as you enter the attraction you are given the name of a person who was on the voyage. The displays advance you through the tragedy from the building of the ship to the aftermath of the sinking. Currently featured is "Titanic: the Movie Exhibit," highlighting items from the movie and a replica of the grand staircase in honor of its 10th anniversary.

With toys that date from the 19th century, the World's Largest Toy Museum contains all the toys you ever played with and then some. The best featured non-toy object on display is a British Embassy Rolls Royce. Located within the larger museum is the Harold Bell Wright Museum with a 27-minute video on Bell, handwritten manuscripts, and an original manuscript of "Shepherd of the Hills."
www.worldslargesttoymuseum.com



Missouri is in the record books as having had the worst earthquake in American history, 8.0 on the Richter Scale in 1812, and the facade of Ripley's Museum reflects that past. The building is the most photographed in the city and its 7 galleries are some of the most visited. www.ripleysbranson.com

The Veteran's Museum is one of my favorite attractions in Branson. The museum honors all who served in the military in all conflicts. The collection is stunning. Branson is also known as Tri-Lakes because of the three lakes, Table Rock,

Bull Shoals and Taneycomo, in the area. All the water sport activities are available and marinas provide services ranging from boat rentals to fishing guides. Both Table Rock and Bull Shoals Lake are nationally noted for bass fishing and tournaments.

Lake Taneycomo was created in 1913 when the Powersite Dam was constructed. Annually it is stocked with more than 700,000 rainbow and brown trout and is internationally recognized for trout fishing. A variety of daily cruises are offered by Branson Landing Cruises and Ride the Ducks.
www.bransonlandingcruises.com

The \$420 million Branson Waterfront Landing is a 95-acre retail and entertainment district that is situated along Lake Taneycomo in historic downtown Branson. There are scores of shops and restaurants on the 1.5-mile strip but the highlight of the strand is the \$7.5 million lighted fountain, pyrotechnical display.

Branson has more than 200 lodgings that range from luxury accommodations to budget. One of the best bargains in town is the 96-room Boxcar Willie Hotel named in honor of the legendary performer. The hotel is near all the attractions and offers all the standard amenities plus complimentary deluxe continental breakfast, heated pool, hot tub and sauna.
www.boxcarwilliehotel.com

It is not too late to finish your shopping in Branson's more than 300 stores or spend part of the season oohing and aahing over the dazzling displays. Share the excitement of both Christmas Past and Present. Holidays in Branson are truly special. www.explorebranson.com

I wish you smooth and spirited travels!
