

POSTCARDS BRANSON *from*

Wish you were here? Join our intrepid reporter on a whirlwind tour of country music's hottest destination

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GOT SOME VACATION TIME TO BURN? IN THE MOOD FOR SOMETHING kind of wacky, kind of otherworldly, yet still kind of Western? If so, chances are you'd enjoy a journey to Branson.

Finishing a writing assignment in southeastern Missouri, I was thrilled to find myself with a free weekend to kill. The decision to spend it in Branson was easy: Like many people, I was skeptically curious about this obscure little burg in the Ozarks that during the past few decades has exploded into one of America's hottest entertainment spots.

Knowing I'd only have time to catch a couple of the music shows that are Branson's top draw, I decided to pursue the perspective of a visiting Westerner. My self-appointed mission: Locate honky-tonks with live country music and dancing, restaurants serving credible barbecue and steaks, and shops offering authentic Western wear. I vowed at least to pinpoint some local diversions—musical or otherwise—that might appeal to folks who insist on maintaining a Western lifestyle even while vacationing as far “east” as Missouri.

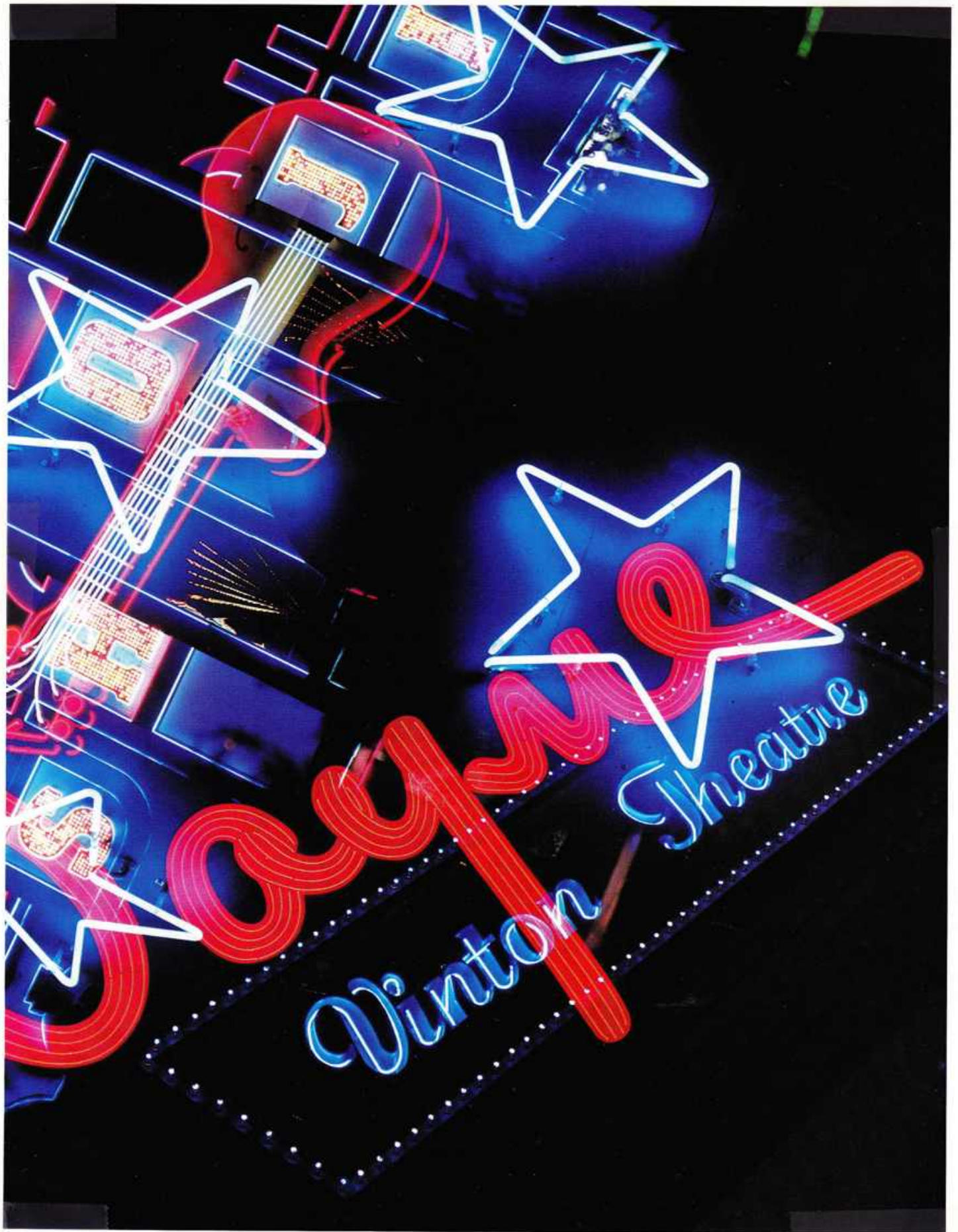
Travelers flying to Branson are usually routed to the closest major airport, in Springfield—although Branson Airlines, with its tiny airstrip right in town, advertises nonstops from Dallas-Ft. Worth, St.

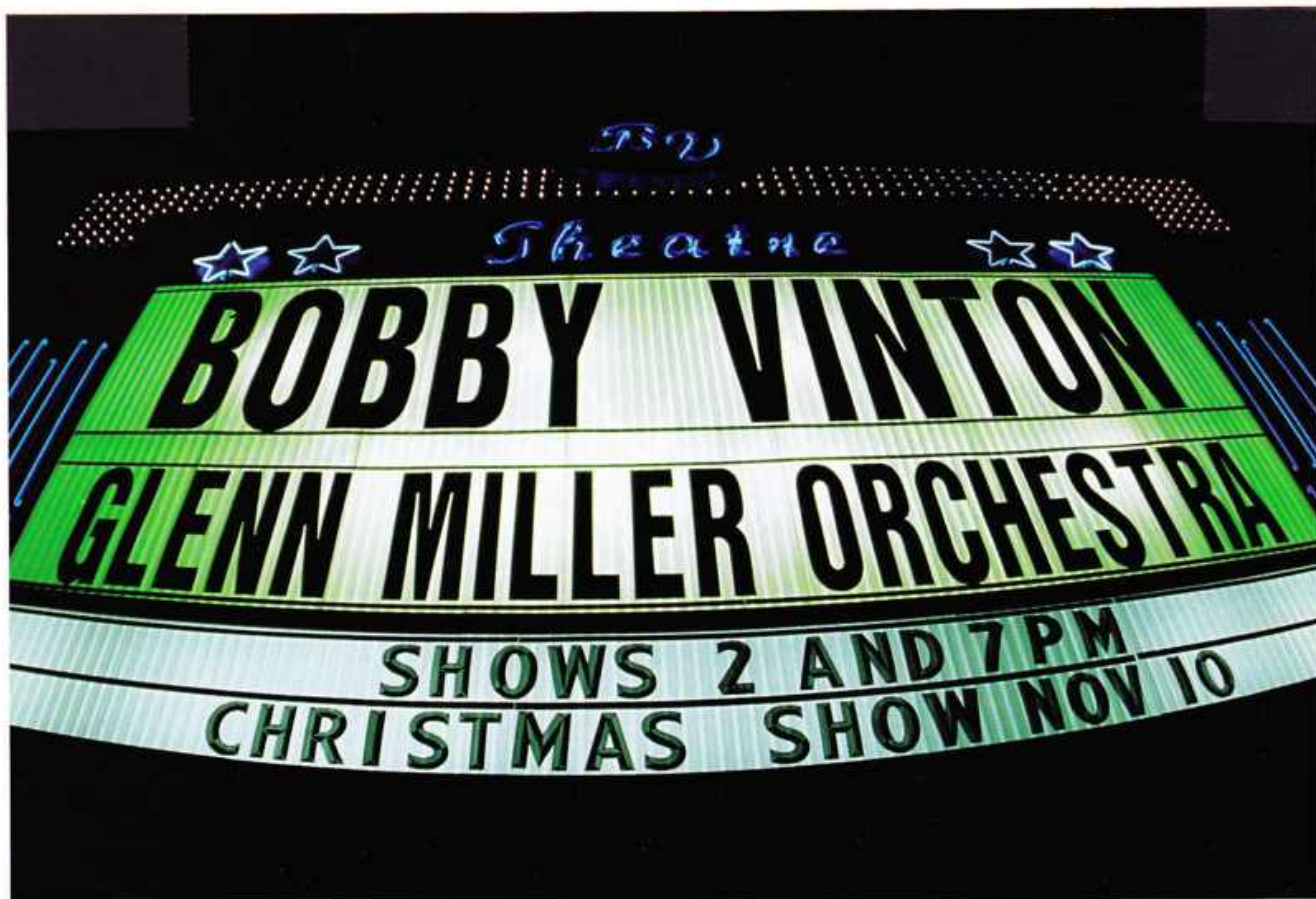
Louis, Kansas City, and Nashville. The 45-minute car trip from Springfield's airport is a smooth and easy drive on U.S. Highway 65 South. But no matter how you approach the city, a late-night arrival is not recommended.

It was close to 10 p.m. when I spotted the first exit sign for Branson. As I turned off 65 onto 76 Country Boulevard (known locally as “the Strip” where it winds through the main part of town), I was immediately confronted by two dazzling images: an endless trail of bright white marquee lights, and an endless trail of bright red taillights caught in the infamous Branson gridlock.

You'll quickly learn, as I did, that there are two particular times to avoid driving on the Strip: between 6 and 8 p.m., when







everyone's coming in for the shows, and between 10 and 11 p.m., when the shows let out. During the rest of the day, you might succeed in getting up to 20 miles an hour on Highway 76. Several new access roads help you avoid the congestion; but since much of the action centers on the Strip, sooner or later you'll have to plunge in. Actually, the full hour you might spend in traffic to cover the two miles to your hotel (no kidding!) will give you plenty of time to absorb the entire fascinating scene.

Perhaps nowhere is Branson's evolution from sleepy resort town to booming tourist mecca more evident than in the five-mile Strip's startling commercial clash of silliness and sophistication. Fronted by rainbow-lit fountains, sweeping entrances, and majestic columns, numerous

state-of-the-art music complexes, such as the Grand Palace and Andy Williams's Moon River Theatre (named, like many similar facilities, for its star's most golden oldie), sit side by side with such folksier joints as Kids Kountry Mini-Golf & Go-Carts, Ma Barker's Famous BBQ, Ride The Ducks Excursions, Outback Bungee, and an apparel store with its portable trailer sign proclaiming: "Our Prices Have Fallen and They Can't Giddyup."

Several theaters owned by some of the music world's more seasoned veterans display their hosts' larger-than-life photographs on entrance billboards, and many of these images look as lost in the past as the singers' most recent hits. (Portrait artists with a flair for discrete air-brushing can obviously prosper in Branson.) At the John Davidson Theatre,

beneath a misty visage of the eternally baby-faced entertainer, elegant neon curvise promises visitors "The Romance, the Memories, the Show." Adorned with the Ray Stevens Theatre's camel motif, a banner proudly declares that the star will perform "Live-In Person!" (As opposed to *what* in person?)

Lodging along the Strip ranges from tacky little cottages and no-frills motels to more deluxe accommodations at Best Westerns, Holiday Inns, and others. Many signs boast of "In-Room Phones," as if that's some kind of technological miracle. (The community telephone pole in "Green Acres" comes to mind.)

Lots of places feature rooms overlooking the breathtakingly gorgeous Ozark scenery—remarkably untouched by development, at least for now. The Palace Inn, where I stayed, is one of the nicer places, with interior room entrances and a fairly complete range of comforts and services. But hey: After creeping along at a snail's pace to get to your hotel, you'll probably be happy to sack out just about anywhere.

Start your first full day with a trip to the Branson Chamber of Commerce Visitors' Center on 248, just west of 65 at the northeast edge of town. Armed with a flurry of free brochures, retreat to



a quiet corner to map out your itinerary. Bear in mind when doing so, however, that you'll be spending a lot of time in your car: Branson's not exactly huge geographically, but its attractions are hopelessly spread out.

On with the Show

If you decide to get tickets to a couple of shows, several free weekly program guides can help you choose. A dedicated Westerner might prefer a straight-shooting music performance, ruling out more middle-of-the-road variety shows (Baldknobbers Hillbilly Jamboree, Jim Stafford, Presleys' Jubilee, etc.) and the glitzier likes of Tony Orlando, Wayne Newton, Bobby Vinton, violin sensation Shoji Tabuchi, and the Osmond Brothers. On my short-notice visit, Roy Clark was sold out and Loretta Lynn was out of town; but I managed to snag good seats for Mickey Gilley and the stage production of *Oklahoma!* starring Rudy Gatlin. Tickets, bought the day of the shows, were \$16 each.

At any time of year, Branson draws bus tours full of retirees. The audience at Gilley's matinee was no exception—a sea of polyester warm-up suits in every hue, accessorized by Keds, Hush Puppies, gimme caps, and nylon jackets sporting farm equipment logos from places like Elkhorn, Wisconsin, and St. Cloud, Minnesota. As the only person not wearing a plastic name badge, I felt really out of place.

After allowing an adequately talented female backup singer to open with a 45-minute set, Gilley delivered an energetic two hours featuring such surefire favorites as *The Girls All Get Prettier* at *Closing Time* and *Room Full of Roses*. Between numbers, he bantered with the audience, causing hordes of women to giggle and sigh like 20-year-olds at a Garth Brooks concert.

Not only were Gilley's CDs, tapes, and souvenirs on sale in the lobby, but during intermission, salesmen worked the aisles hawking those wares like ballpark peanuts. That practice—along with allowing flash cameras and squalling babies in the audience—is common and acceptable in other Branson shows as well, but it may come as a surprise to first-time visitors.

Approaching Gilley with other audience members after the show, I asked

the longtime country loyalist if he opposed the recent boom in Vegas-type performers in Branson. Looking somewhat exhausted from signing scores of autographs and posing for countless snapshots, he made a real trouper's effort to collect his thoughts. "Well, we're all after the entertainment dollar," he replied, "and the growing selection of acts in Branson is creating business for everybody. But the real winners are the visitors, because I think they come here looking for variety."

Gilley did admit that he hopes Branson's increasing resemblance to Las Vegas will stop short of gambling. "This is a family town, and that's one of Branson's most precious assets," he said. "Right now, you can take your kids anywhere, at any time. You can't do that in Vegas."

That night, less than a hundred audience members were on hand to witness

Broadway Branson USA's production of *Oklahoma!* at the 650-seat Thunderbird Theatre. A cast of mostly local performers (I recognized one of the chorus girls from her day job in the box office) provided surprisingly talented accompaniment to the spirited singing and acting of Rudy, the youngest of the famous trio of Gatlin Brothers. Why, I wondered, did this show seem to be such a well-kept secret?

During intermission, while simultaneously struggling with the popcorn machine and making change at the concession counter, producer Martha Frederick explained that attendance was often sparse because the show had only been playing for a few months and was still relying heavily on word-of-mouth. "The biggest ticket sales for any show in Branson come from the bus tours," she said. "Those are usually booked



months in advance.”

After the show, Gatlin invited visitors on stage to chat with the cast—we were, after all, a pretty cozy group. Like Martha Frederick, he hoped for audiences by the busload; but he added that, after performing for so many years in front of huge concert crowds, he kind of enjoys playing to smaller groups. “The fans in Branson are super-friendly and receptive,” he said. “You develop a special rapport with them in this kind of setting.”

After-Hours Entertainment

The entertainment in Branson doesn't stop when the show curtains go down. Guided by recommendations from a reliable sampling of musicians, I visited all the local clubs featuring live country music and dancing—only a handful, easily covered in two evenings, with none charging cover.

You'll find the biggest dance floor at Crockey's, perched high on a hill overlooking the Interstate a few miles south in the tiny town of Hollister. There's a family restaurant on one side, where Buck Trent puts on a daily breakfast show, and a honky-tonk on the other, where the Crockateers entertain from 8 p.m. to 1 a.m. According to a band member, Crockey's draws a mostly local clientele: Tourists either don't know about the club or don't want to stray too far from the Strip. The night I was there, I found a youngish to middle-aged crowd of devoted two-steppers and line-dancers. I also learned the place is a popular hangout for Branson's sizeable population of band musicians.

So, too, is The Loft—which, along with Club Celebrity, flanks Roy Clark's sprawling theater complex back on the Strip. Clark's band, Celebrity Sound, plays in The Loft before and after the evening show. Band drummer Randy Bowling, a 12-year Branson resident, says The Loft attracts a young, beer-drinking, dancing crowd, while Club Celebrity caters to a more sophisticated,

sedate cocktail set.

Next to the Mel Tillis Theatre on the Strip are Mel's Restaurant and The Mole Hole, another live country music locale with the second-largest dance floor in town. The Mole Hole draws a younger crowd, and on Sunday nights the entertainment switches to bluegrass.

B.T. Bones Steak House, the remaining destination for live country music, lies somewhat off the beaten track on Shepherd of the Hills Expressway. A band called Route 66 provides nightly music for dancing on a floor located smack in the middle of the popular eatery. If you don't mind restaurant-type

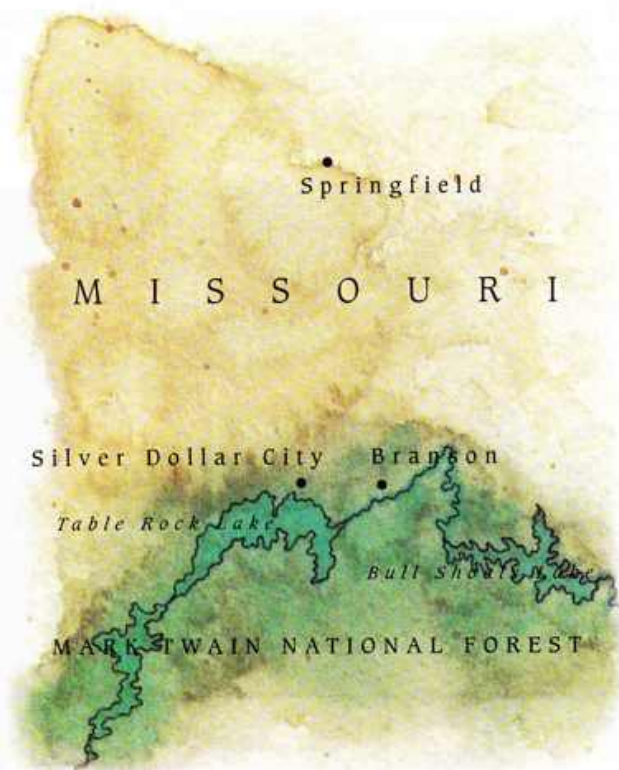
the most impressive stores of its kind to be found anywhere. You can't miss it, just off of Highway 65 at Battlefield Road. The 30,000-square-foot facility stocks more than 10,000 pairs of Western boots and 300 saddles, and includes a saddle-making shop on the premises.

If the sight of all that Western gear makes you lonesome for ol' Buck back home, you'll find several places to trail ride in Branson. The biggest establishment, Krazy Horse Ranch, stocks 65 horses and ponies ranging from Clydesdales to Shetlands. The animals seem in pretty good health and mild-mannered—a good thing, since they're left free to wander around a large unfenced parking area, most of them wearing full tack! For \$12.50 per person, Krazy Horse guides will lead you on a scenic one-hour ride over three miles of hill and woodland trails. If the experience moves you in mysterious ways, you can cap your visit with a consultation from the on-site psychic.

Another good option is Uncle Ike's, which keeps about 35 horses on hand from Memorial Day to Labor Day. For \$10 a head, you get a 45-minute, 2½-mile trail ride through terrific scenery. At Shepherd of the Hills Homestead, just west of the Strip, a one-day ticket price of \$12.69 buys a diverse menu of equestrian entertainment options, including horse-drawn wagon rides, a corral full of miniature horses to pet, and a 20-minute guided trail ride that you can repeat as often as you like.

Chowing Down

After all this activity, a big question looms: What's for dinner? Well, how about the first restaurant you can find that doesn't have a line of people spilling out the door and snaking halfway around the building? With scores of shows starting within one hour of each other every evening, most places fill up fast—and early. If you want any assurance of a leisurely meal before an evening show, get used to eating at 5:30 p.m.



lighting, trays of tenderloins whizzing by your head, and the din of families with kids chowing down, wear your dancing duds to B.T. Bones.

From PFI to Happy Trails

Forgot to pack those dancing duds? You'll find a reasonable selection of Western wear in Branson, at stores such as S-Bar-B and the Silver Spur. But truly serious shoppers must make time for a stop back in Springfield at PFI Western Store, Missouri's largest Western outlet and one of

BRANSON BY THE NUMBERS

Street addresses can be all but useless in Branson—a good thing, considering you won't find them listed in most tourist brochures. Everybody pretty much knows where everything is, and the huge signs and slow crawl of traffic combine to make it easy to spot your destination long before you get there. Far more important to the visitor are phone numbers to call for reservations and information.

Following is an alphabetical listing of all Branson establishments mentioned in this article. The local area code is 417.

Adam's Rib Restaurant: 334-8163
 B.T. Bones Steakhouse: 335-2002
 Baldknobbers Hillbilly Jamboree: 334-4528
 Best Western Knights Inn: 334-1894
 Best Western Music Capital Inn: 334-8378
 Branson Airlines: 800/422-4247
 Branson/Lakes Area Chamber of Commerce: 334-4136
 Braschler Music Show: 334-4363
 Clark (Roy) Celebrity Theatre: 334-0076
 Club Celebrity: 334-0076
 Cowboy Cafe: 335-4828
 Crockey's: 334-4995
 Davidson (John) Theatre: 334-0773
 Factory Merchants Mall: 335-6686
 Fall Creek Steakhouse: 336-5060
 Gilley (Mickey) Theatre: 334-3210
 Grand Palace: 336-4636
 Holiday Inn: 334-5101
 Holiday Inn Express: 334-1985
 Kids Kountry Mini-Golf & Go-Carts: 334-1618
 Crazy Horse Ranch: 334-5068
 Loft, The: 334-0076
 Lone Star Steakhouse: 336-5030
 Long's Wax & Historical Museum: 334-4145
 Lynn (Loretta) Ozark Theatre: 334-0023
 Ma Barker's Famous BBQ: 335-4143
 McGuffey's Restaurant: 336-3600
 Mole Hole: 335-6635

Mutton Hollow Craft & Entertainment Village: 334-4947
 Newton (Wayne) Theatre: 336-6034
 Orlando (Tony) Theatre: 335-8669
 Osmond Family Theatre: 336-6100
 Outback Bungee: 336-JUMP
 Outback Steak & Oyster Bar: 334-6306
 Palace Inn: 334-ROOM
 PFI Western Store: 862-1614
 Presleys' Mountain Music Jubilee: 334-4874
 Ride the Ducks Excursions: 334-DUCK
 S-Bar-B Western Wear: 335-3207
 Shepherd of the Hills Homestead: 334-4191
 Shorty Small's Restaurant: 334-8797
 Silver Dollar City: 336-INFO
 Silver Spur Western Wear: 334-5026
 Stafford (Jim) Theatre: 335-8080
 Stevens (Ray) Theatre: 334-2422
 Tabuchi (Shoji) Theatre: 334-7469
 Thunderbird Theatre: 336-2542
 Tillis (Mel) Theatre: 335-6635
 Trent (Buck) Breakfast Theatre: 335-5428
 Trotter's Barbecue: 336-3415
 Uncle Ike's Trail Rides: 338-8449
 Uncle Joe's Barbeque: 334-4548
 Vinton (Bobby) Blue Velvet Theatre: 334-2500
 Wigwam Resort: 338-2209
 Williams (Andy) Moon River Theatre: 334-4500
 Winged Eagle Resort: 338-2314

During the day, I suggest maintaining a brisk pace with fast-food chains and Chinese joints. When you're ready to commit to a sit-down Western experience, though, try Uncle Joe's Barbecue for good food, prices, and atmosphere; and B.T. Bones Steak House for the food and prices. Other local favorites along these lines include Lone Star Steakhouse, McGuffey's, Trotter's Barbecue, Fall Creek Steakhouse, Adam's Rib, Cowboy Cafe, Shorty Small's, and Outback Steak & Oyster Bar.

Still More Strategies

A weekend offered me an excellent taste of Branson. However, I would have needed at least another five days to do the town true justice. I only had time, for example, to take a brief look at some of the local lakeside resorts that beckoned with names like Wigwam and Winged Eagle, offering tranquil, picturesque alternatives to the frenzied Strip. I also quickly realized that a review of Branson's youth-oriented activities—from giant water slides to pirate cruises to vast indoor amusement arcades—would fill an article themselves. And the attractions in places like Mutton Hollow and nearby Silver Dollar City promise a good week's worth of entertainment for children and adults alike.

Local shopping opportunities abound, with hundreds of stores stocking everything from the junkiest of souvenirs to quality clothing and jewelry. Hard-core bargain-hunters will especially enjoy scouring specialty and clothing outlet stores at the Factory Merchants Mall.

Speaking of clothing: The Missouri weather can change in a heartbeat, so it's wise to pack a little of everything for your visit. But leave your fancy clothes at home: The Branson dress code, even in the swankiest of theaters, is casual to the point where you could almost imagine being thrown in jail for wearing high heels or a coat and tie.

Different rules do seem to apply in Branson. There's so much constant, colorful, crazy activity going on everywhere that you really begin to feel you're on another planet, where every social level from hillbillies to highbrows lives, works, and plays in harmony. Hokey though much of it all may be, the range of things to do and see is virtually endless. So if you do land in Branson, you might as well try to see it all—or have a wild time trying. 🍷

