

TRAVEL



Braving Branson

Celebrating its centennial this year, **BRANSON, MO.**, is typically thought of as a haven for silver foxes. So what does the town have to offer a 20-something? As it turns out, plenty.

“PLEASE STAND FOR THE PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE.”

The audience immediately towered above me as if they were already expecting this cue while I scrambled obediently to my feet. The Pledge of Allegiance? Here? Now? My mind wandered to the last time I recited the Pledge, standing proudly in my second-grade classroom with my hand over my heart, holding out for the promise of a gold star and an 8-ounce milk box. Somewhere along the line, it seemed the country stopped opening classes and shows by pledging allegiance; I guess I assumed we all knew we were, indeed, allegiant to the flag.

Even so, I appeared to be the only one in that dimly lit Moon River Theatre auditorium who had grown unaccustomed to this patriotic ritual. Elderly men displayed their gleaming white hair as they removed trucker-style hats with the words *Veteran* and *B-52* embroidered front and center, while we began in unison, “I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America ...”

Once it was finished, as if by another unspoken cue, the audience disappeared from eyesight to their velvety seats, leaving me standing alone with my hand frozen to my heart as the curtain came up to reveal the reward for our patriotism: a group of beautiful, middle-aged vocalists — whom I’d never heard of before.

I was in Branson, Mo., and it was clear that I was in someone else’s world.

I CAME TO BRANSON not quite sure what to expect. As was the case for many of my fellow Gen Y-ers, Branson wasn’t even on my radar as far as destination travel was concerned. The Lennon Sisters? Elly May? *The Shepherd of the Hills*? Succotash? All were foreign to me before setting foot in this well-preserved baby boomer compound.

Anything I’d heard about this city had come from non-descript mentions from members of my grandparents’ generation. Things like, “Branson is so beautiful,” and

LEFT TO RIGHT: Marvel Cave, a Branson tourist attraction since 1894; chicken pot pie at Andy Williams Moon River Grill; Silver Dollar City’s Wildfire coaster

“There’s just so much to do there,” and even a very enthusiastic “You have to experience the Ozarks at least once in your lifetime.” Despite its obvious acclaim, it seemed no one could nail down what exactly was going on in Branson, which is why, when the opportunity came up to visit during the city’s 100-year anniversary, I jumped at the chance to see if this southwestern-Missouri spot could charm my 20-something, city-girl heart.

Branson was incorporated as a town in early 1912, but it wasn’t five months before it faced its first case of adversity, testing the proud new residents’ resilience and their principles of faith, family and country. On Aug. 29, 1912, the mild Missouri summer heat was torched by flames ripping through downtown Branson, a fire rumored to have started with an explosion in a hotel caused by someone filling a coal-oil stove with gasoline. With no fire department, townspeople rode out the blaze and tried to keep it from spreading. It’s hard to say whether it was this first unified act that solidified the town’s collective pride, but residents have maintained that mission to preserve their city ever since.

Over the years, the town has remained relatively unscathed by mainstream culture, its people staying faithful to the family-friendly values established more than a century ago, even turning the seemingly derogatory word *hillbilly* into a term of endearment — one they use often to describe themselves. Branson has a uniquely untouched allure that makes visitors feel as if they’ve traveled back to an era when it was safe to leave a window open or a door unlocked before heading to Dick’s Oldtime 5 & 10 on the downtown strip.


IT WAS THE HILLBILLY CHARM that lured me into Andy Williams Moon River Grill, where I grazed on some killer sweet-potato fries. Admittedly, I had no idea who Andy Williams was as I feasted on his mother’s made-from-scratch recipes — until I recognized a familiar song playing through the speakers and put two and two together. “He’s the guy who sang the song from *Breakfast at Tiffany’s!*” I exclaimed. You could hear a pin drop as my uninformed comment echoed off the walls. I cringed as a group of the waitstaff headed toward me, sure I would be berated for my ignorance. Instead they eagerly took turns educating me on Andy, whom they spoke of as if he were a close friend or relative. They passed no judgment as they welcomed me, an ill-informed outsider, to their world.

I came to find out that Williams did a lot for the community, helping to turn this gorgeous, musician-laden Ozark landscape into America’s live-music-show capital. Acts like Jim Stafford, Roy Clark, The Lennon Sisters and Donny and Marie Osmond have come through town. There are showtimes literally all day long, with younger acts added to the rotation constantly.

I saw a fair share of shows while in town, ranging from outspoken comedian Yakov Smirnoff to the incredible a cappella group The Cat’s Pajamas to a high-energy set performed by The Haygoods, a young and talented family band. For the more adventurous set, there are options to get your blood pumping, from ATV rides and trails for biking to kayaking and cave tours. Unfortunately, as the woman running the Vigilante ZipRider zip line told me, the winds were too strong on the day I visited to allow for any *zipping* or *lining*. But in pure Bransonite time-isn’t-an-issue-because-people-come-first fashion, she tried to diminish my disappointment by talking me through Branson’s history.

As we looked out over the lush, rolling hills of the Missouri Ozarks, freckled with three pristine lakes, she explained how the book *The Shepherd of the Hills*, based on life in early Branson, brought in swarms of fans from all over the country to experience hillbilly culture firsthand. A proud self-proclaimed hillbilly, she told of her personal experiences from the economic boom in the ‘60s to the Feb. 29, 2012, tornado that unsuccessfully sought to shred the plans for the city’s centennial celebration.

“We all love Branson,” she said with a smile. “Our goal is that you’ll love it too.”

And somewhere along the way — whether it was while traversing the historic streets of Silver Dollar City, a theme park that appeared several times on *The Beverly Hillbillies*; chatting with passionate performing artists; savoring local dishes like skillet succotash (a mix of corn, lima beans, peppers and who knows what else); or splurging on the oversized muffins at Persimmon Hill Farm — I did. Though Branson and its residents may seem part of a world that once was, the beauty of this unadulterated destination doesn’t just lie in the rolling hills or forests but in the fact that it’s entirely one of a kind. 

This trip to Branson prepared freelance writer and Air Force wife **KRISTY ALPERT** for her recent move to Mississippi, where the best restaurant in town’s slogan is “Come’n getcha some.”

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