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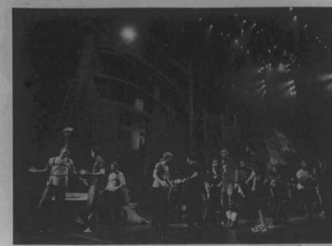
If you go

Branson Landing: (866) 417-9300 and bransonlanding.com.
Sight & Sound Theatre: The theater is at 1001 Shepherd of the Hills Expressway. (800) 377-1277 and sight-sound.com.
Silver Dollar City: Adult admission is $51.59, children 4-11 are $40.84. Season passes are available. For information, schedules and tickets, call (800) 831-4386, or visit silverdollarcity.com. Celebration City's site is at celebrationcity.com.
Payne Stewart Golf Club: (417) 332-3453 and paynestewartgolfclub.com.
Branson information: (800) 272-6766, or visit explorebranson.com.

TOM UHLENBROCK/St. Louis Post-Dispatch
The new Branson Landing development has upscale shopping for boomers and a fire-and-water feature that keeps the kids entertained.

The NEW Branson

High-end golf and upscale shopping seek to attract the next generation of visitors



MARK SCHIEFELBEIN/The Associated Press
Cast members rehearse a scene in which they debate whether to board a giant replica ark in "Noah — The Musical" at the Sight & Sound Theatre in Branson.

MARK SCHIEFELBEIN/The Associated Press
A passenger trolley makes its way along the main avenue of the Branson Landing shopping district in Branson, Mo.

BY TOM UHLENBROCK
St. Louis Post-Dispatch

BRANSON, Mo. — Nearly everyone who's a regular visitor has an I-remember-Branson-when story.

Here is Bob Allen's version: "When I first came down here, the only things in Branson were the Presleys, Silver Dollar City and bait shops."

Branson started as an Ozark fishing hole, with the Presley family setting up a metal building on Highway 76 in 1967 to provide wholesome entertainment for the sportsmen who used the man-made lakes. That simple start multiplied into about 50 theaters, earning Branson the title of America's live music capital.

The evolution is continuing today, and Allen is a part of it.

Allen grew up in Springfield, Mo., where he was friends with Payne Stewart, the pro golfer who died in a plane accident in 1999 at age 42. Now, Allen is the club pro for Branson Hills Golf Co., which is putting the finishing touches on the Payne Stewart Golf Club, a tribute to his friend.

"Each hole of the course tells a story about Payne's experience on the tour," Allen said. "The golf course is $27 million, with five sets of tees from 7,400 yards. We can host national events, everything from Tiger to little tigers."

He led the way through the clubhouse, which has dark wood paneling, an outdoor pool and an area that will display memorabilia, including trophies won by Stewart and pairs of his signature gold-toe golf shoes. Everything in the clubhouse will be linen, crystal and silver — "no paper plates and Styrofoam cups," Allen said. "It's all going to be tip-top, Payne would be proud."

The public golf course will be the 12th in the Branson area — joining John Daly's Murder Rock as the latest additions — and cements Branson's role as a golf destination.

Add the upscale shopping at the new Branson Landing, the growing retirement and second-home community, and the recently opened convention center and second Hilton Hotel, and it's easy to see why Branson's backers say it has turned the corner in attracting the boomers needed to fill the vacancies left by fading World War II-era veterans and their spouses.

While the housing industry in other parts of the United States is ailing, Branson's market is holding its own during the national slowdown, said C. Craig Richards, president of Ozark Mountain Bank.

"There's a lot of interest from people outside the area who see real estate in Branson as a good buy," Richards said. "The cost of construction is lower, as is the cost of land. People from California or Florida can sell their home there and buy three or four times the home for the money in Branson.

"We've got a good school system, good health service. That attracts people who are retirees but also families who want to get away from the big city. There's a strong feeling of family values in the area, probably tied to strong Christian beliefs."

The only downside, for Richards, is increased competition. "We've had five new banks in the last 10 years," he said. "They see the same numbers we do as far as commercial development and new home sales. In 1998, there were two homes that sold for over $350,000. Last year, there were more than 30."

And don't forget the new full-size airport scheduled to open next spring, said Dan Lennon, vice president of the Chamber of Commerce.

"As soon as you get outside an eight-hour drive to Branson, some people perceive it's difficult to give up a day to get here," Lennon said. "With the new airport, it starts to be more practical for people to fly in. With those further out markets, Branson becomes a weekend getaway."

Branson's annual visitation grew 5.2 percent to 8.39 million last year, Lennon said. Over the past two years, total growth was 14 percent while the rest of the national tourism market was seeing 2 percent annual increases. How those numbers will shake out this year, in the face of high fuel prices and a sluggish economy, was an unknown, he added.

Lennon emphasized that the culture that Branson was known for is alive and well. You can still find cornpone humor at the Presleys and Baldknobbers shows, motels still offer "2 for $32.95" in the off-season, go-kart tracks and water slides still line Highway 76, and traffic this summer will crawl as the commercial strip fills with gawkers.

But now you can shop for fancy undies at the Victoria's Secret at Branson Landing, or try out a new boat at the Bass Pro Shop dock on Lake Taneycomo.

"The thing that brought the people in the '60s and '70s — the Ozark Mountain experience — that still happens, we've just added these higher amenities," he said. "Fifteen years ago, you'd have the Lawrence Welks. With the boomers, you have Dick Clark, the Acrobats of China, the Liverpool Legends."

Branson's best known side, the live music shows, also has a new player this season.

The $65 million Sight & Sound Theatre will open May 24 with a stage area of 26,550 square feet, the equivalent of more that five basketball courts. The stage, largest in North America, is 300 feet long and wraps around three sides of the 2,085 seats, giving the audience the feeling of being inside an ark, with all the animals, for a production of "Noah — The Musical."

Sight & Sound Theatres is the nation's largest professional Christian theater company. Its headquarters theater in Lancaster County, Pa., is one of the most-attended live theaters on the East Coast with an annual audience of more than 800,000. Founded in 1976 by Glenn and Shirley Eshelman, the company produces epic biblical stories. About 100 live animals, 200 "animatronic" animals and 45 human actors will be used in Branson to tell the story of the journey of Noah and his family.

"It's sometimes called Christian Broadway in Pennsylvania," said Joan Chowning, who ushered me into the theater where trainers were working with the live animals. "The employees all profess to be Christians. But we welcome the unchurched, as well as the churched, at our theaters."

Admission for both is $49 an adult, $25 for a teen and $15 for children.

As Allen, the golf pro, mentioned, Silver Dollar City has been around since the beginning. But it also continues to evolve, from a re-created Ozark mining town built above Marvel Cave and featuring arts and crafts, to a quality theme park in a landscaped setting with rides and a full schedule of live entertainment.

The biggest new attraction this season is at Silver Dollar City's sister park, Celebration City, where Roaring Falls, a $2 million water adventure, makes its debut this spring.

General manager John Fitzgibbons gave a blow-by-blow description of the new ride: "Twenty passengers go up five stories in a boat, which falls in a 55-degree drop, ending with a splash that gets everybody in the boat, and everybody on the land nearby, wet. It has an Amazon theme, with crocodiles and hippos and fossilized rocks. There'll be fog and a mister going, and Amazon noises."

Celebration City, which is entering its sixth season, now has about 30 rides and attractions, including three roller coasters and a Ferris wheel. The park closes each evening with "Ignite the Night," which uses three projectors to display images on a water curtain, along with lasers and fireworks and music.

"We have a 50-foot Elvis walking on water and singing," Fitzgibbons said. "There's a dance party on the Great Lawn. We get kids, parents and grandparents up and dancing."

Silver Dollar City, which is a short ride away from Celebration City, also has a full schedule of events with Bluegrass & BBQ, through June 1; National Kids Fest, June 7-Aug. 10; Southern Gospel Picnic, Aug. 28-Sept. 7; National Harvest Festival, Sept. 11-Oct. 25; and An Old Time Christmas, Nov. 1-Dec. 30.

Lisa Rau, spokeswoman for Silver Dollar City, said the park uses continuing feedback from customers to update attractions and facilities.

"The bottom line is: We are not the boss, the guests are the boss and mostly Mom," Rau said. "Roaring Falls is exactly what they wanted. A big, get wet, whole family, thrill ride."

TOM UHLENBROCK/St. Louis Post-Dispatch
The lobby at the Hilton Branson Convention Center Hotel adds an upscale touch to the Ozarks in Branson.

Courtesy Silver Dollar City Attractions
A new ride debuted with a big splash when the amusement park Celebration City opened Roaring Falls in Branson, Mo. The water adventure ride features a 5-story, 55-degree angle drop for an enormous splash finale.

Slow down (or not) in Silver Dollar City

Families can escape their hectic world of iPods, fast-food and Nintendo Wii by traveling back in time at Silver Dollar City, an 1880s-style theme park.

The Branson, Mo., attraction is open until the season ends Dec. 30. Numerous activities entertain visitors.

Over 100 craftsmen demonstrate old-time skills, such as soap- and candle-making, silversmithing and baking.

Rides include a steam train and "The Giant Swing," which launches riders through barn doors.

Special events include Bluegrass and BBQ through June 1 and National Kids Fest June 7 through Aug. 10.

The Showboat Branson Belle is a vintage-style paddle-wheeler complete with a three-course dinner, a show and a cruise on Table Rock Lake.

Celebration City amusement park hosts the Midwest's largest nightly show, with fireworks, lasers and music. It also includes the $2 million water adventure ride "Roaring Falls" and a Frisbee-catching dog show.

The White Water waterpark has more than 12 rides and attractions with "Kalani Towers," a six-slide thrill ride, and a 500,000- gallon wave pool.

The Wilderness at Silver Dollar City offers cabin rentals and camp sites. The cabins provide modern conveniences with vintage charm. Complimentary shuttle service is provided to Silver Dollar City.

Special offers and packages are available. To learn more, call (800) 831-4386 or visit www.silverdollarcity.com.

— Miranda Hobelman

Khiva, western Uzbekistan, May 2006

While tracing a portion of the Silk Route through Central Asia, we visited Khiva, an ancient walled town in western Uzbekistan dating to the 10th century. Here we encountered Meisha, whose personality appears to be reflected in her eyes. This day finds her sitting patiently waiting to become the centerpiece of another admiring tourist's photograph. However, in year's past, the ancestors of this stately "ship of the desert" would have been making the arduous journey between China and Europe carrying goods that fueled east-west commerce. All things considered, it appears that Meisha is enjoying retirement.

— Sharon and Keith Sawyers, Lincoln

WHERE WE TRAVEL ■
CENTRAL ASIA

Amusement parks gear up for family fun this summer

Summer is quickly approaching, and it's time to start planning family vacations.

Amusement parks, such as Dollywood, Dollywood's Splash Country and Cedar Point, draw families from near and far.

The Dolly Parton-inspired parks are in Pigeon Forge, Tenn., and offer a Smoky Mountain setting on 130 acres with rides, Southern cooking, themed shopping, festivals and live entertainment.

Dollywood, known for its Mystery Mine steel coaster and Thunderhead ride, begins daily hours May 27 through July. The park is periodically closed throughout the rest of the season ending Jan. 3, 2009.

Dollywood's Splash Country's season begins at the end of May and ends Sept. 14.

Two new rides will be launched this season. The $5 million River Battle ride in Dollywood features an eight-passenger raft with soaker guns. Passengers can take aim at both targets and each other in a 500-foot channel.

The SwiftWater Run ride in Dollywood's Splash Country offers double- or single-passenger tubes that take riders through a tunnel and multiple twists and turns, eventually ending with a downward chute plunging into a landing pool.

For those seeking an alternative to rides, Dollywood boasts some of the South's largest festivals. KidsFest will run June 13 through Aug. 3. It features Dolly's Imagination Playhouse, the Kratt Brothers, stars of a PBS children's television series, headlining "Creature Adventures featuring the Kratt Brothers" and Veggie-Tales LIVE!

Dollywood hosts BBQ and Bluegrass from Sept. 5 to 28 with over 500 concerts with artists such as Ricky Skaggs and the Del McCoury Band.

No on-site accommodations or camp sites are available but lodging is plentiful nearby. For information contact the Pigeon Forge Department of Tourism at (800) 251-9100 or visit www.mypigeonforge.com.

To learn more call (800) 365-5996 or visit www.dollywood.com.

The Great Lakes region offers Cedar Point Amusement Park in Sandusky, Ohio. The park has the world's largest collection of roller coasters and Soak City, an outdoor water park.

Cedar Point is open daily May 10 through Sept. 1 and open Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays from Sept. 5 until the season ends Nov. 2. This season it debuts Planet Snoopy, an attraction geared toward little ones that includes "Peanuts" characters, a balloon ride and a miniature train.

Soak City is open daily from May 24 to Sept. 1. The water park includes a wave pool, family raft ride and 15 water slides.

Cedar Point also has live shows, including "Snoopy's Big Bow-Wow on Ice" and an extreme biking show.

The Cedar Point Resorts offers on-site accommodations. Resort guests may purchase discounted tickets and are admitted into the park an hour early.

To learn more call (419) 627-2350 or visit www.cedarpoint.com.

— Miranda Hobelman

TOM UHLENBROCK/St. Louis Post-Dispatch file photo
Visitors to Dollywood Theme Park ride the Thunderhead, a wooden roller coaster, in 2006 in Pigeon Forge, Tenn.

See 'Gee's Bend' quilt show through July 6 in Denver

CoCo Key water resort to open in Kansas City

Missouri's largest indoor water resort is scheduled to open in Kansas City at the end of May.

The CoCo Key Water Resort, which spans over 55,000 square feet, is at the Sheraton Kansas City Sports Complex Hotel, adjacent to Kauffman Stadium. The resort offers a close-to-home getaway for time-pressed families.

The Key West-themed park stays precisely at 84 degrees and features body and raft water-slides, water cannons and spray nozzles, a "dip-in" theater for movie watching, giant whirlpools and the Parrot's Perch Play Island with interactive games.

After playing at the water park, guests can visit the Wet Rooster Bar for tropical drinks or dry off and visit the Key West Arcade, an all-new game room. Available to greet visitors is CoCo, a real-life parrot ambassador.

Several packages with hotel stays, CoCo Key passes and Kansas City Royals tickets are available. The resort also allows visitors to purchase admission for the day, without overnight stays at the hotel.

To learn more, call (877) 425-2746 or visit www.cocokeywaterresort.com. Booking information is available at www.sheraton.com/kcsports-complex.

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