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Branson keeps polishing its acts

An airport and a \$27 million golf course are just a few additions.

BY TOM UHLENBROCK
ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

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 tiptop. 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 to that 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. 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, is an unknown, he added.

Lennon emphasized that the culture that Branson was known for is alive and well. You can still find corn-pone humor at the Presleys and Baldknobbers shows, motels still offer "2 for \$32.95" in the offseason, 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.

Sight & Sound Theatres, the nation's largest professional Christian theater company, opened its \$65 million venue May 24. The stage, the 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.

Admission 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, 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 from Celebration City, also has a full schedule of events with National Kids Fest through 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."



SOAK UP THE FUN: The water ride Roaring Falls offers a splash from five stories up in Branson's Celebration City theme park. Silver Dollar City Attractions photo



IF YOU GO: BRANSON, MO.

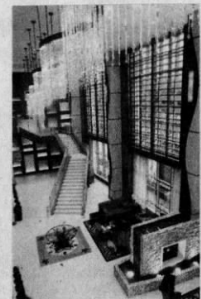
Branson Landing: 866-417-9300 and bransonlanding.com

Sight & Sound Theatre: 1001 Shepherd of the Hills Expressway; 800-377-1277 and sight-sound.com

Silver Dollar City: Adult admission is \$51.59, children 4-11, \$40.84. Season passes available. Schedules and tickets, 800-831-4386 or silverdollarcity.com. Celebration City's site is at celebrationcity.com.

Payne Stewart Golf Club: paynestewartgolfclub.com

Information: 800-272-6766, or explorebranson.com



SUITE: The lobby at the Hilton Branson Convention Center hotel has an upscale touch. St. Louis Post-Dispatch photo

TWO BY TWO, PLEASE: Noah — The Musical boasts a 300-foot-long stage that gives the audience the feeling they are inside an ark. AP photo

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