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TRAVEL



opens for tours.
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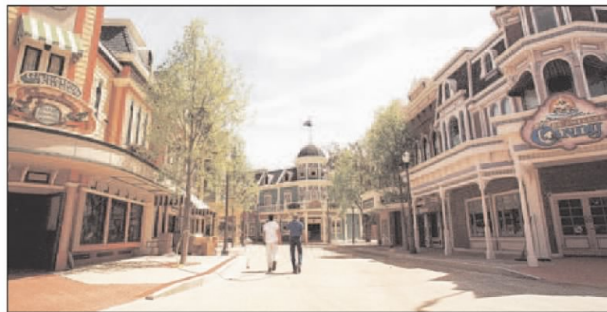


The Ozark WildCat Wooden Roller Coaster is one of the attractions designed to draw younger families to Branson.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF SILVER DOLLAR CITY

BRANSON beckons to boomers

Entertainment
town has a
new venue:
Celebration
City



Victorian architecture lines 'downtown' Celebration City.

By TOM UHLENBROCK
ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

BRANSON, Mo.

The hottest show in Branson this summer isn't in a theater, it's on the side of a mountain. A man-made mountain at that.

Silver Dollar City's new \$40 million theme park, Celebration City, is calling itself "a night place for families," and the night-capper will be an outdoor show preceding the park's closing each night at 11.

The production will include lasers, fireworks, pyrotechnics, water cannons, confetti cannons and images projected on a water screen and a 160-foot molded concrete mountain with a reflecting pool in front. The crowds will watch it all from a grassy terrace.

"We wanted to do something a little different," said Brad Schroeder, entertainment director for Silver Dollar City. "When you go in, it will be dark, with lighted paths and theatrical lighting on the mountain."

The still and moving images projected on the water and mountain will include people and events from the last half-century — Elvis and James Dean will be there, and the Surfin' Safaris will sing their sole hit, "Wipeout," as a surfer rides a pipeline and water cannons splash a little on the audience.

"In the '60s, we talk about the space race," Schroeder said. "We have a Saturn V rocket starting to lift off; smoke, red lights and the audio woofers kick in. As the rocket clears the water screen, fireworks shoot off behind the rock wall."

Add 30 rides, including one wooden and two steel roller coasters, a boardwalk with vintage games and a theater for live performances, and Celebration City becomes the biggest thing to open in Branson since Andy Williams arrived in town more than a decade ago.

Celebration City is aimed squarely at what Schroeder called "the next wave" — baby boomers and their

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families. All of Branson hopes the boomer market will help replace the dwindling numbers of the World War II generation, which has been a major part of the 7 million or so visitors who show up each year.

During a walk-through, Celebration City looked as if it was designed specifically for the boomers, with lots of Art Deco buildings, a penny arcade and old-time rides such as the "Tilt-a-Whirl" and bumper cars. The Diamonds' "Little Darlin'" was one of the golden oldies that played throughout the park.

In the Bijou building, a cherry red '56 T-Bird and a white-over-turquoise '55 Chevy sat amid merchandise including a pink poodle skirt for \$39.99, a Betty Boop lunch box for \$7.99 and a Barney Fife T-shirt that says "Nip it" for \$15.99.

Attracting boomers is becoming increasingly important as age and the economy cause a decline in the number of tour buses bearing silver-haired visitors. The buses are still coming, but fewer are stacked outside the theaters, and many arrive half-empty.

That drop-off started in the season preceding the Sept. 11 terrorist attack. Tourism picked up in 2002 in the aftermath of the tragedy, largely because travelers were seeking closer-to-home destinations that didn't require flying, and Branson's central location fit the bill.

Branson's unabashed themes of motherhood, apple pie and Old Glory were perfect for the mood of the country.

But this spring started slowly — motels all along the Branson strip advertised "two for \$24.95" — and folks at the Chamber of Commerce and Convention and Visitors Bureau are watching this summer with bated breath.

Ross Summers, executive vice president of the visitors bureau, said some of the tour bus operators are reporting cancellations approaching 40 percent. He blamed much of the decline on the hard times for folks on fixed incomes.

"People who travel a lot depend on dividend and interest income," he said. "Literally, people who



A 500-gallon bucket douses guests at Splash Country Indoors.

ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH PHOTO BY TOM UHLENBROCK

were making 5.5 percent two years ago are making 0.05 percent or negative."

On the up side, Branson's dubious billing as having the oldest clientele of any destination city in America is falling some. "For the first time in 10 years, we saw the average age went down in 2002 from 55 to 53, and that's significant," Summers said. "When you get that kind of a drop, that's good news for us."

Branson is changing, slowly but

surely, to attract the boomers. Buffet lines and fried food still reign, but enough chains have moved in that there's more variety in the restaurants. In this bastion of the Bible Belt, a stir was caused a couple of years ago when the town's video ad campaign included a couple clinking wine glasses. Today, Stone Hill Winery is one of the tourist stops, and Williams' Moon River Theatre, along with the Grand Palace, are the first to offer wine and beer at

intermission.

"We had the Moody Blues for two concerts, and it went extremely well," Summers said. "And the week before, Styx and REO Speedwagon sold out for two nights. Pam Tillis will be here this year. It does point out that younger artists are willing to come to town."

Some entrepreneurs in town are ahead of the youth movement. Glenn Robinson started out selling Mexican pottery on the old Wal-Mart lot on Branson's main drag. Today, he owns the lot and has built Grand Country Square, which includes a music hall, indoor miniature golf, 30,000 square feet of retail space, a couple of restaurants and a 319-room inn.

"We also have the world's largest fiddle and world's largest banjo," Robinson said.

Robinson noticed a disturbing trend a few years ago. "All of our wonderful little old ladies and men that had been jumping off the buses in front of the restaurant, they were dying on me," he said.

He saw the future, and it said "families, absolutely."

A friend told Robinson about

BEING THERE

SILVER DOLLAR CITY: It began as a re-creation of a mining town that once stood at the mouth of Marvel Cave, which lies under the park. Today, it is an 1880s-style family entertainment theme park with rides and craftsmen in a landscaped Ozark setting. The park has four seasonal festivals: World-Fest in the spring, National Kids' Festival in the summer, Festival of American Music and Craftsmanship in the fall and Old Time Christmas in the winter.

Herschend Family Entertainment Corp. owns Silver Dollar City, White Water, Showboat Branson Belle and Celebration City. Discount prices are available on tickets that cover all four attractions, or tickets can be purchased individually. (800) 831-4386, www.silverdollarcity.com.

ROY AND DALE: Roy Rogers-Dale Evans Museum and Happy Trails Theater, 3950 Green Mountain Drive, just off Highway 76. Daily, 9 a.m.-6 p.m. Combo museum-theater ticket discounts are available. (417) 339-1900, www.royrogers.com.

RIDE THE DUCKS: The charge for riding the Ducks is \$15.95, \$7.95 ages 4-12. (417) 334-3825, www.ridetheducks.com.

WORLD'S LARGEST TOY MUSEUM: The museum is at 3609 West Highway 76. \$8.95, \$6.95 children. Monday-Saturday, 9 a.m.-9 p.m. (417) 332-1499, www.worldslargesttoymuseum.com.

ACCOMMODATIONS: With 22,000 rooms to rent, you should be able to find room at the inn at a reasonable price. Starting at the top, the two finest places to stay are Chateau at the Lake and Big Cedar Lodge. Nearly every major chain has opened on or near the strip. The Clarion Hotel is conveniently situated in the middle of the action next to Grand Palace and Moon River Theatre. Prices for the summer at the Clarion run \$69-\$89. The Branson Area Lodging Association has a site where reservations can be made at www.bransonarealodging.com.

INFORMATION: (800) 214-3661, www.explorebranson.com.



the Wisconsin Dells and the success it had with water parks. He flew there, came back and built a small outdoor water park near his inn. Two years ago, he made a second trip to Wisconsin and returned with more ambitious plans.

He built Splash Country Indoors, a \$5 million indoor water park with a 250-foot lazy river, two spa pools, a basketball-shooting pool, a toddler area and a three-level tree house with two tube slides, a tipping bucket and all sorts of gizmos that shoot and spray water.

Guests at the inn get free admission to the park with their \$69 to \$79 lodging fee. Tourists not staying at the inn pay \$15.

Go-cart tracks have been a mainstay of the Branson strip, but Track Family Fun Parks took the attraction to a new level when it opened the \$1 million Lumber Jack, a wooden three-level track, in 2001.

The ride was such a hit that the company came back the next year and spent \$1.5 million on another wooden track, the Wild Woody.

"They have all the aspects of a wooden roller coaster — twists and turns, changes in elevation," company president Larry Schmitt said. "You're 40 feet in the air — that's the biggest thrill. We call them our go-cart coasters."

Moments after meeting Tom Beck, you put together his soft speaking voice with the personality he sounds like. "Mr. Rogers," Beck said. "I've heard that a lot lately."

Which is perfect for Beck's job as owner and curator of the World's Largest Toy Museum, a recent addition to the scene.

Beck, 54, and his wife, Wendy, have been collecting much of their lives and have put it all on display in a two-level building on Country Music Boulevard. He'll gladly walk you through the thousands of items on display.

"This is a Hopalong Cassidy chair, the kind you'd send in your box tops and a few dollars for," he said. "It's very rare. I understand they don't even have one in the Hopalong Cassidy Museum [near Wichita, Kan.]. This is a Three Stooges scooter. The rear wheel is off center, so you go up and down like you're riding a horse."

"Upstairs is motorcycles, antique fishing, 1800s carriages, cars, trucks and construction, ships, 'Star Wars' and GI Joes. The back is cap guns, BB guns, pedal cars, bicycles and trains. You come out through dolls, Disney, ventriloquist dummies, Barbies and Shirley Temples."

"Every one of these toys belonged to someone — we didn't get them out of the box or a store. They all have memories attached to them."

Beck has been known to reduce some customers to tears. They spot their childhood doll or toy and want to buy it. "We've never sold an old toy," he said. "We sell lots of reproductions in our gift shop."

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BOOMERS

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There's another Mr. Rogers at Branson's newest museum: the Roy Rogers-Dale Evans Museum & Happy Trails Theater opened Memorial Day weekend.

"Dad was one of those guys from the old school — he never threw anything away," said Roy "Dusty" Rogers Jr., who performs in the theater. "We'll have up to 40,000 items in the museum. We cover their entire careers, all of Dad's 88 movies."

Nellybelle, the Jeep driven by sidekick Pat Brady, is on display, but the stars of the show are the mounts of Trigger and Buttermilk, the couple's long-time horses. Buttermilk Jr. and Bullet, the German shepherd dog, also are mounted and displayed nearby.

"Dad first met Trigger in 1938 when Dad was 26 and Trigger was 4," Rogers Jr. said. "He was on his back for 29 years. Dad used to say, 'When I die, just skin me out and put me on Trigger and I'll be happy.' But there's laws against that."