

Branson – Delightfully Unexpected

By Graceann Macleod



I thought I knew what to expect from Branson, Missouri. It's where folks like Andy Williams, Mel Tillis and Yakov Smirnoff perform for family-friendly crowds. It's known as the "Live Music Capital of the World." With all due respect to the many performers who call Branson home, as someone who has never been a big fan of shows, I didn't think there would be much in this corner of the state to entice me. Then I found out that a Titanic Museum had opened there, and suddenly, Branson was a prime destination for me.

Branson, by that name, has existed since 1882, and has drawn tourists since the turn of the last century, due to the lure of a nearby cave and the publication of a book by Harold Bell Wright, "The Shepherd of the Hills," which was a history of that area of Ozark country. Tourism continued steadily and comfortably throughout the 20th century, but really took off in the mid-1980s, and has continued unabated, thanks to the numerous stars who have become full-time staples on the entertainment circuit there. Even now, during what are financially difficult times by any measure, folks are finding the time and funds to visit Branson.

Having gotten to the area late the previous evening, we stayed just outside of town at a nice, inexpensive hotel in the town of Ozark, Missouri. This was the first of several sweet surprises – this hotel, despite being in the heart of a tourist-heavy area, was the least expensive we encountered in our two-week travels. Secondly, the owner was from our home town and quickly engaged my husband in lengthy discussion of how things have changed since he made his home in Southwestern Missouri. Landing in Ozark was a happy accident, given that every owner of every antique shop we stopped at on our way through the heartland advised "if you want some really great antiques, you need to go to Ozark." These folks knew of whence they spoke. We ran out of time before we ran out of shops to visit. Unfortunately, given that we knew we'd have to find a way to get these things back home, we had to leave a lot of beautiful items behind, but that was probably better for our finances.

The Titanic Museum



I've always been interested in the Titanic. I devoured Walter Lord's "A Night to Remember" among many other books, and have loved all the films. Several years ago, when a smaller collection of Titanic artifacts was traveling throughout the US, I visited Minneapolis/St. Paul and then Chicago to see it. I find the trivia fascinating – the fact that more first-class male passengers survived than did third-class children is appalling, but completely true to the class system of the era and the vagaries of fate. When I read that the largest collection of artifacts in the World would be centered in a permanent museum in Branson, Missouri, I immediately began pleading my case to my long-suffering husband. It was an easier "sell" than I expected, given that he had always been a bit intrigued by Branson itself, and that the location was somewhat within striking distance of an event we would be attending later in the week.

When we drove through town, clutching our map of the main street and attractions, we called out names as passed them both in real life and on the map. "There's the Osmond Theater;" "there's the big hotel." We were quite afraid that we'd miss the Titanic Museum, but we needn't have worried – it's a bit difficult to drive past an enormous ship built to be one-half the size of the real Titanic without it catching your eye.

When you arrive, you are welcomed as if you are a passenger traveling from England to New York. Each guest is issued a boarding pass assigning them the name of a passenger who traveled on that fateful journey, and at the end of the tour, you find out whether you survived or not. As I'm here to tell the story, I was one of the lucky ones.

Unfortunately, photography is not allowed inside the Museum, so I wasn't able to take snapshots of any of the beautiful items we saw. There are more than 400 artifacts from the ship, including

the life vest worn by Mrs. John Jacob Astor, luggage, jewelry and many other items. There is an audio tour that goes along with these pieces, and you are able to hear survivors and historians discuss their significance as you look at them.



The Museum is superbly planned and executed. Everything from the staterooms for all classes, to the bridge, to the lifeboats are faithfully recreated with an eye to the smallest of details. In one area, you are asked to lift a shovel full of coal and put it into the boiler so that you can see how arduous it was for the stokers. Later on, you're asked to walk up an incline in order to find out for yourself just how steeply the ship rose before she broke in half and sank in the Atlantic. The exhibit that seemed the most evocative for my husband was one where he placed his hand in water which was the temperature that the Atlantic was on the night

of April 14-15, 1912, and told to see how long he could stand it. He managed about 15 seconds before giving up, and talked about it later as “excruciating.”

At one point, we were lucky enough to see a couple renew their wedding vows at the top of the Grand Staircase. It was romantic, witty and beautiful, and of course I immediately tugged at my husband's sleeve with a hopeful look in my eye, but he thought our vows were still fairly new and didn't yet need reinforcement. I was satisfied with recreating Jack and Rose's kiss from the 1997 film.

A Reluctant Farewell

After all that international travel, we were starved, and discovered the final of our fantastic surprises in Branson – the food! Something missing from my diet for a long time was crab rangoon. Between it's spotty availability where I live and the fact that I'm slimming, I hadn't treated myself to any in a long while. As it happened, we spotted a buffet on our way to the Museum, and decided that my body's “rangoon deficiency” was due to end. When we walked into this place, we were shocked at the sheer volume and variety on offer. There were over 100 items on the buffet, about 90 of which I would have been happy to have on my plate. I'm amazed I didn't need to be rolled out of there afterward.

By this time, we really needed to hit the road in order to get to our next stop, but we had a lot of notes for the other things we'd like to see on the next of what we expect to be several visits. We'd still like to do the River



Cruise and the Scenic Railway, and we'll have to bring an extra, empty suitcase for hauling home all those antiques from Ozark. I've never been so thrilled to be mistaken about a vacation destination.

Suggested Browsing:

- Information About Branson: <http://www.branson.com/>
- Information about the Titanic Museum: <http://www.titanicbranson.com/index.php>
- Ozark-Area Antiquing: <http://antiques.ozarkmerchants.com/>