



# Branson's Ozark Mountain Christmas

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY MARY ANN DESANTIS. ADDITIONAL PHOTOS COURTESY OF BRANSON CONVENTION AND VISITORS BUREAU.

"Welcome to Branson; we hope you enjoy your stay," the friendly airline ground crew repeated to every passenger who stepped off the plane just outside the airport's lodge-like terminal. The cool mountain air certainly seemed to hasten the holiday spirit in this southern Missouri town.

Christmas celebrations extend for two months in Branson from November 1<sup>st</sup> until January 1<sup>st</sup>, but the storybook setting is permanent. Deer tracks in cement led me to baggage claim; a log cabin in a corner of the terminal was really a general store filled with colorful candies I remembered from my childhood; and the lyrics from *Over the River and Through the Woods* echoed in my head as I drove down from the mountaintop airport through a picture-perfect forest.

The real magic began when I crossed the White River, which really isn't a river any longer since it was dammed at both ends to create Table Rock Lake on the west and Lake Taneycomo to the east. Disney World has nothing on Branson, which has created a Christmas fantasyland like none I have ever seen. Millions of Christmas lights created a glistening winter wonderland in this city, which has been included on so many "best-places-to-spend-the-holidays" lists that it would take a page to name them all.

Year-round entertainment, though, put Branson on the map. A 1991 *60 Minutes* show aired about the community's few dozen theaters. Before long, Andy Williams opened his Moon River Theater, and others

followed including Tony Orlando, the Osmond Brothers, and Charley Pride. Today, more than fifty theaters offer family-friendly live shows from morning to evening at ticket prices far less than you'll find in Las Vegas or New York.

In the past, when my parents talked about Branson, I mistakenly thought the shows would be hokey. Not so. The productions I saw were slick extravaganzas with talented performers who could go anywhere in the world and make a living. My recommendations for can't-miss shows include multitalented Shoji Tabuchi at his posh theater and spellbinding aerialist Janice Martin at the Showboat Branson Belle. The younger generation will find Branson isn't just for their parents. Lively shows like *The Legend of Kung Fu* and *12 Irish Tenors* target new audiences of all ages.

No holiday trip to Branson is complete without spending time at Silver Dollar City. An Old-Time Christmas festival transforms the 1880s-style theme park into a Christmas paradise with 1,000 decorated trees, parades, and millions of lights that are synchronized to holiday songs. Last year, I saw the park's Broadway-style production of *A Dickens' Christmas Carol*, which featured pyrotechnic special effects, elaborate sets, and an extremely talented cast. This year, Silver Dollar City has added a musical interpretation of *It's a Wonderful Life*, which is already getting rave reviews. And, of course, Santa Claus makes a spectacular appearance during the

nightly Christmas parades. Throw in Silver Dollar City's culinary arts classes, craftsmen demonstrations, and five roller coasters, and it's easy to spend more than a day inside the park.

Missing the Trail of Lights at the Shepherd of the Hills Homestead and Outdoor Theatre, however, would be a mistake. The Shepherd of the Hills marks the spot where Ozark tourism was born in 1907 when Harold Bell Wright's book about the area was published and became the first American novel to reach a million copies sold. The Travel Channel named the 2.5-mile trail as the most spectacular drive-through light display in America. It's also a great place to learn how this former logging community became the live entertainment capital of the world.

Finally, spend some time downtown where residents in cafés and shops prove that Branson's friendliness extends all year, not just during the holidays. Even with traffic jams comparable to those in larger metropolitan cities, Branson's residents manage to keep a sense of humor.

After a whirlwind four days of shows, amusement parks, cooking classes, and even a round of golf at the Payne Stewart Golf Course, I boarded my flight home. I was tired but brimming with Christmas spirit. As I looked out the plane's window, the ground crew was lined up and waving goodbye — a perfect ending to my storybook trip.



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