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### The newly renovated Opryland Resort can stand alone as a destination

By Richard Locker  
Contact  
May 27, 2007

NASHVILLE -- There's an old Nashville lament that the hundreds of thousands of conventioners who visit Opryland every year can spend days wandering around its three big plush atriums, cavernous convention centers and the Opry Mills shopping mall next door (which replaced the theme park a decade ago) and never venture out into the real Nashville.

They miss the historic Second Avenue, gritty Lower Broad honky-tonks, the songwriters' showcase Bluebird Cafe, the legend-filled Country Music Hall of Fame & Museum, bustling West End, urban-pioneering East Nashville and other neighborhoods.

Visitors from the Mid-South, who are most likely to drive in, can do it all.

But if there's no time to sample the greater city, Opryland is a destination of its own -- and it does have an authentic slice of Nashville, the Grand Ole Opry, only a short tree-shaded walk from the hotel.

A visit there earlier this month reaffirmed for me that the Opry is a Tennessee treasure, overlooked by many Tennesseans -- but it shouldn't be.

The Gaylord Opryland Resort is nearing the end of a three-year, \$115 million upgrade that includes renovation

of all 2,881 rooms and suites, the new spa and new restaurants. Room renovations are complete except in The Delta area. Otherwise, there is little or no disruption for guests.

Opryland launched its annual SummerFest this month -- a series of entertainment events through September that are worth checking out for a family road trip.

Or a girls' getaway. The luxurious new 27,000-square-foot Relache Spa, salon and fitness center is open, and a Celebrity Chef Series runs Saturdays, featuring cooking demonstrations by Alton Brown Aug. 18, Bobby Flay Sept. 29 and the hotel's own master chefs.

Minnie Pearl or Halle Berry?

Opryland Resort general manager Arthur Keith, who arrived three years ago from Las Vegas, is putting his mark on a hotel built in the 1970s to resemble an Old South plantation.

"We're reinventing and evolving the hotel. It's a very proud heritage that we embrace. Minnie Pearl was an icon for this place for a long, long time. She represented what this place stood for -- wholesome, down-to-earth, friendly, fun, entertaining," Keith said.

"Our vision for the future is to take this place from one where Minnie Pearl represented who we were to one where Halle Berry represents that sexy, sophisticated, contemporary excitement and energy that we want to infuse into this resort."

Keith said the makeover's driving reason is that the hotel's enormous convention business has moved from a regional to a national draw. "A significant percentage of our customers are coming from all over the country and we want to make sure our product offering appeals to everyone," he said.



At the Cascades Seafood Restaurant and sushi bar, diners can watch and listen to a SummerFest act called HydroponiX.

Not that you're likely to see Catwoman entertaining there.

But you might envision her at the new nightlife and entertainment area planned for what was once the main entrance area of the hotel, known as Magnolia. The popular Rachel's Buffet Restaurant, still open all summer, will be replaced with what Keith calls a "sleek, hot, high-energy" nightclub called Pulse.

That work won't begin until this fall and won't be completed until 2008.

#### Rooms and restaurants

A \$74 million room renovation project is complete in all but The Delta area, the newest of the three massive atriums. Room decor has moved from floral prints and striped wallpaper -- "southern traditional," Keith said -- to more contemporary styles.

Rooms are comfortable, with a desk, high-speed internet access, cordless phones and TV armoire. There are 165 suites and 741 rooms with balconies overlooking the hotel's three indoor-garden atriums covering nine acres. (Other rooms face outward, onto parking lots or the rest of the hotel.)

There's also buzz about three new restaurants to open this fall -- a \$30 million transformation overseen by Wolfgang Ebenbichler, vice president of food and beverage.

The hotel is upgrading its convention and other guest dining services, with new chefs under the direction of Executive Chef Michael Swann.

"Every diner at every level financially, as well as taste buds or time available, has a choice now -- whatever they're looking for," said Ebenbichler.

The new restaurants likely won't be open in time for SummerFest, but should be in time for Opryland's holiday season.

They are Water's Edge Marketplace ("reinvents the buffet concept" with various chefs' stations preparing different global dishes daily); Stax (family-oriented build-your-own hamburger place) and Paisano's (casual, family "quick eats" place with Tuscan- and New York-style pizza, pasta and salads).

The hotel's existing restaurants will serve guests this summer, including:

Cascades Seafood Restaurant and sushi bar, casual "outdoors" in the Cascades atrium, where diners can watch and listen to a unique SummerFest act called HydroponiX.

Old Hickory, an upscale (and expensive) steakhouse where The Peabody's former Capriccio Grill chef Jeffrey Quasha now presides. This restaurant in The Delta atrium features nearly 100 varieties of "artisanal" cheeses from around the world and *maitre fromager* Richard Peterson can tell you about every one of them.

Ristorante Volare, an Italian "upscale casual" restaurant and wine bar in the Garden Conservatory atrium.

Rachel's Buffet Restaurant, comfortable and traditional, especially for breakfast.

Findley's Irish Pub, Rusty's Sports Bar & Grill and Jack Daniel's pub. Live music, drinks, sandwiches and bar food.

Sandwich, coffee, ice cream and snack shops are throughout.

#### Summerfest

Just wandering through the resort is entertaining. The three big atriums are lush with trees, greenery, waterfalls, fountains and meandering walkways. The Delta has a "river" you can ride flatboats around, for a fee.

In summer, the resort reaches out to families and other guests with special packages, one indoor and two outdoor pools, and SummerFest's special offerings.

The 2007 edition includes:

HydroponiX. New Age musicians disguised as plants and playing their instruments amid lily pads, trees and fountains. Free. Tuesday through Saturday evenings, in the Cascades.

Cooking Under Glass, the Celebrity Chef series featuring the hotel's own master chefs demonstrating their international recipes, along with the Food Network's Alton Brown Aug. 18 and Iron Chef Bobby Flay Sept. 29, in front of small audiences in The Delta. Saturdays. Admission: \$35-45.

Songwriters Under the Stars, live performances on Friday nights, in the Woodlands outdoor performance area. \$5 for seating, free on the lawn.

DiVine. Watch closely, children, and you'll see that tall green vine slowly straighten out and walk gracefully and acrobatically away. She's part vine, part actress, part stilts and quite enchanting. Free, Wednesdays through Sundays in The Delta.

Music City Hitmakers, July 20-22. Admission fee.

Fiddlin' Brewin' Bar-B-Q'N Cook-Off, a barbecue competition featuring Iron Chef Bobby Flay, Sept. 28-29. Admission fee.

Opry Plaza Parties, free Saturday night performances on the plaza in front of the Opry House. Saturdays through July 28.

Grand Ole Opry, shows Tuesday, Friday and Saturday nights. Admission fee.

Campfire Cafe Cookin' Camp, with TV's open-fire cooking hosts, Pamela Alford and Larry Wiseheart taping their shows. June 1-2, July 6-7, Sept. 21-22. Admission fee.

Tennessee Walking Horses, in front of the hotel June 23, July 28, Aug. 18, Oct. 13.

General Jackson Showboat, a 300-foot paddlewheel riverboat cruising the Cumberland between the hotel and downtown. Midday cruises offer a southern buffet and country music performances. Evenings include a three-course dinner and the Broadway-style musical "Sing!" Admission fee.

Gaylord Springs Golf Links. 18-hole. Fees.

Wildhorse Saloon Concert Series, Gaylord's downtown restaurant, bar and dance hall, on historic Second Avenue. Free admission for Opryland Resort guests presenting their room key. Admission fee for others.

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