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Cultural Nashville: The Athens of America's South

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The country music industry is to Nashville what the film industry is to Los Angeles: it's everywhere throughout the landscape and impossible to avoid. Though most visitors who make their way to Music City are hardly intent on avoiding the country music scene, it should be noted that Nashville's cultural offerings extend far beyond the Grand Ole Opry and Country Music Hall of Fame.

Country may be Nashville's iron core, but it's also a city jeweled with world-class art museums; the Schermerhorn Symphony Hall, which is reported to have the best acoustics in the nation; elegant shopping districts; Monet-like botanical gardens; and an impressive jazz and blues epicenter.

So culturally rich is Nashville, it's been dubbed "The Athens of the South," and not only because it boasts an exact replica of The Parthenon.

Many of Nashville's downtown buildings are built in Neo-Classical style, including The Frist Center for the Visual Arts and The Schermerhorn Symphony Center, spread elegantly across an entire city block. The 1,860-seat venue has been host to such luminaries as conductor Leonard Slatkin, Aaron Neville, Marvin Hamlisch, and The Nashville Symphony.

Then there's the Parthenon, a glorious homage to its namesake in Athens, minus the crumbling columns. It was built for Tennessee's 1897 Centennial Exposition, and, like the original, it took a decade to construct. It hovers like an apparition above the lake in Centennial Park and has several art galleries within. The star attraction is the golden, Godzilla-sized likeness of Athena. Weighing in at an astounding 12 tons, the goddess holds a six-foot statue of the God Nike in the palm of one hand; a massive circular shield in the other. Love the grandeur or loath the garishness, Athena is guaranteed to leave an impression.

The Frist Center for The Visual Arts is housed in a pre-war building that once served as the city's post office. Its two floors are filled with traveling exhibits from around the world. If you're fortunate enough to get the masterfully knowledgeable Mancil Ezell as a docent, you'll effortlessly hang on his every word...even if you're not a museum person.

The perimeters of Nashville also hold a bounty of southern enchantment and history. The Cheekwood Botanical Garden and Museum of Art is the former estate of the Christopher Cheek family, who pioneered Maxwell House Coffee. The 100 acres of formal gardens are inspired by the grand English houses of the 18th century and in the museum, the permanent collection includes American art, British decorative arts, and Andy Warhol paintings. There are also outdoor sculptures acquired for the Woodland Sculpture Trail. No need to be daunted by the triple-digit acreage. There's a shuttle bus available to transport visitors between buildings.

The Belle Meade Plantation is a 30-acre historic site whose centerpiece is the 1853 Greek Revival mansion, home to five generations of the Harding-Jackson family. Once encompassing nearly 6,000 acres, the former thoroughbred stud farm bred a lineage that includes Seabiscuit and Smarty Jones. Guided tours are given daily by interpreters in period costume.

Nashville may be full of compelling options beyond Country Music, but don't overlook it. It's an experience to be embraced, because you'll never find anything like the energy of the live music scene in Nashville, whether you catch Hank Williams Jr. at the Opry, or listen to an up-and-coming star perform a self-penned song at one of the downtown clubs.

There's also the cuisine. Far from being stuck in a time warp of classically heavy southern cooking, many of Nashville's restaurants are eclectic, and endlessly interesting. There's also the Nashville Farmers Market that meets weekly year-round and has a cornucopia of fruits and vegetables, locally produced food, and spices and hot sauces of every stripe.

For accommodations, the Gaylord Opryland Resort and Convention Center is a world unto itself. So huge, it practically functions as an independent city with 2,881 guest rooms, more than two-dozen restaurants and shops, a day spa, the Grand Ole Opry, and a fleet of convention halls under one roof. The resort just completed an expansion, which added 400,000 square feet of convention space and a new 400-room luxury tower. Guests can enjoy splendor in any weather with the resort's nine acres of indoor gardens, waterfalls, and a winding river with its own riverboat under three massive glass atriums.

The Athens of the South offers option upon option for visitors, so there's no need for limitation... why not choose a bouquet of them?

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