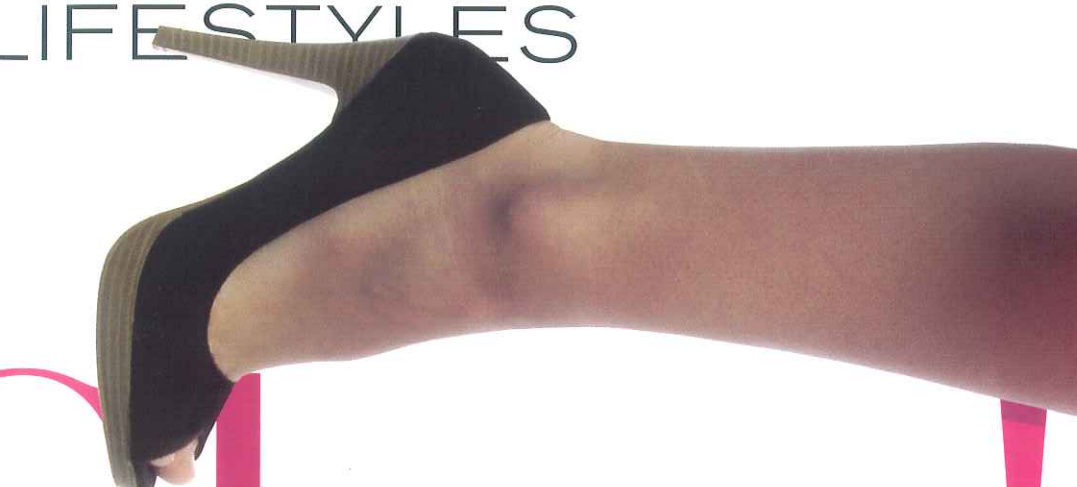


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36 Hours in Opryland
The Gaylord Opryland Hotel has everything you need
to be comfortable. But can you actually live there?



The hotel's original entrance, still used for certain groups today.

welcome to OPRYLAND

THE GAYLORD OPRYLAND RESORT AND CONVENTION CENTER HAS EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO BE COMFORTABLE. BUT CAN YOU ACTUALLY LIVE THERE? by BILL DITENHAFFER

SITTING ON THE BALCONY, THE FRENCH doors to my hotel room swung wide, I noticed that the waterfall 100 yards away, whose rush of white spume spent the day glistening like a thousand-faceted diamond in a perpetual twirl, was beginning to give in to the slowly encroaching shadows let loose by the setting sun.


At least I think the sun was setting. It was kind of hard to tell. Everything I was looking at was indoors. The entire tropical ecosystem at work outside my hotel room—the lush, humid forest of palms, ferns and equatorial flowers, the gurgling brooks and ponds filled with Koi and other fish and fed by tumbling waterfalls of various sizes, the rock formations that shape the falls, and for that matter, the two open-air restaurants that serve the mass of people in constant flux on the matrix of pathways winding throughout the area—all of it was a passageway away from the cold late-January wind and spare, drab scenery of mid-winter in Middle Tennessee. And yet here I was on my balcony in shirtsleeves taking in the view, the air a still, palpably oxygenated 72 degrees. It's always 72 degrees at Opryland.

I've always enjoyed travelling to other towns and cities more when I've spent my time experiencing the place pretty much as a resident would—popping in to neighborhood eateries, leisurely reading at the outdoor cafes, that kind of thing. A city's character is revealed in its everyday offerings, not its museums and tourist traps. That's why so many New Yorkers have never been to the Statue of Liberty, for instance, or Bostonians to Bunker

Hill. Those things are nice, but they're not where the people who truly love the city—its citizens—choose to spend their time.

But what happens if the place you're visiting is itself a tourist attraction? If a city, in terms of its visit-ability, is judged by how many points of entertainment or interest it's got—when you think of Memphis you think of Graceland and Beale Street, for example—can we say that its inverse is true as well, that the worth of a giant resort can be judged by the number of common conveniences it has, of soothing quotidian touches?

What's it like, in other words, to live in Opryland?



Although in some ways it's hard to imagine, Opryland is a relatively recent addition to the city's landscape. In 1977 the Opryland Hotel opened adjacent to the locally and regionally popular Opryland USA theme park and the Grand Ole Opry house on a vast piece of property east of downtown Nashville off of Briley Parkway. It had some 600 guest rooms, a 20,000-square-foot ballroom and 30,000 square feet of convention space. Owned by the National Life & Accident Insurance Company, as was the theme park and the Opry itself, within five years the hotel and the rest of National Life's entertainment properties were purchased by the then-Oklahoma City-based

Gaylord Broadcasting Company, known now as the Gaylord Entertainment Company. A year later, the hotel unveiled what it referred to as "Phase II," an addition to the property that tacked on 467 extra guest rooms, some 30,000 square feet of supplementary ballroom space and, most consequentially, the Garden Conservatory, the hotel's first atrium.

There are few places in the world, if any, that can match the indoor ecosystem that Opryland has created. Its three atria (The Cascades, the waterfall-themed atrium which my room overlooked, was added, along with more guest rooms for a total of 1,891 and more ballroom space, in 1988; and the \$175 million Delta atrium, with its New Orleans-inspired town surrounded by a quarter-mile-long artificial river and yet more guest rooms, bringing the number up to its current total of 2,881, was completed in 1996) combine for a total of nine acres of indoor gardens. Thousands of plant species are carefully cultivated by a team of 19 interior gardeners (there are 51 gardeners in all, most of whom manage the expansive outdoor landscaping). The Cascades atrium alone is covered by an acre of glass; the Delta atrium reaches a height of 150 feet. Birds sneak in and live here for days, if not weeks. They'd never leave if it weren't for the fact that they're eventually captured and released with the intent of keeping this massive artificial environment—which is complicated enough, as you might imagine—from making the leap to the next level of sustainable life.

Indeed, as a feat of engineering, the hotel is mind-boggling. Behind massive waterfalls are doors leading to stories-deep spaces that house filtration systems, pump systems, etc.—engine rooms the size you'd expect to see on a cruise ship. And underneath the property is an enormous network of tunnels, training facilities, a cafeteria for the hotel's immense, around-the-clock staff, and acres upon acres of work space, whether for the jaw-droppingly huge laundry facilities, the numberless prep kitchens or just out-of-sight storage (2 million Christmas lights need to go somewhere when the season's over).

And much of it is self-sufficient—Opryland generates a significant portion of its own energy (roughly 35 percent) and water, aware that being the largest non-gaming facility in the continental United States as well as the operator of a uniquely demanding indoor environment might not exactly endear them to their neighbors should the city's energy or water resources start to dry up. The resort has also fully embraced a range of good earthkeeping practices to ensure that, while its physical footprint is unavoidably gargantuan—nearly 4 million square feet under one roof—its carbon footprint is relatively small, and shrinking. In 2007, for instance, Opryland reduced its natural gas consumption by 36,830 therms (that's a good thing, for those of you who don't toss the term "therm" around regularly) and decreased its usage of city water by 1.2 million gallons. Its increased its cardboard recycling efforts from several dozen tons annually in 2004 to 275 tons in 2007, which, according to their calculations, equals 4,786 trees saved. Nothing at Opryland is done in a small way.

Which might be what can be so off-putting about the resort to so many locals. The average human mind isn't particularly prepared to deal with a single building or operation of this scale. It blends numbers we normally associate with full-fledged communities with, again, the preposterous notion that it's all happening under one roof. A cognitive dissonance invariably comes into play. Even as we're looking at it, we can't imagine it, so in our minds, we turn it into what, for all intents and purposes, it already is: a small-scale city. That's what I did, anyway. How else could I live there for 36 hours without getting swallowed up by its immensity?



The first thing you need to do to orient yourself in a foreign city is get lost in it. That's my theory, at any rate, and whether or not it was born of necessity, as my wife, who claims I have a terrible sense of direction, would have you believe, or an innate sense of adventure, I choose not to investigate. Courtesy of the hotel, I was given my room overlooking The Cascades atrium, but at my request, I was given very little in the way of a schedule. I'd already been provided with a glimpse of the legendary below-ground facilities—one former caterer describes the sprawling system of corridors as what it must be

like on the Death Star, though I think he was referring to its sheer scope as opposed to anything to do with the Empire and its quest to dominate the universe—as well as a quick tour of the interior gardens by 36-year Opryland veteran and Assistant Manager of Horticulture and Pest Control Max Dillard. (Dillard began his career at the Opryland theme park.) Otherwise, I was free to lose myself along the miles of pathways that wind through the massive resort.

Which somehow didn't happen. And believe me, I'm as surprised as you are—not because I think my wife is right about me (she's not), but because one of the unofficial things Opryland is famous for is the tendency of its guests to get lost. If you're not paying attention, the entrance to the Garden Conservatory atrium can look suspiciously like the entrance to the Delta atrium, that is if you're not already in the Delta atrium, the far side of which can be mistaken, at a glance, for the far end of The Cascades atrium, which stands out for its collection of waterfalls, features that can be found on a just slightly smaller scale in the Garden Conservatory atrium, which ... well, you get the picture. It's essentially a side effect of the hotel's successful design—the three atria are subtly different, but of a piece enough to confuse an unguarded guest. Or, for that matter, when you throw in the underground tunnel system, the occasional new employee or two.

Still, not getting lost in Opryland is not the same as knowing exactly where you're going. There were things I saw on my horticultural tour that, no matter how many laps I did around the place, I never saw again. Like, for instance, where did the arcade go? Not that I thought I'd actually have the time, but I assumed I'd at least be able to find my way back to it, if not by sight, by the electronic din pouring out of its door. On the other hand, I could hop in my car right now and make a beeline to Findley's Irish Pub with nary a wrong turn or false step. Priorities, I guess.

It helps, too, that the resort is starting to gear some of its features that may have a wider appeal beyond the bounds of the hotel itself to the locals. Relâche Spa & Fitness Center, for one, is already catering to a growing number of in-the-know Nashvillians who take advantage of the free valet parking, luxurious services and first-rate salon. The pools alone—one's indoor, one's outdoor—would be worth getting a local membership. And on the horizon is a revamped nightlife area already dubbed The District, which will feature, among other establishments, a state-of-the-art nightclub unique in Nashville, another reason to exploit that part of the resort's free valet parking for locals. Then there's the Old Hickory Steakhouse, yet one more destination worth the drive for locals. (More on that later.)

By the time I'd wandered through each of the atria several times, I was starting to get the hang of the place. In the industry—actually, in the world of business in general—Gaylord Opryland has built a reputation for excellent service that is becoming legendary, and it shows. At once unobtrusive and friendly, the employees



A tour of the Delta atrium's quarter-mile river.



Miles of pathways wind through the resort's three main spaces.



A view of the riverside town in the Delta atrium.

I came across were a part of my experience there that, in retrospect, I realize was indispensable to the illusion that I was not so much a guest as a resident. No hovering, no over-solicitousness. One reason for this kind of laid-back cheeriness might be that, for all they know, I was living there—or just getting there, or in the middle of a weeklong stay. With anywhere from 2,000-4,000 guests at any given time, there is no possible way to keep track of everyone, which means no churn-'em-in, churn-'em-out, get-ready-for-the-next-guest approach.

Then again, there's a good chance everyone I came across just happened to be happy. Opryland has a downright scary retention rate among its employees. Max Dillard, the 36-year veteran—and he's by no means alone in the multi-decade department—regards his work and his co-workers as a major, and positive, part of

his life. "This is a family experience for me," he says matter-of-factly. "This place, where we come and serve a purpose, it's ours." On the way up to my fourth-floor room at one point, I asked an employee who was going up with an empty luggage trolley how long he'd been at the hotel, and, not that I'm an irrevocable skeptic, but his response—"Eleven years, baby, and I love it!"—pretty much shocked me. I mean, we were alone on an elevator, with no one watching, and for that matter, he had no idea who I was or what I was doing. It was simply the way he felt about the place. (It came as no surprise, then, when I found out that Gaylord Opryland was one of a handful of companies featured in the recently released book *The Celebrity Experience: Insider Secrets to Delivering Red-Carpet Customer Service*, a distinction given them, unplanned, after the author's two-night stay.)

Then came dinner, where the good people at the Old Hickory Steakhouse tried politely to kill me with the aid of my own gluttony. Of five full-service restaurants on-site (there are five quick-serve restaurants, five lounges, and four specialty/dessert outlets, as well), this is the property's premier place to dine. The setting is hard to beat, both because the gorgeously appointed antebellum-style Southern mansion it's in overlooks a particularly pretty bend in the river just below, and because you don't often find a gorgeously appointed antebellum-style Southern mansion overlooking a river inside a building. But by now I was used to that type of thing.

What I hadn't anticipated was the real-time tour of the menu, from the cheese course through the desserts. I hope I don't sound ungrateful, because I'm not. It was fantastic—



One of the many, many, many waterfalls at the resort.



The Cascades atrium alone has 8,200 plants and a three-and-a-half-story waterfall.

easily as good as any of the high-end steakhouses in town, but with the added bonus of having a maitre fromager to help with what has to be one of the best cheese menus in ... well, I don't know what I'm qualified to say here, but I'm inclined to go no lower than the entire South. It is stupefying. I had two cheeses from France, one from England, one from Australia and one from Italy, all accompanied with a palate-saving quince paste. Then a medley of appetizers came, followed by a medley of salads, followed by a medley of entrees, followed, inevitably, by a medley of desserts. So you can see what happened to me. Even so, it was delicious.



Unfortunately, after 36 hours, I'm no closer to knowing what it would be like to live here. I'm not quite sure what I was thinking, really. Even if you could afford it, even if it were allowed, Opryland is not meant to be lived in—its perfectionism, its unrelenting positivity is alien to everyday existence. That's why the locals find it so jarring while everyone else—the conventioners, the tourists, the families—see it, and enjoy it, for what it is: a wonder. But they're immersed for two days, three days, a week, and that's how it works best. It's a difficult world to pop in and out of, to visit for a few hours and then go home.

But it shouldn't be. I mean, what more does Opryland have to do to impress us? Its public spaces are breathtaking, its gardens unique in the world, its design—from the reproduced riverside town complete with a Southern mansion to the massive glass roofs that call to mind 19th century Parisian train stations—flawless, and its services, and service, literally award-winning.

The problem is, when something has too broad an appeal, when something can cater to the needs of too large a number of us, a certain faction of us gets suspicious. This faction (for convenience's sake, I'll call them "me") tends to gravitate toward locally owned, one-of-a-kind-type places and to shun anything marketed to the lowest common denominator. National chains in general don't appeal to "me." Malls don't usually do it for "me." What does interest me (oops, "me") is diversity, variety and a commitment to the task at hand.

Which Opryland, I am now equipped to say, provides in spades. As it turns out, Opryland isn't like a mall at all—it is, in fact, closer to a city, with all of a city's disparate parts, some of which cater to tourists, some to kids, and still others to steakhouse connoisseurs. It's there for thousands upon thousands of out-of-towners, yes, but it's also there for us, in the form of Old Hickory Steakhouse, Relâche Spa and The District. If it helps, think of Nashville as a suburb of Opryland—every once in a while it's fun to head into the city for a change. It's just that this city happens to have no inhabitants. Or sky.