

# The Best of Nashville

Nashville may be the capital of Tennessee, but it's better known as Music City, the country music mecca. Yet it is so much more. Combining small-town warmth with an unexpected urban sophistication, Nashville is an increasingly popular tourist destination that boasts world-class museums and major-league sports teams; an eclectic dining and after-hours scene; and an eye-catching skyline ringed by a beautiful countryside of rolling hills, rivers and lakes, and wide-open green spaces.

Ultimately, though, Nashville is the heart and soul of country music, that uniquely American blend of humble gospel, blues, and mountain music that has evolved into a \$2-billion-a-year industry. At its epicenter, Nashville is still the city where unknown musicians can become overnight sensations, where the major record deals are cut and music-publishing fortunes are made, and where the *Grand Ole Opry* still takes center stage.

Symbolic of Nashville's vitality is downtown, an exciting place that is finally breathing new life. Once-tired and -abandoned warehouses now bustle in the entertainment area known as the District. This historic neighborhood teems with tourist-oriented nightclubs and restaurants, including B. B. King's Blues Club & Grill, the ubiquitous Hard Rock Cafe that's become a staple of most large cities, and the one-and-only Wildhorse Saloon (the most famous boot-scootin' dance hall in the land). Luckily, the District isn't yet all glitz and tour-bus nightclubs. Along lower Broadway, there are still half a dozen or more dive bars where the air reeks of stale beer and cigarettes and live music plays day and night. In these bars, aspiring country bands lay down their riffs and sing their hearts out in hopes of becoming tomorrow's superstars. With so many clubs, restaurants, shops, and historic landmarks, the District is one of the South's most vibrant nightlife areas.

Folks looking for tamer entertainment head out to the Music Valley area, home to the *Grand Ole Opry*, the radio show that started the whole country music ball rolling back in 1925. Clustered in this land the locals sometimes refer to as "Nashvegas" are other music-related attractions, including the epic Opryland Resort; the nostalgic *General Jackson* showboat; several modest souvenir shops posing as museums; and theaters featuring family entertainment, with the majority showcasing performers from the *Grand Ole Opry*. Dozens of other clubs and theaters around the city also feature live music of various genres.

Country isn't the only music you'll hear in this city. Mainstream rock stars are also being lured by the city's intangible vibe. (Jack White and Kid Rock are just a few of the high-profile musicians to have moved here recently.) They come here for inspiration, to record new material, or for crossover collaborations with local music pros. No matter the genre, the city seems to attract more musicians each year, which means there's enough live music here in Nashville to keep your toes tappin' even long after you hit the highway home.

## 1 FROMMER'S MOST UNFORGETTABLE TRAVEL EXPERIENCES

- **Catching a Show at the Ryman Auditorium:** Known as the "Mother Church of Country Music," the Ryman Auditorium, 116 Fifth Ave. N. (☎ 615/254-1445; [www.ryman.com](http://www.ryman.com)), was the home of the *Grand Ole Opry* for more than 30 years. Now restored, it once again has country music coming from its historic stage. And, yes, the old church pews are still there and just as uncomfortable as they always were. See p. 95.
- **Attending the *Grand Ole Opry*:** This live radio broadcast is an American institution and is as entertaining today as it was when it went on the air nearly 80 years ago. Luckily, the current Grand Ole Opry House, 2804 Opryland Dr. (☎ 800/SEE-OPRY [733-6779]; [www.opry.com](http://www.opry.com)), is quite a bit more comfortable than the old Ryman Auditorium, where the *Opry* used to be held. See p. 129.
- **Checking Out Up-and-Comers at the Bluebird Cafe:** With its excellent acoustics and two shows a night, the Bluebird Cafe, 4104 Hillsboro Rd. (☎ 615/383-1461; [www.bluebirdcafe.com](http://www.bluebirdcafe.com)), is Nashville's most famous venue for country songwriters. Only the best make it here, and many of the people who play the Bluebird wind up getting "discovered." See p. 130.

## 2 THE BEST SPLURGE HOTELS

- **The Hermitage Hotel,** 231 Sixth Ave. N. (☎ 888/888-9414 or 615/244-3121; [www.thehermitagehotel.com](http://www.thehermitagehotel.com)): Built in 1910 in the Beaux Arts style, the Hermitage boasts the most elegant lobby in the city. The marble columns, gilded plasterwork, and stained-glass ceiling recapture the luxuries of a bygone era. This is a classic grand hotel, conveniently located in the heart of downtown Nashville. See p. 50.
- **Loews Vanderbilt Hotel,** 2100 West End Ave. (☎ 800/23-LOEWS [235-6397] or 615/320-1700; [www.loewsvanderbilt.com](http://www.loewsvanderbilt.com)): If you want to be near the trendy West End area of town, treat yourself to a stay at this sophisticated luxury hotel. European tapestries and original works of art adorn the travertine-floored lobby. Service is gracious and attentive. See p. 51.

## 3 THE BEST "GREEN" HOTEL

- The **Hutton Hotel,** 1808 West End Ave. (☎ 615/340-9333; [www.huttonhotel.com](http://www.huttonhotel.com)), sets a new standard of excellence for sustainability, from the decor of reclaimed wood and bamboo furnishings, to its use of biodegradable cleaning products and energy-saving lighting, plumbing, and elevators. Even the hotel's two luxury courtesy vehicles are hybrid SUVs. See p. 54.

## 4 THE MOST UNFORGETTABLE DINING EXPERIENCES

- **Slurping a Chocolate Shake at the Elliston Place Soda Shop**, 2111 Elliston Place (☎ 615/327-1090): Sure, every city has its retro diner these days, but the Elliston Place Soda Shop is the real thing. It's been in business since 1939 and makes the best chocolate shakes in Nashville. See p. 80.
- **Sopping up Red-Eye Gravy with Homemade Biscuits at the Loveless Cafe**, 8400 Tenn. 100 (☎ 615/646-9700; [www.lovelesscafe.com](http://www.lovelesscafe.com)): This perennially popular country cookin' outpost serves the best traditional Southern breakfasts in the entire area. But be prepared to wait for a table. See p. 78.
- **Lingering Over Coffee and Biscotti after an Exquisite Lunch at Marché Artisan Foods**, 1000 Main St. (☎ 615/262-1111; [www.marcheartisanfoods.com](http://www.marcheartisanfoods.com)): This sunny East Nashville eatery is probably my favorite place for gourmet food in a casual setting. Chef/owner Margot McCormack oversees a menu featuring artisanal breads, luscious salads, and creamy quiches. Imported olive oils, pestos, and pastas are artfully displayed around wooden farmhouse tables. See p. 84.

## 5 THE BEST THINGS TO DO FOR FREE (OR ALMOST)

- **Pretending You're at the Parthenon in Greece**: Nashville's lovely Centennial Park, in the West End, offers everything you could want in a city park—playgrounds, picnic areas, gorgeous shade trees—and, believe it or not, a replica of Greece's famed Parthenon. Admire the amazing architectural detail for free, or go tour the art galleries inside, for a nominal fee. See p. 97.
- **Getting That Old-Time Religion at Cowboy Church**, Texas Troubadour Theatre, 2416 Music Valley Dr. (☎ 615/859-1001): If you're looking for a down-home dose of gospel-music ministry, make it to the Cowboy Church on time. The old-timey, nondenominational services kick off Sundays at 10am sharp. Come as you are, or don your best Stetson and bolo tie. Either way, you'll fit right in with the eclectic, all-ages congregation of locals and tourists alike, who pack the pews every week for a patriotic praise-and-worship service. See p. 129.

## 6 THE BEST ART DECO ARCHITECTURE

- **The Frist Center for the Visual Arts**, 919 Broadway (☎ 615/244-3340; [www.fristcenter.org](http://www.fristcenter.org)): Located in a building that dates back to 1934, this was originally Nashville's main post office. The Art Deco building is a city landmark and on the National Register of Historic Places. See p. 99.

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## 7 THE BEST (YEAR-ROUND) CHRISTMAS LIGHTS

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- Aside from Opryland's dazzling holiday display of electrical excess, the Christmas lights with the most colorful history can be seen, year-round, in **Historic RCA Studio B**, on Music Row (☎ **800/852-6437** or 615/416-2001; [www.countrymusichalloffame.com](http://www.countrymusichalloffame.com)). The modest building where Elvis Presley recorded more than 250 of his

songs still has the red, blue, and green lights that were used during the sessions from one of Elvis's Christmas albums. The story goes that The King had trouble showing the holiday spirit while recording in July, so his crew put up an artificial Christmas tree and lights. See p. 93.