

## **Nashville and Memphis, Tennessee For Country Music, History Buffs, and Elvis Fans Only!**

by Camille Pepe Sperrazza

"Tell me again why you're in Tennessee," said my son when I called home. "What's there?"

Like most New Yorkers, he had no idea you could see the balcony where Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated, which is about 15 minutes from Graceland, Elvis Presley's home, the second most visited house in the world. (The White House is number one).

Or, that you could tour President Andrew Jackson's plantation; catch big name performers at the Grand Ole Opry; visit Sun Studios where legends such as Elvis, Roy Orbison, Jerry Lee Lewis, Johnny Cash, and others recorded; tour the Ryman Auditorium, the original Grand Ole Opry which dates back to the 1800's; listen to tunes on Beale Street, and so much more.

This is a perfect place for groups, country music fans, and history buffs.

We took a nonstop flight (one hour and 50 minutes) from New York to Nashville for \$197 roundtrip, rented a car, and drove to our hotel, the Gaylord Opryland Resort Hotel in Nashville, the best place in the city. The hotel is huge -- it's the biggest hotel in the United States, outside of Vegas. (In 2008, this same company will have a bigger complex completed in Washington DC).

What's amazing is that they have figured out how to control the one part of any vacation that can't be controlled -- the weather. That's because a giant sun-friendly roof allows natural light to flood the complex, giving guests the illusion that you are outside, as you are surrounded by gardens, a river, and waterfalls. Rooms with balconies overlook it all, and scattered throughout are restaurants and bars that feature nightly live entertainment. There's an indoor and an outdoor pool, a fantastic gym, and a free Internet Cafe. It's all a free shuttle bus ride away from the Grand Ole Opry.

I'm not (or at least I wasn't) a big country music fan, but one can't help being drawn into the excitement of the Opry, a lively, energetic show that highlights many performers. In between the singing, they have the funniest advertisements, as it's broadcast live on radio and television. What's interesting, too, is that a performer will sing a song or two, then others will take the stage, and she'll return later. We saw Martina McBride, whose name I didn't recognize right away, but whose music I sure did. ("This One's For The Girls," "Through My Daughter's Eyes," to name a couple of her hits).

We spent the better part of our next day touring the Hermitage, the plantation that belonged to President Andrew Jackson. (My daughter: "I never heard of him." My response: "Take a look at a \$20 bill.")

You can tour the rooms of the mansion, and visit the slaves' quarters. So much of history is revealed at this National Landmark. One fact I learned that I had never heard before: a

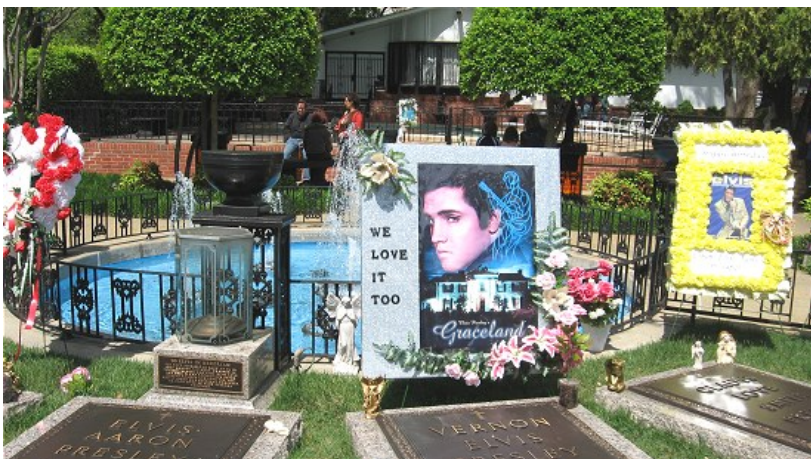
former slave, who later worked for wages at the mansion, is buried next to Jackson himself, right on the plantation. You can see his grave. Jackson was already dead, but this arrangement was made with the group that preserved the estate.

Downtown Nashville, about a 15-minute ride away from the Opryland Resort, is jumpin' during the day and at night. Live music lures all who walk the area. One of the most popular bar/restaurants is the Wild Horse Saloon, noted for its ribs, marinated with Jack Daniels' barbecue sauce. They were exceptional; so tender, the meat just falls off the bones. It came with the best cole slaw I've ever eaten. It was laced with chunks of fresh blue cheese, and marinated, not in mayo, but in a tangy vinegar sauce. It was so good, I ordered an extra side dish.

Other must-sees in Nashville include the Ryman Auditorium, which provided insight into country music's roots. This facility started as a church, where gospel music was sung, and evolved into musical venue on which nearly every top name performed -- even President Nixon. A big drawback was the lack of air conditioning which is one of the reasons why the new Grand Ole Opry was built. After seeing this original, I understood why the new building has church pews, rather than seats. It's modeled after the original.

The Country Music Hall of Fame is a walking distance away, and rightly so, the most impressive part of the facility is the music. You can open "gold" and "platinum" record doors to hear artists such as Kenny Rogers sing hits like "The Gambler." The sound is so terrific, I spent a lot of time just opening doors, listening to these hits, and singing along. I never get tired of hearing Patsy Cline sing "Crazy."

Memphis is a about a 3 1/2 hour drive from Nashville, a scenic route on a well-paved highway. We stayed at the Elvis Presley Heartbreak Hotel, right next door to Graceland. Here, it's all Elvis, all the time. Elvis tunes blare from the radio, and at night, in the room in which breakfast is served (it's included), a screen is pulled down, and Elvis concerts are shown. It's a great way to spend an evening -- gathered with other guests, watching Elvis, while sipping a glass of Elvis Presley wine. (Yes, there is Elvis, right on the bottle of Merlot. You can buy a bottle for \$20 at the hotel's "Jungle Room.")



In the living room/lobby, furnished to look like the 60's, Elvis movies are shown all day. They're also in your room. Regular cable television is available, too, but once you're immersed in Elvis, who can concentrate on anything else?

Graceland, Elvis' home, is right there, right out in the open. It's surrounded by a small fence and some land, but it's amazing how accessible it is, and we are told, it was this accessible when he was alive,

too. Elvis welcomed guests, those he knew, and even those he didn't. Legend has it that Bruce Springsteen, before he made it big, hopped the fence, and knocked on Elvis' door. He was told Elvis wasn't home, as he was in Vegas at the time, but it seems that it wasn't unusual to have this kind of access.

You can walk through his kitchen, his pool room, his awards' room, and board his airplanes. You can view his wardrobe and see clips of his performances. Elvis never went to Europe or Asia, yet he has earned awards from these countries, and people from all over the world fly to Graceland.

My favorite souvenir is a photo of us playing pool in Elvis' pool room. He's sitting on the couch, strumming his guitar, presumably waiting for his turn, while I'm shooting a ball into the side pocket. It's all superimposed on computers -- including my shot -- one of many poses you can get with Elvis. The price is a little steep: \$25. But it's a priceless conversation piece.

A free shuttle bus ride away from Graceland is Sun Studio, where Elvis, B.B. King, and so many others first recorded. Here, you can take your own photo at the microphone these legends are said to have held. The small luncheonette counter in front of this studio, is still there, and it looks just like those southern luncheonettes seen in all those old movies.

Like Nashville, downtown Memphis is filled with lively, small musical venues that lure tourists and residents. But if you want to see something different, walk another two blocks and visit the Peabody Hotel, a luxurious 5-star facility, with a piano bar. You can drink, surrounded by luxury, or dine at a number of fine restaurants. Every day at 11 a.m. and at 5 p.m., ducks are paraded on a red carpet, as they make their way to and from the elegant lobby fountain. This is done with great fanfare, and tourists flock into the hotel during these times. When the ducks are not swimming in the lobby fountain, they're on the roof, and you can visit them there as well.

One of the most intriguing parts of our trip was the National Civil Rights Museum, built around the Lorraine Hotel, the place where Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated. You can actually look through the window from where James Earl Ray supposedly shot King, and see the balcony on which King stood. Decide for yourself whether this shot could be made. You'll walk through the boarding house where Ray stayed, and the hotel where King stayed. View actual evidentiary material, and read numerous conspiracy theories. I left with new insight about this historic event.

If you are interested in getting a group of history buffs or music fans together for a fascinating look at Nashville and Memphis, please give me a call. I have all the information you need.

For more information or to book a trip, [contact](#) "Commodore" Camille today.

This article was accurate when it was written, but everything in life changes. Enjoy the journey!