

Nashville

Music City, USA



November, 2012

Six weeks after Molly's surgery we were ready for a short break and felt comfortable taking a driving trip not too far from home. Based on great reports from Elizabeth, who had visited there only a few weeks previous, we decided on Nashville, Tennessee. Only about 300 miles from Cincinnati, the drive there and back was very easy—especially as we broke the journey in both directions to facilitate visits to favorite restaurants in Lexington and Louisville.

We were gone just five days but saw a lot of Nashville, which is much more than the "Music City USA" title would imply. It has a very pleasant riverfront, an interesting and historic downtown and an imposing Capitol. And, of course, it has the Grand Ole Opry and Southern Hospitality to boot.

We had gorgeous weather, several excellent meals and enjoyed the facilities of the enormous Opryland Hotel. It was a great way to break in to our more normal traveling routine again.

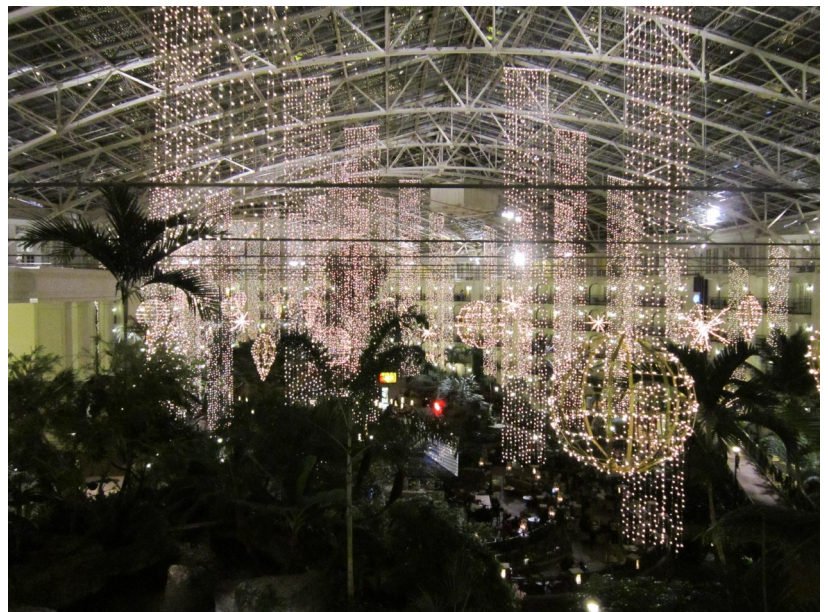
Nashville, November 2012

Wednesday November 14

We left home shortly after 1:30 and stopped for coffee at our local Panera before driving directly to the Fairfield Inn in Lexington. We arrive at 4:20 and relaxed until leaving for dinner at the Merrick Inn, a favorite restaurant of ours that we have enjoyed on many occasions. Once again, we had an excellent meal in the pleasant surroundings of an old home of a famous thoroughbred race-horsing family but run for the past years as one of Lexington's best restaurants.

Thursday November 15

It was after nine before we were up and about on a cold but bright and sunny morning. We packed and checked out and then went to a local McDonalds for breakfast before driving via the Bluegrass Parkway and Interstate 65 to Nashville. The route took us along the Bourbon Trail, passing at least six distilleries, before turning south to Bowling Green. Here we stopped for a light lunch and then proceeded to the Gaylord Opryland Hotel just outside Nashville.




Our room

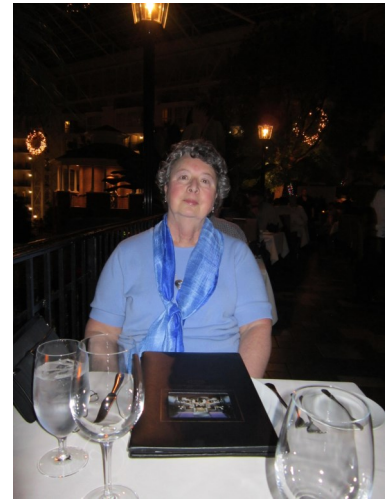


This is a HUGE facility built around about five indoor courtyards filled with flowers, trees, water features and places to eat – from small coffee bars to upscale steakhouses. Our room was an “atrium” room with a balcony overlooking one of the courtyards – this one called the Cascades featuring a waterfall right outside our bedroom window.



We took a short stroll around part of the facility and generally got the lay of the land but didn't do much more than admire the place before going to dinner at one of the upscale restaurants – The old Hickory Steakhouse.

The meal started out well enough with a nice bottle of wine and good appetizers but went rapidly downhill from there. My steak was cold and when I sent it back they simply micro-waved it and brought it back within a couple of minutes. I refused this. In the meantime, Molly had tried her crab cakes



and the vegetables and they were also cold, or at least not as hot as they should have been. Obviously we complained again and were apologized to profusely, given a very nice dessert and (cool) espresso and told that there would be no charge for the entire meal. In addition, they asked if we would be dining in the hotel again and we said that we had planned to eat at the Italian restaurant on Saturday evening. The manager took it upon himself to make that reservation and inform them of tonight's debacle so we'll see what Saturday brings!

The Opryland Hotel

2,881 guest rooms, including:

200+ suites

750+ atrium-facing rooms with private balconies, patios, or large bay windows which overhang into the atrium

109,465 square feet of ballroom space

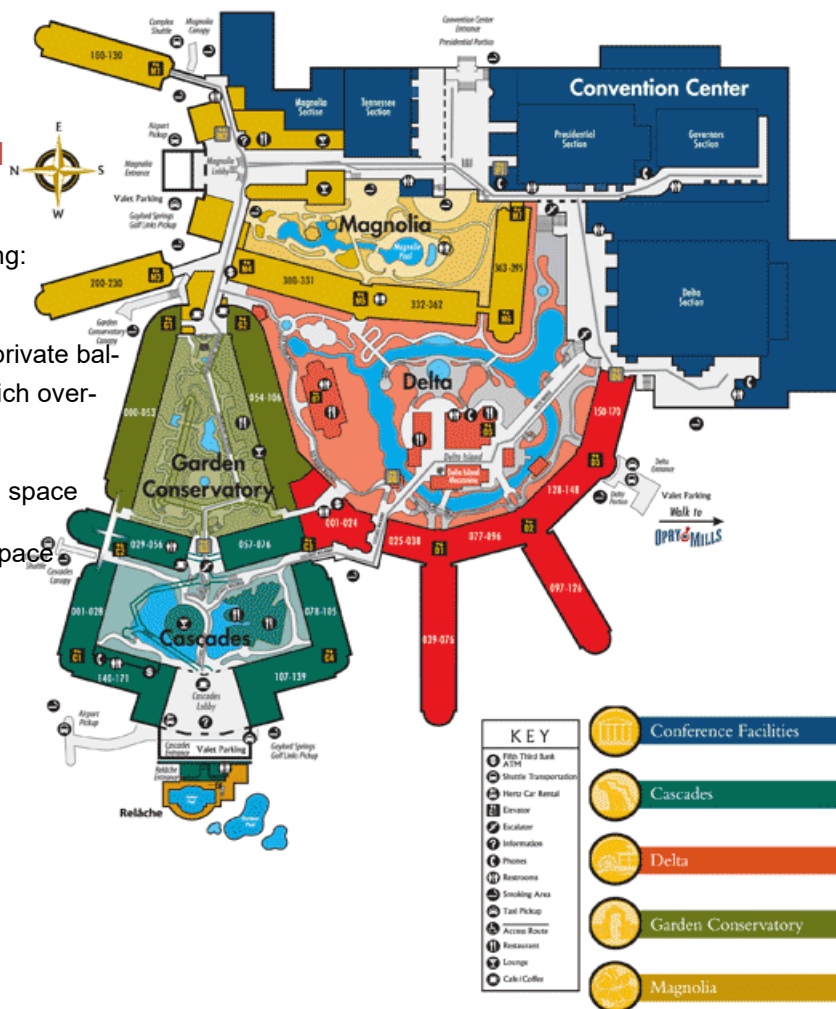
319,000 square feet of exhibit space

6 full-service restaurants .

3 lounges

8 eateries

14 retail stores



This is an ENORMOUS complex!

Friday November 16

We were up soon after seven and had a light breakfast in the Cascades atrium prior to getting our bus for the Nashville City Tour. There were just 15 passengers on a small bus so the very much “down-home” driver/guide was able to personalize his talk to include information about Nashville that had some connection with our home towns (In our case, the Clooney connection). In addition, he had a deep knowledge of the country music scene and gave the impression that he knew each of the stars intimately.



The tour took us through downtown and specifically the Music District where there still are a number of recording studios (although he said that Music was now behind Printing/Publishing and Insurance in the city’s businesses) and many cafes and bars that are or were frequented by the artists. We also saw the business district, a very impressive bicentennial park (marking Tennessee’s 200 years as a state in 1996) and the famous “copy” of the Parthenon.

There were two stops on the tour; the first was at the Ryman Auditorium (better known as the Grand Ole Opry) and the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum. This latter is now located in a very new facility and has two floors of exhibits as well as the usual ground floor coffee shop and gift shop. Whatever your interest in country music, there is no denying that the Hall of Fame is a credit to the city and the exhibits and interactive videos and audios are extremely well done.



The Ryman Auditorium (Top) and The Country Music Hall of Fame

The Ryman Auditorium started life as a church over a hundred years ago. Ryman – a riverboat owner – was concerned that an evangelist in town was cutting into his business of drinking and gambling and decided to attend a revival to heckle his presumed adversary. Instead, he

was converted himself and raised money for a permanent preaching home for the evangelist. This became the Union Gospel Tabernacle and it was re-named the Ryman Auditorium upon Captain Ryman's death in 1904.

The Auditorium served as a venue for many events until the Grand Ole Opry took it as its home in 1943. The Opry had started as a Saturday night radio show and then expanded to its present form when it took over the Ryman and became the "Mother Church of Country Music".

In 1974 the new Grand Ole Opry House was built (near the hotel where we are staying) and the future of the Ryman was in doubt for 20 years until a major renovation took place in 1994. Now it is used as a venue for a variety of musical functions and is, somewhat confusingly, the winter home for the Grand Ole Opry once again. The story of the two buildings helped clear up some confusion for the two of us as we have tickets for the Rockettes Christmas Show at the Grand Ole Opry – and it wasn't until we understood the history that we realized we were actually scheduled in the NEW building, only a five minute shuttle ride from the hotel!

The tour ended back at the hotel about 12:30, at which point we had a light lunch in the atrium before spending a quiet afternoon in the hotel.

Just before six we took a short shuttle ride to board the General Jackson showboat for dinner and the Christmas show as we cruised down the Cumberland River to downtown Nashville. The meal, which wasn't at all bad for this type of function, was served while we sailed into downtown, at which point we were given a short break (before dessert) to go outside and admire the lights of the city. The buildings and especially the major road bridge were colorfully illuminated which made for a pretty scene with some spectacular river reflections.



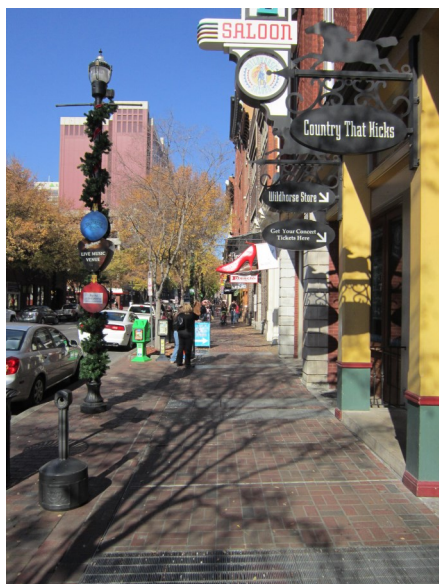
The General Jackson Showboat, The Dinner Show and Nashville's Night Skyline

It was a little cool standing outside so we were quite pleased as the ship turned round and headed back to Opryland and we could go back inside for dessert and coffee – and the show. This was presented by a troupe of seven singers/dancers and a seven piece band, all of whom were in good voice and made a lot of noise! The show itself moved rapidly from song to song, with perhaps a dozen costume changes by the cast, but the whole presentation was done at maximum decibel level, whether they were singing a Christmas song or "Away in a Manger". Perhaps one couldn't expect much more than this on what is basically a tourist attraction (as opposed to a theater show) but we weren't too disappointed when it was all over.

The whole experience, however, was quite pleasant and we had some good conversation with one member of a foursome at our table, all of whom were from Gander, Newfoundland.

Saturday November 17

It was after nine before we left the room and drove downtown for a Starbucks breakfast before starting our self-guided walking tour. We had received a city map at the hotel and were able to find our way to the points of interest that we wanted to see. We walked along the streets containing all the bars, cafes and music saloons that epitomize Nashville, although at 10 on a cool Saturday morning in November there weren't many people on the streets. In fact the whole town seemed to be almost deserted which surprised us, especially as today was the date of the Vanderbilt/TSU football rivalry. Maybe everyone was already tailgating at the stadium? Or perhaps it was to be an evening game?



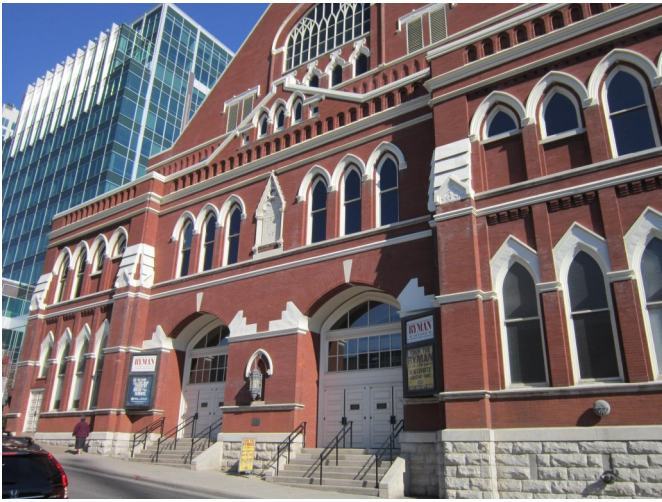
Downtown Nashville

The Maxwell House Hotel—which gave its name to the Coffee

Printers Alley—named for the industry but later became the nightclub center

Music City, USA—with its bars, clubs and boutiques and everything “Country”

The modern AT&T Building

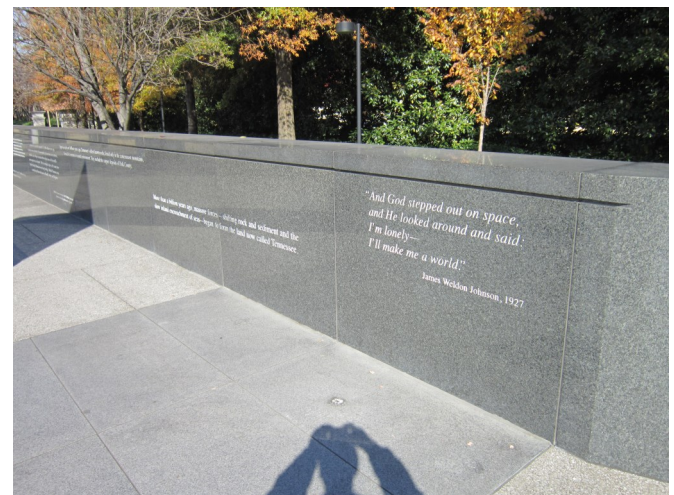


The Ryman Auditorium and the restored Grand Ole Opry



We walked around the **Capitol** and then descended to the Bicentennial Park that we had been shown briefly on the bus tour yesterday. By now it was pleasantly warm in the sun and it was interesting to stroll slowly along the path next to a granite wall on which were inscribed the events in this area over the past one billion years. Obviously there was much more emphasis on the last 300 to 400 years, covering the influx of Europeans and westward-heading Americans, but the geological history as well as the Native American tribal history of the region were also presented.

We ended our stroll "at the end of the Civil War" (where there is a symbolic "crack" in The Wall. Tennessee was the last state to join the Confederacy (and the first to be re-admitted to the Union) but only Virginia saw more battles. The state maintained a strong Unionist following and even Lincoln's Vice President was from the state.





Bicentennial Park

We left the park and made our way back to the car and then drove to the hotel for a late lunch and some quiet time before our final evening at Opryland. Today we had early evening tickets (5pm) for the Rockettes show at the "new" Grand Ole Opry, which was only a five minute shuttle ride away. This theatre is about twice the size of the Ryman Theater downtown and we had excellent seats, five rows back in the circle, centered over the middle of the stage. The 2 hour show (including a 15 minute intermission) was excellent.



The NEW Grand Ole Opry



It was their Christmas show and clearly had much of the same material as that on the showboat the previous evening. But the contrast was amazing. The show was equally fast paced but the professionalism was so much higher; the music and dancing were superb and the Rockettes certainly lived up to their reputation as a premier precision dance troupe. The rest of the cast was also good so the two hours went by very quickly and it was soon 7pm and time for our ride back to the hotel.

Tonight we had dinner reservations at Ravello, an Italian restaurant in the hotel. This reservation had been made by the manager of the steakhouse where we had had a poor experience on Friday so we were expecting to at least be treated well. In fact, the entire staff, from hostess to bus boy, was very attentive throughout the evening and we enjoyed a good meal. It wasn't as authentic Italian as they had billed but it was a very enjoyable meal nevertheless. We both had salad and pasta with a bottle of white wine and we even had enough room for dessert (cheese plate for me) and espresso, as well as limoncello and grappa.

The biggest surprise came, however, when we were told that the entire meal was on the house! We had expected that the entrees on Friday would not have been charged but we had expected to pay for the rest of the meal. Similarly, we were expecting that, while the service would be attentive, we would be expected to pay for tonight's meal. Not so; the waiter was adamant that everything was covered and they hope that we had a better feeling about the Gaylord Hotel after this experience. We certainly did!



Sunday November 18

We were up before nine and went to the Cascades restaurant for breakfast. Oddly enough, we had a coupon for this meal also which the manager had given us after a poor experience with the Business Center. So, although the breakfast was no better than any at Bob Evans and the service was a little slow, the \$40 (yes \$40) cost was covered in its entirety by the hotel, including – the waiter told us – his tip!

We checked out about 11 and drove via “other roads”, rather than the expressway as far as Bowling Green. The land between Nashville and here was open farmland – tobacco, corn and hay we assumed, although only the tobacco hanging to dry was obvious as the fields were entirely bare. It made a pleasant change to simply driving at 70 mph, however, and added only a few extra miles to our drive.

In Bowling Green we had coffee and then completed our journey to Louisville via I-65, arriving at the Courtyard near the airport about 4:45. Tonight we had 7:30 reservations at Ruth’s Chris restaurant, always a favorite of ours and often reason enough to visit this town. Tonight’s meal was not a disappointment and we both enjoyed our filet mignon with shared vegetables and a drink or two – followed by espresso to finish. Excellent as usual. We were home soon after 9pm after a very enjoyable evening.

Monday November 19

We drove to a local Bob Evans for breakfast and then took the expressway home from Louisville. We arrived home around noon after a very pleasant visit to Music City, USA.

