



A brisk morning at Table Rock Lake.
Dogwood Canyon Nature Park

ARTS & CULTURE

FAMILY

WEEKENDERS

Weekenders: Only in the Ozarks

Missouri's favorite mountain town is a holiday haven.

By Renee Brincks



Branson's Ozark Mountain winter scene is easygoing compared with those of more-conventional ski-season destinations. Southern Missouri's mild December weather sets a pleasant backdrop for sipping hot chocolate and viewing brilliant light displays. While some area attractions pause for a post-holiday break, the community warmly welcomes visitors throughout the season.

Star Attractions

To learn how this land of rugged dolomite bluffs and rounded hilltops became a fun-filled, family-friendly vacation spot, swing by the free **Branson Centennial Museum**. The compact downtown venue displays historical photos, maps, and memorabilia, including Osage Nation arrowheads, antique three-stringed Appalachian dulcimers, and show bills from Branson's 1960s boom-era entertainers.

From the museum, head one block north to Main Street, which leads a couple blocks east to Lake Taneycomo and west past vintage shops, bakeries, Western-wear studios, and the sprawling dime store **Dick's 5 & 10**. If you head west, you'll eventually reach West Highway 76 Country Boulevard. This busy street, known locally as the Strip, is where country artists and comedians performed at Branson's newly built theaters in the 1960s. Variety acts, such as the Presleys and the Haygoods, still perform here, along with touring bands, aerial violinists, acrobats, and young singers who bring a fresh sound to stages such as the **Andy Williams**

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Performing Arts Center and Theatre that are used to hosting more traditional talent.

Grammy-nominated songwriter Billy Yates worked with the likes of George Jones and Kenny Chesney before opening his popular **Starlite Theatre** show, *Raiding the Country Vault*. The 2018 follow-up, *Billy Yates' Hit Songwriters in the Round*, spotlights acoustic artists at the **Americana Theatre**.

Decades before concert halls opened on the Strip, Canadian entrepreneur William Henry Lynch bought a mountaintop cave 10 miles from downtown Branson. The marble he intended to quarry here turned out to be limestone, so in 1894 he named it **Marvel Cave** and held tours instead. The Herschend family leased the business in 1950, and they later re-created the 1800s silver-mining village that once stood above it. Today the whole operation is a part of **Silver Dollar City**, a theme park with more than 40 rides, roller coasters, and attractions, plus 18 restaurants, a cooking school, and heritage-craft demonstrations set across 100 wooded acres.

Festive Trimmings

Silver Dollar City closes from January to mid-March but shines bright in December, when 6.5 million bulbs illuminate spectacular holiday exhibits and storefronts inside the park. Steam trains outfitted for the season navigate the sparkling scenery, and a twinkling five-story tree towers above Rudolph's Holly Jolly Christmas Light Parade each evening.

This year marks the eighth and final season of Silver Dollar City's production of *It's a Wonderful Life*; you can also expect an adaptation of Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*, holiday concerts, and a 35,000-ornament shopping display at Jingle Bell Junction.

East toward the waterfront, Santa finds time to ride **Branson Scenic Railway's Polar Express**. Train riders sip hot chocolate and munch on cookies as a storyteller reads from the beloved children's book. Another only-in-Branson experience awaits at the *Andy Williams Performing Arts Center and Theatre*, where the Lennon Sisters star in the annual Andy Williams Ozark Mountain Christmas Show; venue owner and singer Jimmy Osmond sometimes joins them onstage.

Flavors of the Foothills

Though select Branson theaters and attractions take a break in January and February, several restaurants keep their doors open. Known statewide for their Kansas City-style barbecue, the **Gettin' Basted** food-truck team opened a permanent Country Boulevard location in 2017. Pitmaster Brad Leighninger piles plates high with pulled pork, smoked prime brisket, poblano-spiced cream-corn brûlée, and pork-belly macaroni and cheese drizzled with rich barbecue sauce.

Fresh-baked goods are also big here, from plate-size cinnamon rolls at Silver Dollar City to blueberry "thunder" muffins from **Persimmon Hill Farm**. Along Branson's unofficial blackberry-cobbler trail, you'll find several great renditions. The cheerful **Sugar Leaf Bakery & Cafe** tops its cobbler with a delicate sugar-sprinkled crust and an optional scoop of vanilla ice cream. **Farmhouse Restaurant's** signature version has a thick crust that crumbles easily, and one serving is big enough to share. At the **Branson Cafe**, a downtown mainstay since 1910, you can order off the all-day breakfast menu or go straight for the blackberry cobbler.

To watch young bakers, chefs, grain millers, and jelly makers at work, save some time to tour the **College of the Ozarks**. Students work on the campus to cover their tuition, and visitors can watch as they weave textiles, build baskets, nurture greenhouse crops, craft stained-glass art, and churn ice cream using milk from the school's dairy. **Fruitcake & Jelly Kitchen** staffers distribute samples and sell packaged items to take home, while **Dobyns Dining Room** serves meals prepared by student cooks.

Local Character

About 100 Ozark Mountain artisans—glass cutters, candymakers, blacksmiths, leather crafters, and lathe workers—maintain studios at Silver Dollar City and chat with guests while demonstrating their skills. Master chip carver Pam Gresham created some of the park’s carousel horses, and she shares the stories behind her intricate basswood mantelpieces and keepsake boxes. Master potter Jeff Walker studied a late-1800s practice called crystalline glazing to develop his latest colorful pattern. Crystals grown during the firing process leave whimsical cloudlike designs on each piece. The **Branson Craft Mall**, about a 15-minute drive away, showcases locally made art, gifts, and candies throughout the year.

Across **Table Rock Lake**—the rambling, recreation-friendly reservoir west of Branson—Ozark-area native and Bass Pro Shop founder Johnny Morris established **Dogwood Canyon Nature Park** on a 10,000-acre expanse that includes wooded slopes, limestone bluffs, trout streams, and trails. Year-round Segway, bicycle, and tram tours offer an insider’s look at the area’s nature and history.

For a playful rainy-day option, consider spending a few hours at **Fritz’s Adventure**. Children and adults tackle everything from ropes courses and climbing walls to slides and suspended bridges at this cavernous indoor attraction that’s open daily in December, and Thursday through Sunday in January and February. An on-site café specializes in simple health-minded snacks, and if all that activity leaves you hungry for a bigger meal, Branson’s cafés and cobbler stops are just a few blocks back down Country Boulevard, the heart of this merry mountain town.

Play

Branson Centennial Museum

120 S. Commercial St.; 417-239-1912; admission, free; wrvhs.org

Branson Scenic Railway’s Polar Express

206 E. Main St.; 800-287-2462; train rides, from \$44 a person; children 2–12, from \$34; children 2 and under on an adult’s lap, \$2; bransontrain.com

Dogwood Canyon Nature Park

2038 W. State Hwy. 86, Lampe; 866-459-5687; admission, \$10; children 4–11, \$5; prices for tours and additional activities vary; dogwoodcanyon.org

Fritz’s Adventure

1425 W. 76 Country Blvd.; 417-320-6138; admission, \$30; children 4–11, \$22; open daily (including holidays) in Dec., and open Thurs.–Sun. in Jan. and Feb.; fritzsadventure.com

Silver Dollar City/Marvel Cave

399 Silver Dollar City Pkwy.; 800-888-7277; adults, \$65 a person; children 4–11, \$54; closed Jan. to mid-March; silverdollarcity.com

Eat

Branson Cafe

120 W. Main St.; 417-334-3021; breakfast for two, \$12*; downtownbransoncafe.com

Dobyns Dining Room

1 Opportunity Ave., Point Lookout; 417-239-1900; lunch for two, \$30; keetercenter.edu

Farmhouse Restaurant

119 W. Main St.; 417-334-9701; lunch for two, \$25; farmhouserestaurantbranson.com

Gettin’ Basted

2845 W. 76 Country Blvd.; 417-320-6357; dinner for two, \$40; gettinbasted.com

Persimmon Hill Farm

367 Persimmon Hill Lane, Lampe; 800-333-4159; six blueberry “thunder” muffins, \$25; persimmonhill.com

Sugar Leaf Bakery & Cafe

2800 W. 76 Country Blvd.; 417-336-6618; breakfast for two, \$14; sugarleaftreats.com

Shop**Branson Craft Mall**

694 State Hwy. 165; 417-334-1223; bransoncraftmall.com

Dick's 5 & 10

103 W. Main St.; 417-334-2410; dicks5and10.com

Fruitcake & Jelly Kitchen

1 Opportunity Ave., Point Lookout; 417-690-3395; store.cofo.edu

Explore**Americana Theatre**

2905 W. 76 Country Blvd.; 417-544-8700; tickets, \$43; children 4-12, \$22;

americanatheatrebranson.com

Andy Williams Performing Arts Center and Theatre

1 Andy Williams Blvd.; 417-334-4500; tickets, prices vary; andywilliamspac.com

College of the Ozarks

100 Opportunity Ave., Point Lookout; 417-690-3241; tours (by appointment only), free;

cofo.edu

The Starlite Theatre

3115 W. 76 Country Blvd.; 417-337-9333; tickets, from \$45; starlitetheatre.com

Table Rock Lake

14226 State Hwy. 13, Kimberling City; 800-595-0393; visittablerocklake.com

STAY

RCI® affiliated resorts in Branson include:

Holiday Inn Club Vacations Holiday Hills 1004

Experience the lovely Ozark Mountains by hitting the links at the on-site golf course. 2380 E. Hwy. 87

Member Review: "Great for families."

The Falls Village 3641

Give your body some TLC at the sauna, Jacuzzi, and swimming pool. 200 Creekside Rd.

Member Review: "Units were so spacious."

Branson's Nantucket C340

Find your home away from home in these cottage-style condos big enough for a family of 14.

2837 State Hwy. 265

Member Review: Not yet rated

Wyndham Branson at the Falls C489

With a two-mile radius around the property, there's plenty of room to roam on horseback or fish in the on-site lake. 3165 Falls Pkwy.

Member Review: "Beautiful views."

The Lodges at Timber Ridge by Welk Resorts WLK5

Luxury meets the great outdoors with a rock fireplace in the master bedroom and cedar accents throughout the unit. 1984 State Hwy. 165

Member Review: "The staff was very accommodating."

Still Waters Vacation Club D927

The Oasis pool is a kids' paradise, with large waterslide, bridge, and rock water fountains. 21

Stillwaters Trail

Member Review: Not yet rated

For complete member reviews (as member reviews have been condensed) and additional resort listings, visit RCI.com or call 800-338-7777 (Weeks) or 877-968-7476 (Points). Club Members, please call your specific Club or RCI telephone number.

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Non-RCI affiliated resorts in Branson include:

Branson Towers Hotel

Between the resort's indoor pool, arcade games, and evening ice cream social, families can have lots of fun just north of downtown Branson. 236 Shepherd of the Hills Expy.; 417-336-4500; bransontowershotel.com; doubles from \$99 a night

Chateau on the Lake

Set aside some time to watch the sunset—several rooms and suites here have private balconies overlooking the neighboring Table Rock Lake and the serene Ozark Mountains. 415 N. State Hwy. 265; 888-333-5253; chateauonthelake.com; doubles from \$130 a night

Grand Plaza Hotel

This 200-room hotel is conveniently close to outlet shopping and major attractions on West 76 Country Boulevard. 245 N. Wildwood Dr.; 417-336-6646; bransongrandplaza.com; doubles from \$90 a night

*Estimated meal prices do not include drinks, tax, or tip.

NOTE: Information may have changed since publication. Please confirm key details before planning your trip.

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