

Nashville, Tennessee: Travel Feature

by Dave Marx, Authors of [PassPorter Travel Guidebooks](#)

Every so often my business travels take me somewhere other than Orlando or Anaheim - a book convention in New York, Los Angeles, Washington DC, or Chicago; and recently, book sales conferences in Berkeley, California and Nashville, Tennessee. Wherever I go, it seems there are precious few hours left over for enjoying the city, but the idea of just sitting around the hotel when there's so much outside to explore is very hard for this travel lover to take. I may have precious few free hours, but I'll try to make something of them.

Those sales conferences offer a particularly interesting opportunity. The conferences are mostly made up of presentations by various publishers. There's a good chunk of the day when I'm just waiting around for my turn at bat. Rehearse and refine the spiel, rehearse it again... there such a thing as being too prepared.

Never one to pass up a chance to explore or to turn the exploration into an article, I've created a little game for myself: I'll avoid any research about the city before I get there. Then, once I'm settled into my hotel, I'll study the inevitable visitor publications waiting in my room and in the rack by the front desk, and create a three-hour walking tour (a three hour tour) for myself. It's not an exhausting tour of all the sights, but a good, moderately-priced taste of one part of the town. It's also a lot like what I do when visiting a cruise ship port-of-call - "What does the port area have to offer visitors if they don't book excursions?"

Those tourist guides provide, at best, a basic framework for a tour. They almost never convey the real flavor of the city, and rarely describe all the pleasures there are to be found. I always have the feeling I'll miss the "real" city if I stick to their advice. But they are helpful in helping me mak my basic decision. After that, it's time to explore.

My most recent conference was in Nashville, so I'll start there, while the taste of the food and the sound of the music are still fresh in my senses. First off, I went through the visitor magazines in my room, to see what heralded sights seemed to be most noteworthy. Some were clearly a good distance from the others (like Opryland and the Parthenon), so poof, they were off the list. (Would you park-hop at Walt Disney World if you only had three or four hours? I think not.) Visits to museums? Nope. As much as I love museums, they eat up a whole lot of time, and I had very little of that.

A trip to "The District" in Nashville looked like it would suit my needs

well. This is the heart of the city's tourist-oriented music, dining, and entertainment scene - the southeast end of downtown Nashville. Nearby, if shoe leather and time permitted, I could view the grand civic buildings of this great city and state capital (nope, never got there). I had my driver drop me at the corner of Broadway and 5th Avenue. That's the southwest corner of a rectangle that stretches eastward to the Cumberland River and north to Union St., a tidy, well-preserved neighborhood of 19th-century brick buildings filled with honkytonks, shops, chain eateries, and historic sites, including the Ryman Auditorium, former home to the Grand Ole Opry.

I then called my hotel's front desk to check transportation options. Would the hotel shuttle bus take me there? (This is a good tip - make a note! Often, hotels have free shuttle buses that, when they're not running back and forth to the airport, are available to ferry guests to nearby destinations.) Sorry, my hotel was too far from downtown, so the shuttle was out. I took a taxi.

Arriving at Broadway and 5th at around 11:00am, I surveyed the scene. Downtown's modern glass and steel hotels and bank towers were just blocks away, to the north. The large Gaylord Entertainment Center, Country Music Hall of Fame, and Schermerhorn Symphony Center were a couple of blocks to the south, and the Nashville Convention Center was just across the street, between 5th and 6th. This was no out-of-the-way neighborhood.

Despite the modern buildings nearby, looking immediately east on Broadway I could see nothing but old, low-rise brick buildings until the street ended at the river. Since this was obviously a tourist district, I worried that this would turn out to be a long strip of tourist traps that looked authentic, but didn't deliver on their promise. Bars with names like Legend Corner, Layla's Bluegrass Inn, Tootsie's Orchid Lounge, and Second Fiddle; eateries like Rippy's, Big River Grille, Jack's Bar-B-Que; various western wear and souvenir emporiums, and the Ernest Tubb Record Shop ... Hold on, I knew for a fact that Ernest Tubb's is the real deal, with its own big, honkin' hunk o' hunk o' country music history. Maybe I'd have to look a bit closer.

I walked east on Broadway, planning to head north when I hit 1st Street, and eventually to work my way up and down the streets of the entire District. I'd hunt down a good looking lunch spot along the way. By 1:00pm I'd wrap-up my walk, decide where to eat, and after lunch, spend some time enjoying one or more sights in greater detail.

For now, I walked past all the honkytonks between 5th and 4th. To my surprise, there was live music pouring out of nearly every one of them,

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even at this hour. Each promised no cover, no minimum, but please put a tip in the jar for the band, since the club doesn't pay them. I knew I'd be back later.

I crossed the street to check out Ernest Tubb's. OK, there were a good bit of tacky souvenirs to be found near the front door, but once past them, the deep, high-ceilinged shop was full of CDs and DVDs representing even the most obscure threads of country music and gospel. I looked for folk, jazz, rock, or classical... nada, but I wasn't exactly surprised. Way up, near the ceiling, a long procession of fading, 12-inch record jackets lined the wall from the front of the store to the back, each of them an album featuring Ernest Tubb performing with just about anybody who was anybody in country music of the day. And at the back of the shop, right where it always stood, is the small stage where his weekly, Midnight Jamboree radio show on WSM originated (right after the Grand Ole Opry). The shows still continue from a concert hall at Opryland <http://etrecordshop.com/mj.htm> but the original stage stands here as a low-key shrine to a simpler day, just like the nearby Ryman Auditorium.

Crossing back to the north side of Broadway, I popped into Gruhn Guitars <http://www.gruhn.com>, on the corner of Broadway and 4th. Housed in two, simple storefronts with towering ceilings, this is a place of pilgrimage for any guitar, banjo, or mandolin picker (or fiddler) that knows how to change a string. The scent when I entered was breathtaking - all fragrant, spicy wood. Row after row of instruments hang from the walls with little ceremony. There's a smattering of new instruments here, but the vast majority are well-played, cherished veterans of music making (more than a few with an ownership pedigree the envy of a Mayflower descendant). If you're a classical violinist, imagine walking into a shop displaying hundreds of Strads and Guarneris, and you sort of get the idea. I drooled for a little while, but kept my hands stuck firmly in my pockets. To actually play one of these babies would be to guarantee either an expense I could never explain back home, or a heartache upon separation that would follow me for years.

From there I continued to stroll east to the end of the road, at Riverfront Park. This is a pleasant spot, affording views across the Cumberland River to LP Field, a very modern stadium. 1st Avenue runs alongside the park, and across the street are tall, 19th century brick buildings built to serve the river commerce. Now, they're studded with the back doors of the bars on 2nd Avenue. In the park you'll find a cluster of log buildings, a re-creation of Fort Nashboro that itself seems to be headed for ruin, with big gaps in the rotted, cedar shake roofs. Still, it's pleasant to pop your head inside for a few minutes to see how the early settlers may

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have lived, and to read the inscriptions on the statues and historical markers.

I turned inland again on Church Street, then turned south on 2nd - three long city blocks of attractive, old brick buildings housing one chain restaurant/bar/night club after another. Hooters, B.B. King's, Wildhorse Saloon, Coyote Ugly, Hard Rock Cafe, Big River Grille... the locations look more authentic than some of their sister-establishments (Big River can also be found at Disney's BoardWalk, Wildhorse used to be at Downtown Disney Pleasure Island, B.B. King's is at Universal City Walk in Los Angeles, and Hooters and Hard Rock are everywhere). There are plenty of "originals" in Nashville, so why bother with these? Case in point, Charlie Daniels' shop <http://www.charliedaniels.com/museum-n.htm>, which offers lots of souvenirs and logo wear, including hundreds of artificially battered straw cowboy hats. While it's far nicer than most other souvenir shops in town, it's really redeemed by the free, Charlie Daniels Museum at the back of the store, oozing with Charlie's memorabilia and some choice bits of country music history he's collected over the years. A sign by the door announced that Charlie would next stop by at 5:30pm on Monday, November 19th. Also on the street are Miss Marple's, offering a mystery dinner show; sushi and Mexican restaurants; and plenty of places offering classic "bar cuisine" - steaks, burgers, ribs, etc. What I couldn't find is an honest-to-goodness barbecue place! Oh well ... just keep walking, walking ...

Reaching Broadway again, I looped back north on 3rd, in search of Printers Alley, a block-long remnant of the city's old-time publishing business that runs parallel to 3rd and 4th, between Union and Church. Descriptions suggested this would be a cool destination for live music and authentic atmosphere, but I found only a handful of bars closed until nightfall and one takeaway bbq stand. It may look a lot better at night, though.

Close at hand, connecting 4th and 5th between Union and Church is the Arcade. If you're searching for a cheap, satisfying lunch, this is definitely the area. Mostly, it serves workers from nearby office buildings, and most of the shops were packed with obviously satisfied diners. There are so many lunch spots that they spill out of the arcade and onto 4th and 5th. Chili, bbq, wraps and salads, gyros... and not a Golden Arches in sight. If you're interested, treat it all like a food court, and pick whatever looks best to you. I thought I was going to head back here for lunch after my tour ended, but that's not how things turned out.

From the Arcade I headed south again on 5th, headed finally for the

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Ryman Auditorium. Whoops, the entrance is on 4th! So, back around the block I went, in search of info on the available tours (\$12.50 for a self-guided tour, \$16.50 if you want to add a half-hour guided tour of backstage). If I had been more tuned into the Grand Ole Opry growing up I definitely would have set aside the time to tour this beautiful, old building. As it was, the evening concerts would have been even more attractive - the Opry may have moved to bigger, grander quarters, but the line-up here still reads like a who's who.

While I chose not to book a tour (time was waning), I did ask the woman at the box office for a lunch recommendation. She instantly said "Jack's" and the folks in line behind me responded with a very enthusiastic, "Yes, go to Jack's! We just ate there, and it's great!" Jack's was one of the (apparent) tourist traps around the corner on Broadway. I guess I had to re-think my first impression!

Jack's Bar-B-Que www.jacksbarbque.com has a great old neon sign, sitting smack in the middle of Broadway between 4th and 5th, right across the street from Ernest Tubbs'. It's flanked on either side by an array of honkytonks, and after my survey of the entire District, the idea of a bit of live music after lunch was irresistible. But first, I had to eat!

Like just about every other place in the area, Jack's is dark, informal, with brick walls and well-worn decorations. The menu was pretty simple: Tennessee Pork Shoulder (sandwich \$3.29!!!), Texas Beef Brisket, Smoked Turkey Breast, Smoked Texas Sausage, St. Louis Style Pork Ribs, and Smoked Chicken, all available as sandwiches (\$3.29-\$4.29), "jumbo" (\$4.09-\$8.75), plates (\$7.99-\$10.49) and a combo plate with any three meats (\$11.99). Plates come with a choice of two veggies and "bread" (a really solid, satisfying corn bread the likes of which I've never encountered elsewhere).

The line to order at the counter was long, and I watched the counterman do his thing. Someone would place an order, and if there wasn't enough at hand, he'd turn around, open the black doors of the smoker, pull out a blackened, foil-wrapped pork shoulder (or chicken, turkey breast, or brisket), and go to work. He thunked a pork shoulder onto the chopping block, where it burst into shreds (pulled pork with no need to pull). For some perverse reason, I started humming Patsy Cline's "I Fall to Pieces." The counterman then shoved his gloved hand deep into the heap of meat, extracted the shoulder bone like a grown-up Little Jack Horner, and chopped the boneless remains with a few whacks of a meat cleaver. Chickens with deep brown skin fell to pieces on contact with his beefy hands (Patsy's voice now echoing loudly in my brain). I originally waffled on the three choices for my combo (choose just one? No way!), but by the time it was my turn the folks in front of me had

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shown me the way. Like a veteran I rattled off, "Pork, brisket, chicken, baked beans, and cole slaw." Naturally, I should have ordered beer, but I was pretty certain I had a night of drinking ahead of me, so I asked, "Do you have un-sweet iced tea?" Yep, right next to the sweet tea. I was all set.

It was as heavenly a barbecue moment as I've ever had. Everything was tender, moist and smoky, full of flavor and savor. I really can't tell you which I liked better. The pork was perfection. The brisket? Most barbecued briskets I've had were made from the lean, "plate" section of the cut and so tended to be on the dry side. While there was some of that "lean" around (although clearly quite moist), I was awarded a heap of the fatty side of the brisket - even more moist, tender and flavorful than the pork, and that's saying several mouthfuls! Yeah, the brisket probably took an extra day or two off my lifespan, but ooooooh, who cares? The chicken was there, in part, as my attempt to be "good," but if that choice gets me a place in heart-healthy heaven, it's not because it was without sin. Tender (again), moist (again), falling off the bones, rich with smoky goodness. Mmmm, yeah!

They had five sauces at the counter, and I took a little cup of each. Definitely taste the meat before you sauce, and whatever you do, do not drench it with sauce! That's a crime worthy of a stretch in Leavenworth. If you like sauce enough to cover your meat with it, drink it neat or on the rocks (just kidding). Dip the meat, drizzle just a bit over it, or do what some folks do with salad dressing - dip your fork into the sauce before you spear the meat. My favorite sauce by far was the Tennessee Original, a vinegar-based sauce without the tomatoes, mustard or hot sauce that are found in the other sauces. It added an extra dimension to all three meats without getting in the way. The baked beans were tasty - thick, and dark brown with molasses. The cole slaw was exceptional. I like a creamy slaw as much as the next guy (especially on a turkey with cole slaw and Russian on rye), and I enjoy sweet, Southern-style slaws like the kind served at KFC, but Jack's happens to be my favorite style - vinegar-based, with no mayo. It's the perfect complement to the rich meat - vinegary, with just enough sugar to take off the edge, seasoned with plenty of little, black celery seeds.

I might have had some dessert if I hadn't lacked self-control and cleaned my lunch plate (the best \$11.99 meal I've had in a long time). For \$2.50 I could have had a wedge of Chess or fudge pie (I also spied something that may have been banana cream, but it doesn't show up on the printed menu), but I was already over-done. While I can't say that Jack's is the best barbecue to be had in Nashville, if there's better out there, my imagination isn't up to the task.

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Finally, it was time for some music! I staggered out of Jack's and headed back up to the corner of 5th so I could work my way down the line in order. First stop, Legend Corner, the dive closest to the back door of the Ryman Auditorium. Two young guitarists were up on stage, performing an unfamiliar ballad to about ten folks scattered about the bar. The lyrics didn't really matter, though. Like The Lovin' Spoonful sang so long ago, "Nashville cats play clean as country water," and it's still true today. True, too, is that there are well more than thirteen hundred and fifty two worthy guitar pickers in Nashville (the number John Sebastian found in the Nashville musician union's member directory). I stood by the door, listened with pleasure to a couple of numbers, and moved on down the line. A couple of bars were quiet, while musicians were either packing or unpacking their instruments. Then Second Fiddle sucked me inside, with a quartet rocking the room with Sweet Home Alabama. I finished my country music smorgasbord at Layla's Bluegrass Hillbilly and Country Inn. Actually, I was steered inside by an enthusiastic guy in a white shirt and big, white hat (the band's manager? He was definitely too short to be a bouncer), but I was glad for the encouragement. The "Hillbilly Boys" were on stage - acoustic and electric guitars, bass, pedal steel, and drums. First up, a hard-drivin' version of Johnny Cash's Ring of Fire. If the crowd had been larger, they would have torn the house down, brick by exposed brick, and it stuck with me so well that I opened my guitar case as soon as I got home the next day, to play it myself.

"Yeah, there's thirteen hundred and fifty two guitar cases in Nashville And any one that unpacks his guitar could play twice as better than I will"

I allowed myself a few more tune with the Hillbilly Boys before a glance at my cell phone (who wears a watch any more?) told me it was time to head back to the hotel and make my presentation. With a smile and nod to the band, I dropped some bills into the plastic pickle jar and headed out into the sunlight.

I hear that these clubs can get pretty crowded come evening, but whether you enjoy this scene during a slow afternoon or a rowdy night, this strip of honkytonks is anything but a tourist trap. I know I'll be back for more whenever I get the chance.

And I did get the chance, more or less, later that same night. Once the conference was done and we all had a fine dinner under our belts, some of us headed back into town for more music. This time, we were about a mile outside The District, at The Station Inn <http://www.stationinn.com> - a famous, one-story concrete block building near the rail yards that specializes in acoustic bluegrass and "roots" music. The Steeldrivers were up on stage - acoustic guitar, banjo, mandolin, (sometimes) dobro,

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fiddle, and bass - clustered around three microphones just the way Bill Monroe did in his heyday; two "low" mics for the guitars, banjo and mandolin, one "high" mic for fiddle and vocals, the band members moving towards and away from the mics depending on who had the solo. We sipped on our longneck Buds, smiled deeply, and left after the last encore.

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