

NASHVILLE

Exploding in popularity, it's a destination for sports, food and entertainment

By Allison Horne

Nash-thrill, Music City USA, Smashville, Nashvegas, the Athens of the South.

All are nicknames for Nashville, Tennessee, and all represent different aspects of the culture the city has nurtured over the years and what it has grown to represent. While it has a storied past, the 533-square mile capital of Tennessee is now known for being a thriving hub for music lovers, sports fanatics, foodies and really just anyone looking for a good time.

"Nashville offers a diverse, unique, authentic variety of dining, entertainment, live music and sports," says Heather Middleton, vice president of public relations for the [Nashville Convention and Visitors Bureau](#). "The diversity of the city mixed with hospitality and overall friendliness really attracts people to visit and come back again."

Each year, Nashville continues to set records for visitors. In 2018, the area brought in 15.2 million people, which is nearly a five percent increase over 2017, per the visitors bureau. To put the growth in

even more perspective, there were just 8.5 million visitors in 2008.

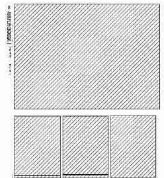
"Nashville draws a diverse crowd," Middleton says. "From young children and families to bachelorette parties, conventions, business meetings and beyond, Nashville seems to attract people of all ages and backgrounds. Nashville top feeder cities for visitors include Chicago, Atlanta and New York City."

To get to Nashville from Chicago, it is either a seven-and-a-half hour drive or an hour-and-a-half direct flight. Not too shabby for all the fun times that await.

■ MUSIC CITY, USA

Much of Nashville's growth after it was founded in 1779 was due to the music business.

According to the Nashville Area Chamber of Commerce, Nashville is home to more than 180 recording studios and 5,000 working musicians. That's in addition to more than 180 live music venues scat-



tered around the city, marked by guitar pick-shaped signs. The live music scene in Nashville has contributed to a thriving nightlife and bar scene, as well.

Part of what makes Nashville so great isn't just the amount of live music venues – but the history behind them.

The Ryman Auditorium, which was built in 1892, is a staple in the Nashville music scene and is often credited with being the birthplace of bluegrass. The building, which was formerly named the Union Gospel Tabernacle and Grand Ole Opry, is named for Thomas G. Ryman, a Nashville businessman who dedicated his life and fortune to erecting the building. The music sanctuary, which was almost demolished after falling into disrepair, was completely renovated and restored in the 1990s. Since then, the 2,362-seat theater was named the most iconic structure in Tennessee by Architectural Digest in 2018.

Artists like Elvis, Emmylou Harris, Paul Simon, B.B. King and Kings of Leon have graced the stage at the Ryman. Keith Urban has boasted that there is "nowhere he'd rather play," and Mumford & Sons have said it's the "Finest room to sing in the world." The Grand Ole Opry, which also played a huge role in the Ryman's success, has become a music tradition of its own. It originally started as a radio broadcast in 1925 is now dedicated to honoring country music's history and future.

"The thing that makes the Opry completely unique is that it is a radio show that has transcended radio," says Dan Rogers, director of marketing and program development at the Grand Ole Opry House. "People from around the world want to come and see the new superstars and legends of country music on a single stage. It's the place you might see three generations of artists on stage and three generations of fans sitting in the audience with you."

After leaving the Ryman Auditorium in 1974, the Opry moved into the brand-new Grand Ole Opry House, which featured a six-foot circle of hardwood from the Ryman placed center stage at the new venue. Today, artists like Trace Adkins, Dierks Bentley, Vince Gill, Brad Paisley and Carrie Underwood are all part of the Opry family.

"The Grand Ole Opry has always reflected the country music of the time," Rogers says. "It holds tight to tradition but also embraces the future of country music. It has always remained relevant over

the course of its 93 years."

Even if it's not possible to make it to the Grand Ole Opry, you can still tune in. The show, which is still broadcast from 650 AM WSM, its flagship station, can also be heard on SiriusXM Radio, YouTube, Opry.com and the Opry app.

"I've personally listened in a hammock in Key West, a hotel room in London and plenty of places around the world," Rogers says. "People all over the world can tune in and hear genuine country music coming from the Opry stage."

Rogers recommends checking out the Opry backstage tour to fully get an understanding of Nashville and country music.

In addition to the Opry, Middleton recommends visiting the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum and the Historic RCA Studio B, where Elvis recorded 250 of his songs.

Not only are there historical venues to check out, but there are also some major festivals worth taking a trek to Nashville for.

Consider visiting for Funk Fest August 10, Lynchburg Music Fest August 23, Wine on the River September 7, Americana Fest September 10, or the Music City Food and Wine Festival September 20.

■ NASHVILLE GRUB

Who doesn't love food? It's not possible to go to Nashville without exploring what the classic southern-meets-James Beard chef scene entails.

"There are so many exciting restaurants in Nashville," Middleton says. "But you can't visit without trying barbeque, Nashville hot chicken, a traditional meat-and-three, and a meal at one of the many chef-driven restaurants."

Nashville is known for being the birthplace of hot chicken, and the Music City Hot Chicken Festival is thrown every year to celebrate it. A classic hot chicken dish comes with a portion of meat that has been marinated, floured, fried and sauced using a cayenne pepper paste. It's generally served on top of white bread with pickle chips. Some restaurants known for their hot chicken include Prince's Hot Chicken Shack and Hattie B's.

Meat-and-threes is a more traditional meal often enjoyed by locals as well as residents in other southern states. The concept is that every customer picks one meat and three side dishes from a daily selection. Restaurants known for serving great meat-and-threes include Arnold's Country Kitchen, Monell's Café and Puckett's.

Barbeque is a southern classic, and Nashville doesn't disappoint. Some local go-tos include Jack's Bar-B-Que, Martin's Bar-B-Que Joint, Edley's Bar-B-Que and Peg Leg Porker.

As Nashville's popularity has risen, the city has seen an influx of talented chefs opening restaurants. Henrietta Red was nominated as a semi-finalist for Best New Restaurants by the James Beard Foundation and co-owner and executive chef Julia Sullivan was named one of Food and Wine Magazine's Best New Chefs in America in 2018. Former "Top Chef" contestant Richard Blais owns the FLIP Burger Boutique, James Beard Award winner Tandy Wilson runs City House, and chef Philip Krajeck, a Beard Award nominee, owns Rolf and Daughters and Folk. (And that's just to name a few.)

■ SPORTS

All great cities have great sports teams. While Nashville has never seen a professional sports championship of any kind in its town, the Nashville Predators might be in the running this season after winning the Presidents' Trophy last year.

"Nashville is a sports city, and the locals and visitors alike show up in masses to catch hockey games, NFL games (Tennessee Titans), USL soccer games (Nashville SC) and MiLB games (Nashville Sounds)," Middleton says.

But the city also has more heading its way – Major League Soccer is growing from 23 to 26 teams by 2020, and Nashville is one of them.

The biggest event in Nashville's history also coincides with two other huge events – the 2019 St. Jude Rock 'n' Roll Nashville Marathon and IF the Predators advance to the second round in the Stanley Cup playoffs, there will most likely be a game

that weekend, as well.

One thing is for sure – there is no shortage of events going on in Nashville year-round, and whether it be for sports, music, food or history, Nashville is calling... and everyone should go.



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