



## A brand-new Branson isn't just for seniors

By Didi Tang, Special for USA TODAY

BRANSON, Mo. — The lights of *The Lawrence Welk Show* are long out, but Welk Resorts in Branson has a new attraction.

It is a \$3.5 million, 10,000-square-foot Splash-A-Torium that opened last March, just in time for families seeking summer fun.

"Everyone really enjoyed it ... and we had a record summer," says Dathan Atchison, general manager of the 15-year-old property.

The town, best known for theaters that cater to grannies, is getting more youth-oriented as it tries to shake off its senior-only image to lure new, younger visitors to keep its tourism growing.

"In the older days, we preached to the choir," says Dan Lennon, a vice president at the Branson/Lakes Area Convention and Visitors Bureau and a brother of the Lennon Sisters, who perform here. "Now, we want to reach out and tell people: 'Guess what you can do in Branson.'"

You can still relive the good ol' days of Andy Williams and Dick Clark, but you also have magic shows, acrobatic acts, comedies, pop music and Broadway performances to choose from. If a live show is not your cup of tea, there are museums, theme parks, golf courses, bike routes and shopping malls.

The city's desire to rebrand itself and attract new blood is all about survival, given the recent plateau of new visitors after a boom of more than a decade.

In 2007, the number of visitors peaked at 8.3 million, but the percentage of first-timers had been hovering around 20% for several years, compared with 53% in 1992 — the year after *60 Minutes* catapulted Branson into national fame. City officials and theater owners knew they needed to adapt to changing demographics.

So at Welk Resorts, for example, *The Lawrence Welk Show* had its curtain call in 2004, along with the Lennon Brothers, who ended their 23-year performance of swing music from the 1930s and 1940s.

"That fan base, obviously, was aging tremendously," Atchison says. "They couldn't travel anymore, and they could no longer sustain our 2,200-seat theater."

Today, Welk Resorts' theater features stars such as Tony Orlando, Lee Greenwood, the Bellamy Brothers and the Lennon Sisters who appeal to Baby Boomers. It also has concert weekends with names such as the Beach Boys, Three Dog Night, B.B. King and *American Idol* Taylor Hicks.

In 2002, the Haygoods, a family of seven brothers and one sister, opened their own variety show on Highway 76 — Branson's strip of theaters. The performers, ages 16 to 33, are popular among seniors, but their gymnastics, dancing and singing have won the hearts of younger audiences.

In 2006, the Titanic Museum opened its doors. Family passes sell briskly, co-owner Mary Kellogg says.

And last summer, the Mansion Theater transplanted Cathy Rigby's revived *Peter Pan* show to the Ozarks.

"We thought we needed to bring some show that ... appeals to the whole family," says Marc Whitmore, a theater vice president.

Even the Chinese are building a cultural outpost in the Ozarks. New Shanghai Circus, which features stunning acts from Chinese acrobats, moved into a custom-built theater in 2005. And in May, the Chinese kung fu and acrobatic extravaganza *Chun Yi: The Legend of Kung Fu* will premiere in Branson in its own theater.

Shops and activities have followed suit. Outside the theater strip, Branson Landing, a waterfront pedestrian mall with retailers such as Ann Taylor Loft, Victoria's Secret and Coldwater Creek, opened in 2006, with the Hilton Branson Convention Center rising in its background.

Tour of Missouri, a premium cycling race, has highlighted the hills of Branson, and the city hopes its inaugural Ironman competition in 2010 will build Branson as an outdoor destination.

All the changes seem to be paying off. The average age of visitors has dropped from 58 in 2005 to 56 this year. And the number of visitors as of September this year, 5.5 million, has declined only slightly from 5.6 million in September 2008, despite the economic recession.

Most importantly, Branson is drawing newcomers again: First-time visitors have made up 32% of all its tourists so far this year.

"It's surprisingly good," Lennon says. "Now those people can come back again and again."

Tang reports for the Springfield (Mo.) News-Leader.