

Contact: Melanie Fly
615-620-2182
mfly@turnberry.com

NASHVILLE'S UNION STATION HOTEL:

HEADQUARTERS FOR EXPLORING NASHVILLE

Boutique hotel is in center of Music City's entertainment, dining, business life

NASHVILLE, Tenn. – Nashville's appeals are many, and the 125-room Union Station Hotel is an ideal headquarters location for exploring the city's history and music or for conducting business.

The hotel itself is one-third of the trio of buildings most often identified as Nashville's architectural icons. The others are the Ryman Auditorium and a full-scale replica of the Athenian Parthenon. All three are only minutes away from each other.

First on the scene was the Ryman Auditorium, which opened in 1892 as an ecumenical church. It gradually morphed into a lecture hall, concert hall and all-purpose gathering place. It gained international fame as home of the Grand Ole Opry radio show from 1943-1974.

The list of performers and luminaries who have appeared at the Ryman is stunning. It includes Sarah Bernhardt, Booker T. Washington, Edward Strauss and the Vienna Orchestra, the Metropolitan Opera Company, Katharine Hepburn, Mae West, Orson Wells, Ignace Paderewski and the greats of country music such as Roy Acuff, Minnie Pearl and Hank Williams.

The Ryman deteriorated terribly in the 1970s but was spectacularly restored in 1994 and today is one of America's most treasured performance venues. It is listed on the National Register of Historic Places and is the recipient of a Phoenix Award from the Society of American Travel Writers for its historic preservation and impact on tourism.

The Parthenon soon followed the Ryman as a symbol of the city. It was Nashville's pavilion in the Tennessee Centennial Exposition of 1897, an event akin to a modern-day world's fair. Other replica structures included an Egyptian pyramid, a Norman castle and the Rialto Bridge from Venice. All were temporary structures, and all but the Parthenon were dismantled at the end of the exposition.

Nashville had fallen in love with the Parthenon, but the plaster and lathe building never was meant to last. A masonry replacement was built for permanence, and it opened in 1925. That structure today is the centerpiece of Centennial Park, Nashville's premier urban park. Just as in the original Parthenon, a 42-foot-tall statue of Athena reigns here.

Union Station came next, and a twist of history connects the original Parthenon with the early days of the station. A statue of Mercury was commissioned for one of the Centennial Exposition's pavilions, and the builder of the Union Station acquired it to crown his new railroad station that opened in 1900.

Union Station was a massive undertaking for its time. It rose 247 feet from track level to the top of its tower (Mercury's new home), and 128 stained glass panels made its barrel-vaulted lobby ceiling a marvel. Architectural touches include a heavenly host of angels (clothed in very revealing gowns for such conservative times), eye-catching bas-relief sculptures and gleaming marble floors.

All of that craftsmanship and beauty were carefully restored when the railroad station was reborn in 1986 as a hotel. A \$10 million renovation in 2006 and 2007 added to its appeal and luster.

A trifecta tour of the Ryman, the Parthenon and the Union Station Hotel is an excellent Nashville experience, but it can be only the start for those who want more.

A multi-day itinerary that barely will get you out of sight of the Union Station Hotel is easy to create.

The hotel's next-door neighbor is the Frist Center for the Visual Arts, and just a few blocks away are the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum and the new \$123 million Schermerhorn Symphony Center. Nashville's honky-tonk district, where the famous Tootsie's Orchid Lounge always has live music, is just five blocks down Broadway from the hotel, and the restaurants of an emerging entertainment area called the Gulch are a similar distance in the opposite direction.

Only slightly farther away are attractions such as the Grand Ole Opry House, Andrew Jackson's Hermitage and the Cheekwood Botanical Gardens and Fine Arts Center.

The Union Station concierge helps guests plan excursions of all types. Full hotel information is available online at unionstationnashville.com.

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