

NASHVILLE



BEYOND THE
HONKY TONK

RAY COLLINS



By now you've heard about the emergence of Nashville and all the fun to have on Broadway at the dozens of bars all playing live country music. Make no mistake—this is a FUN place to be, often compared to the new Las Vegas, minus the gambling.

Each weekend, countless brides and their best friends pop up around town with the bachelorette parties, complete with bridal sashes and thirst for fun and alcohol.

But what about for the rest of us who aren't getting married or who aren't big fans of country music? Pack your bags, there is still plenty to do.

Erin and I flew from Sarasota to Nashville via Atlanta. We were confused in the Atlanta airport when it said, "Leave for Nashville at 5pm. Arrive, 5:05pm." Wow! Quick flight. That's when we realized we were heading into the Central Time Zone.

The airport is nice and just east of downtown. We got an Uber to our hotel near the waterfront for just under \$20. We stayed at a place called the 21c Museum Hotel on 2nd Avenue North, a block west of the Cumberland River that flows through the downtown area.

Conde Nast Traveler calls it a "hotel and modern art museum." It received the Readers' Choice Award several years in a row.

There are 124 guest rooms that are spacious, clean and offer great views of the downtown area. The location couldn't have been better to walk out the door, romp around the city and walk back to our hotel.



After an afternoon of traveling, it was nice to walk out the door and down the alley (alley's a popular, clean and convenient in Nashville) to a newer restaurant called Black Rabbit on 3rd Avenue North. This place is just as cool as the hotel we just left a minute earlier: The restaurant is in an historic building dating back to the 1890's. It's a former law office with 16-foot ceilings, exposed brick and hardwood flooring. The open kitchen featured a wood-fired grill and oven. We could just tell we chose someplace special.

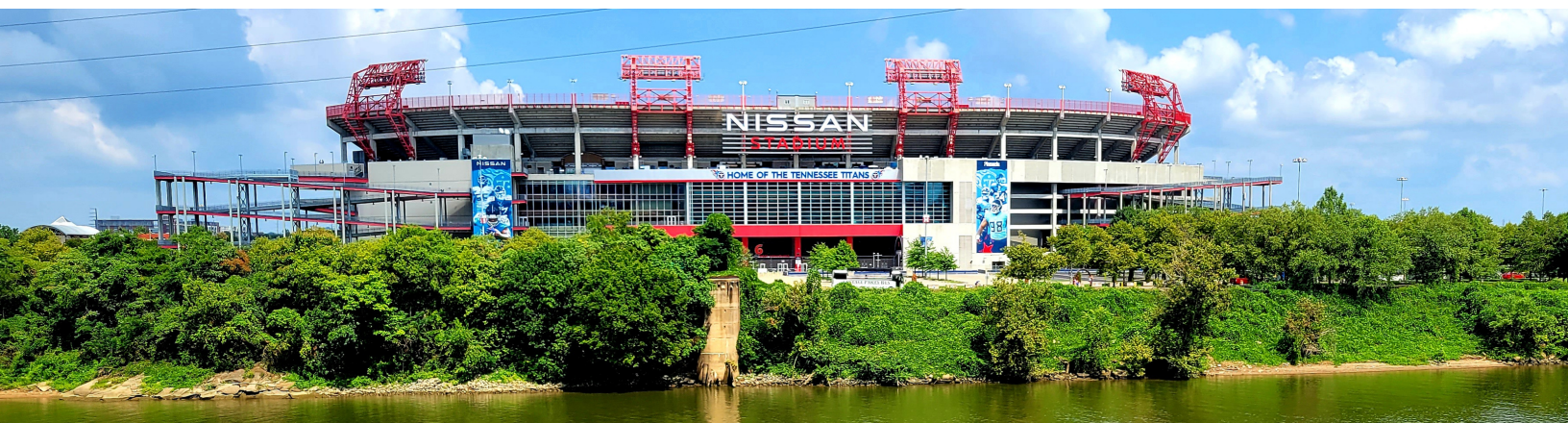
Erin had the half-chicken with white beans, braised greens country ham and mustard-seed chimichurri. I was hungry and chose the 18-ounce ribeye with red potatoes, shishito and whole-grain mustard herb butter. The waiter helped pair a pinot noir that made our meal taste even better. Cool atmosphere, not a lot of tables and a perfect location. We went to a famous milkshake place around the corner for dessert and headed to bed early to rest up for our first full day in Music City.

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Being early-risers, one of our favorite things to do it hit the streets earlier and get a closer look before it gets too busy. We asked the concierge to direct us toward the waterfront and he practically walked us there. Consistently very friendly and helpful.

The waterfront overlooks the Tennessee Titans football stadium which is just across a footbridge from downtown. Nashville was smart to put the facility nearby. Some cities—like my hometown of Buffalo—build stadiums half an hour away, and later regret it.

We walked across the pedestrian bridge to get a good look at the downtown skyline. Beautiful. The city is a mixture of corporate buildings—including the ever-looming AT&T building nicknamed the 'Batman building' due to the unique architecture that resembles ears at the top—and old brick buildings on the city's main drag Broadway.



After a good walk, we stopped for breakfast at Puckett's Grocery—which really isn't a grocery store at all. Puckett's roots stretch back to the 1950s when it began as a small grocery store in nearby Leiper's Fork. Since then, they've grown to six restaurants, and I love their tag line: "Where the main ingredients are real people, real food and real atmosphere."

We chose a window seat to be able to watch corporate Nashville hustling to work. Our waiter was from Clearwater, so we enjoyed talking to him about his Florida roots.

We each had an omelet, split an order of bacon and coffee. Good food and friendly service.

After an easy walk back to the hotel and a quick shower, we ventured back out to hop on the Old Town Trolley Tour. We love doing that in any city we visit. Gives you a chance to see the sights, learn a bit--and hop off and back on when the mood strikes.

We wove up and down the city streets, hearing the history of the city and seeing the arena, convention center and museums around the city. We saw the state capitol—one of a handful that does not have a dome. Good trivia. We also saw the TV station where Oprah Winfrey began her career, WSMV-TV, Channel 5.

We got off the trolley at a place called the Assembly Food Hall, and boy, did we have choices: Thirty restaurants and bars, and the city's largest rooftop. We found a bright and big place on the top floor called Sixty Vines, which also have restaurants in Winter Park, Florida, and several other cities in Texas. This place wound up being a nice surprise. It got the name from the 60 wine taps behind the bar! Despite the crowd, the hostess found us a nice high-top table by the window and a waitress quickly came and took our order. Another cool place with great energy.

It's also right across the street from the arena where big name acts perform, as well as the Nashville Predators hockey team. So far, Music City is getting a huge two thumbs up.

We got back on the trolley, saw more of Nashville including all the famous studios where everyone from Elvis and Johnny Cash—to Taylor Swift record, or recorded. We saw famous Vanderbilt University and quaint Belmont College.

When we got back near Broadway, we got off and walked a few blocks back to our hotel where we were once again greeted like old friends.

After a nap and a shower, it was off to dinner.

We had our final meal in Nashville at another high-energy cool place called Deacon's New South. It's located on the first floor of the historic L&C Tower. They boast a "modern culinary concept with a Southern slant," and "an updated take on the region's traditional cuisine."

Since we're both gluten free—and not by choice--the waitress was kind enough to run through the entire menu and tell us what was safe and what was off-limits. Nashville is known for hot spicy chicken, so we gave it a shot! It came with dilly beans (?), hot honey butter glaze and potatoes in beef fat. Erin called it "Amazing", and I agree.

We walked back to the hotel on Broadway and saw lots of people in every bar and restaurant—all seeming to have fun and enjoying themselves.

Nashville has come out of nowhere to be one of the new top vacation destinations in the country. City planners did a great job designing a user-friendly, pro-business atmosphere that trickles down to a great weekend away!

