

## Branson, MO



Millions of visitors flock to bucolic Branson, Missouri every year. For the overwhelming majority, playing golf isn't a top priority; maybe 5% of visitors actually tee it up while in the area. However that mindset is destined to change in the years to come. The golf product in this region of the Ozarks, in the southernmost part of the state and close at hand to the Arkansas state line, is exceptional, albeit little-known. The inventory continues to grow, and courses such as Buffalo Ridge and Top of the Rock, Thousand Hills, Pointe Royale and LedgeStone, among others, are gaining traction, and garnering deserved attention. In a certain way, Branson is remindful of other Midwest micro-destinations such as Gaylord, Michigan and the Brainerd Lakes area of Minnesota. Much like Branson, these hamlets originated as hunting-fishing-camping specific regions full of natural beauty, and ideal for simple, few-frills, back-to-nature family vacationing. However Branson has an additional asset that the other destinations could never dream of: A cornucopia of live entertainment venues, by day and by night, featuring comedy, music, magic, variety, ventriloquism, acrobatics and more. It's not Broadway, it's not Vegas, but it's not bad at all. It's family-friendly fare, G-rated or PG at the most, with no burlesque or skimpy costume element to be found.

Known in some circles as the “Live Music Show Capital of the World,” Branson offers fifty live performance theaters, three pristine lakes, a popular theme park, numerous other attractions and museums, and a dozen golf courses.

Shoji Tabuchi is both an avid golfer and an entertainment icon in Branson, wildly popular with sell-out audiences, who revel in his unique appeal. It’s not hard to fathom why. How often does one encounter a classically trained Japanese violinist-turned-fiddle-player who cut his teeth in the Cajun style down in Louisiana for a decade after leaving the Far East? Shoji performs in a rotating series of glittery sequined jackets that would make Liberace blush, playing behind the back, behind the waist, flying around the stage on wires like Peter Pan, playing everything from foot-stomping country and western classics to waltzes, rock-and-roll to Broadway standards. “I began playing golf about twenty years ago,” explains Shoji, who performs in his own theatre. “There weren’t nearly as many good courses then as now. Top of the Rock and Thousand Hills are two of my favorites. I think the reason we don’t see the golf traffic we should is because the marketing of golf in Branson hasn’t been aggressive. More marketing, like what you see in Myrtle Beach or Scottsdale, would help a lot.”



Buffalo Ridge



Top of the Rock

The presence of the PGA Tour Champions is certainly helping raise the area's golf profile, as [Buffalo Ridge](#) and [Top of the Rock](#) play host each spring to the world's best fifty-and-older professionals in the Bass Pro Shops Legends of Golf. The courses are popular amenities of Big Cedar Lodge, owned by Bass Pro Shops founder Johnny Morris. They are a complementary duo that, much like Simon and Garfunkel, couldn't be more different. Buffalo Ridge is a brawny and beautiful championship track designed by Tom Fazio that undulates through pristine Ozark landscape. Top of the Rock is a par-3 course and Jack Nicklaus Signature Design perched above Table Rock Lake. The gorgeous setting and views make the excellent golf an unforgettable pairing. Mr. Morris is building two more courses, both also Big Cedar Lodge amenities, including an 18-hole course by Bill Coore and Ben Crenshaw and a twelve hole family-friendly layout by Gary Player.



LedgeStone

[LedgeStone Golf Club](#) is one of the more unique offerings in the area. It's not particularly lengthy, not even 6,900 yards from the tips, and most play is conducted from the blue tees, just 6,400 yards. But there are numerous challenges, including blind shots, hairpin doglegs, precipice greens, and some stunning scenery, in particular the water features that come into play on the closing holes. It is firm as a tabletop, plays lightning-fast, and is a superb option for couples or families. The course has a unique feature with named holes that are literally and figuratively compelling. Examples include "The Quarry," "Deception," "The Ridge" and "Temptation."

Nobody goes hungry in Branson, not for entertainment, and certainly not for food. If fine dining in a top-notch steak house is the preference, be sure to check out [Level 2](#) at the Branson Hilton Convention Center hotel. For local flavor and a breakfast that will tide you over until dinner, visit [Billy Gail's](#) for hubcake sized pancakes and an old-school experience where you'll need to put your hand over your coffee cup to halt the never-ending pour. In between those two options is [Cantina Laredo](#). It serves authentic Mexican dishes in a sophisticated atmosphere. Fish specials, grilled chicken and steaks are complemented by signature sauces such as chipotle-wine with Portobello mushrooms or sautéed artichoke hearts and roasted red bell peppers.