

HOME KITCHEN
REINVENTIONS

REMEMBERING
ROY HARROVER

THE PYRAMID'S
GREAT INDOORS

PETE NELSON'S
TREEHOUSE

Memphis

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GREAT WEDDINGS OF 2016



THE HALLE-CONNOR WEDDING
SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 3RD, 2016
Annesdale Mansion

THE GREAT INDOORS!



PHOTOGRAPH BY LAURA JEAN HOCKING

FORTY-FOUR HOURS IN THE BASS PRO PYRAMID.

by CHRIS MCCOY

THE EMAIL WAS COMPLETELY UNEXPECTED: an invitation to spend two nights in the Big Cypress Lodge at Bass Pro Shops at the Pyramid. It seems someone there had read my recent *Memphis* magazine travel story about Nashville, and was impressed.

I knew on some vague level that there was a hotel inside the Pyramid, but since I live in Memphis, I didn't think I would ever actually stay there. This opportunity was too good to pass up, but I needed a hook. How do you write a travel story about the city you live in, for an audience of people who (mostly) also live in the city? Then, as I was reading the list of amenities and attractions, it hit me. My wife, Laura Jean Hocking, is a photographer, and she lovingly volunteered to spend the entire time with me inside the Big Pointy Building.

Strangely, the editor of this magazine thought all this was a terrific idea. So one Tuesday afternoon in early December, Laura and I got dropped off in front of the Bass Pro Pyramid. It was the earliest check-in time, 3 p.m. We would stay until the latest check-out time, 11 a.m., Thursday.



PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY BIG CYPRESS LODGE

INTO THE PYRAMID

FIRST MOVED FROM MIDDLE Tennessee to Memphis one month before the September 15, 1989, groundbreaking for what was then called the Great American Pyramid, so I've been present to observe the entire saga of the \$113 million, 321-foot monument to the River City unfold. It has been, at various times, a source of hope, a point of pride, a symbol of waste, and a punchline. But the one thing it has never been was uncontro-



The Lookout.

versal. It has hosted graduations, basketball victories (and defeats), monster truck rallies, and the Rolling Stones. I'm not a sports fan, so my biggest emotional connection to the place is the memory of the three concerts by Prince I caught there over the years, the first of which, in 1997, ranks among the best musical performances I have ever seen. The last show at the Pyramid was Bob Seger on February 3, 2006. I know this because it was our wedding night, and some of our guests came from the show to our reception.

During the almost decade-long struggle to find a tenant for what had become a civic white elephant, I was skeptical that the building would survive. When I heard Bass Pro Shops was going to move in, I was incredulous. An outdoor shop? In a pyramid? Just on an architectural level, it seemed incongruous. This place was modeled after a 5,000-year-old wonder of the world, not a hunting lodge. What were they thinking?

The contrast is summed up in the faux-rustic porte-cochère the Bass Pro architects added on to greet guests at the entrance. The shape echoes the pyramid's point, but the wooden structure still looks strange snuggled up to the slick, gleaming, stainless-steel of the exterior. Once inside, however, everything changes. All hint of steel is gone, and everything is made of wood.

LODGING

OUR FIRST ORDER OF BUSINESS was checking into our room. Long after the opening crowds had died down, I had come here to have a look at the store and take in the view from the top, which Memphians had been promised from the ear-

liest days of this building, but which had never materialized. I grudgingly admitted I was impressed with the towering trees and the maze of ponds, but I was unclear on where the actual hotel was located. Turns out, the Big Cypress Lodge is arranged discretely, in two rings around the pyramid interior, filling out the second and third floors. Our room was the basic Interior King. We had both a shower and a tub with air bubble action in the bathroom. If you count the screened-in porch overlooking the store, it was about half as big as my Midtown house.

"The way it is made, even though you book a standard King room, you never know what that's going to give you," says Chard-ee Jones, Big Cypress Lodge's front office manager, as she gives us the tour of the entire facility an hour later. One wall of our room is dominated by a massive entertainment center/armoire. Beneath the TV is a faux fireplace that, while it does not provide warmth, does suffuse the room with an alluring glow. Jones informs us that every room has one of these armoires, and they're all different, because they're all hand-carved. This is not like your usual hotel, where everything is standardized for easy maintenance and geared towards business travelers. There's great attention to detail everywhere, from the spiral staircase-accessed loft and the copper basin sinks in the larger Fly Fishing Cabins to the ornate light switch panels. Even the vent covers are unusual, designed

to reinforce the rustic atmosphere with a tangled branch motif.

"I tell people, 'Keep your eyes open. Look up; look down. You'll be surprised at the things you see,'" Jones says. "They put so much love into everything they carved, even down to the paint they used."

Jones worked at a similar outdoors-themed lodge, called Big Cedar Lodge, outside Branson, Missouri, before she came here to help open the hotel. Like many people we will meet in the next couple of days, she's been here since the April 29, 2015, opening.

"This is the first Bass Pro to have exhibit space inside the store, and the first to have lodging inside the store," she says. "It's unlike anything I've ever worked in before."

The biggest of the 102 rooms, the Governor's Suite is essentially a luxury cabin built on stilts to provide the best views of the sprawling retail floor.

The biggest of the 103 rooms is the Governor's Suite, which is essentially a luxury cabin built on stilts to provide the best views of the sprawling retail floor. To call it massive doesn't do it justice. There's a full kitchen, multiple bedrooms, and a lounge. The ceilings are so high, Jones tells me, that the cleaning staff has

a special lift to get up to the top.

We are joined on the tour by Natalie Persons, a sales manager who has only been with the company a short time. Unlike Jones, she's a Memphis native. As we walk through conference rooms with throne-like leather chairs, she tells us that her biggest Pyramid memory was participating in a Memphis in May event when she was in the sixth grade. "I can remember sitting on



Queen room



Bath



Balcony view



Don't look down! The Lookout features a glass floor.

the floor of the Pyramid, looking up at the people in the stands," she says. "Where the boat center is now, that's where the buses pulled up and we unloaded. I remember that like it was yesterday. When I come in here now, I'm like, there's no way I sat down on that floor!"

Jones says she frequently hears about Pyramid memories from guests. "That's my favorite part — hearing people who are coming here for the first time after years of not being here and saying, 'I remember when the Harlem Globetrotters used to play here!' Me too! I try to help them envision where the concession stands were, where the court was. I love the looks on their faces when they find out there's a hotel here!"

We think our room is approximately where we sat for one of the Prince shows, but it's hard to tell for certain.

SHOPPING

NEXT, MILTON HOWERY LEADS US on a tour of the retail store and associated attractions. The former sales manager for the Cook Convention Center took this job five months before the opening. "I had my high school graduation here," he says. "When I was approached with the opportunity, I could not turn it down. It's the Memphis Pyramid! An iconic symbol! To be

a part of how we represent Memphis and the Bass Pro Shops and be a part of the planning process is one those things I'll talk about when I'm 90 years old."

Howery helped fill the 535,000 square feet of floor space with merchandise and supervises the many events held here, such as catch-and-release fishing in the interconnected ponds that circle the store, seasonal attractions geared towards families, and even a 200-team bow fishing tournament. "That's one thing about Bass Pro," he says. "We're not known for just the

outdoor stuff. When we do events, we try to bring in some kind of celebrity, a sports figure, an outdoorsman, or someone like that to interact with the customers. When you come in the building, you never know what's going to happen. I get emails from customers asking, 'What events are you having in the building?' rather than, 'What sales do you have going on?'"

Children, he says, love the store the most: "We have summer camp, where for four or five weeks we have activities almost every day. We teach fishing, camping, water safety, those types of things that it's vital for kids to know For some kids, it's the first time they're introduced to camping."

We linger to chat in front of the alligators lounging on their heated rocks, so by the time we make it to the biggest of the three massive

aquariums, we've missed the 5 p.m. fish-feeding show. "There's almost 600,000 gallons of water in the building," says Howery. "It's not small at all."

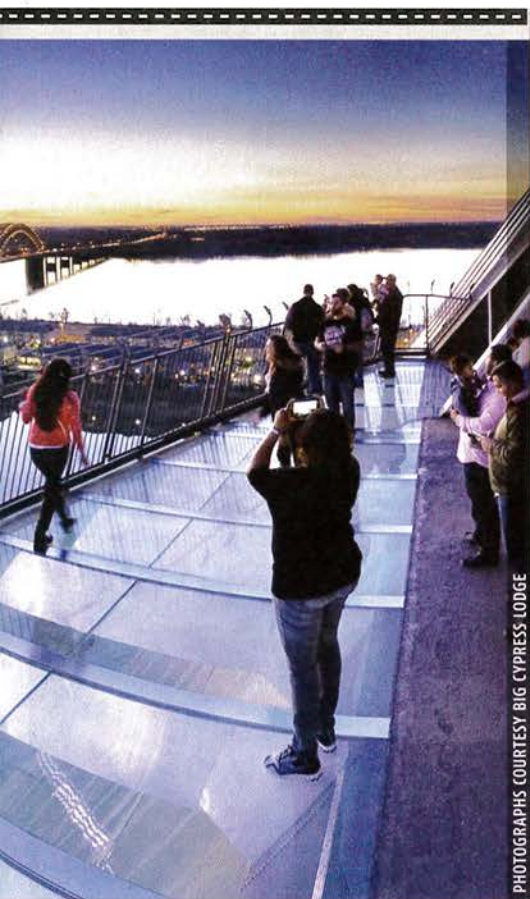
On the elevator to the second floor, we meet Chris and Abby Wheeler, who live near Hot Springs, Arkansas. "We live on a farm, and we're surrounded by national forests on all sides. We do a lot of hunting and fishing," Chris says.

He recently had back surgery at the Semmes Murphey clinic, and they're in town for a follow-up visit. "Whenever we're over here, we always come," says Chris.

"This is our ritual," Abby says. "Bass Pro is one of those stores that we seek out, and this is our favorite. It's got a lot of things to do in here."

When they hear what we're doing, they're jealous. "We never got to take a honeymoon," says Chris. "Our goal one of these days is to come over here and stay in the hotel."

The second floor of the shop is devoted to all things hunting. If there's ever a zombie apocalypse, the Pyramid will be the place to hole up, as the firearms section is the largest arsenal I have ever seen. Next to the racks and racks of pistols, rifles, and shotguns is a tasteful specialty store run by the Italian gun manufacturer Beretta. There, Howery shows us the single most expensive item in the store: A handmade, silver-festooned shotgun priced at \$82,000. Howery says they have sold at least three of them.



PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY BIG CYPRESS LODGE

THE VIEW

WITH HOWERY IN TOW, WE RIDE the world's largest freestanding elevator to The Lookout. On the way up, the recorded voice of fishing legend Bill Dance tells the story of how Bass Pro Shops owner Johnny Morris decided to go ahead with this massive and incredibly risky project. While floating on the Mississippi with Dance, Morris said if they caught a catfish weighing 30 pounds, he would take that as a positive sign. Sure enough, he caught the fish, and here we are.

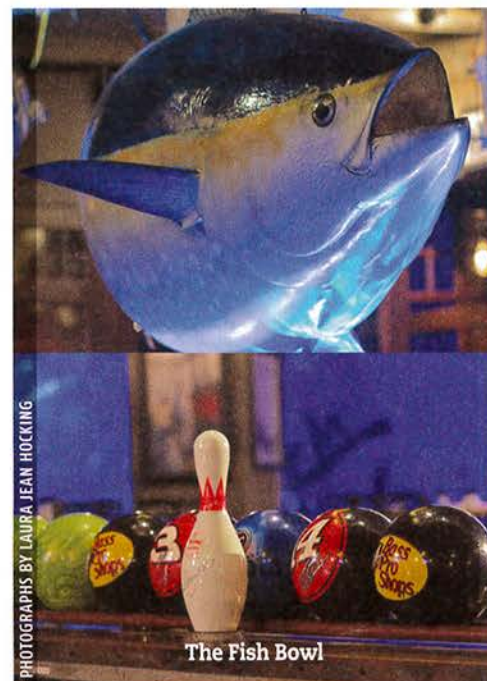
The sun has set while we've been in the store, and Memphis' sprawl twinkles to the north, east, and south. The centerpiece of the bar is a circular aquarium inhabited by a catfish named Lulu who weighs a whole lot more than 30 pounds. At 280 feet above ground, Howery jokes that this is probably the highest catfish in the world.

The view is what Memphis has been promised since 1989, and it does not disappoint. "I think it serves as an example for what other cities can do with existing structures," Howery says before taking his leave. We have a glass of wine while taking in the view, then retire to our lodging. While we're waiting for room service to arrive, I check the pedometer app on my iPhone. We've walked more than four miles today.

BASS PRO PYRAMID

FUN

AFTER SLEEPING IN AND SIPPING ON in-room coffee, we take the private elevator down to Uncle Buck's for a country breakfast. Then it's back up the stairs for a whirl through the Ducks Unlimited Waterfowling Heritage Center. The history of the association of duck hunters and the organization's efforts to preserve the fowl's wetland habitats is interesting to this museum geek. As we're leaving, we pass a pair of Bass Pro customers who were loudly disappointed that none of the collection of vintage shotguns, duck calls, and decoys is for sale.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY LAURA JEAN HOCKING

The Fish Bowl

We know we're going to stuff ourselves silly today, so we decide to use a little bit of our downtime to hit the fitness center. It's well-equipped, and happily on a Wednesday morning, we have the place to ourselves. For lunch, we're back up to The Lookout, where we meet the *Memphis* magazine editor, who comes by to make sure we're actually working. Laura has the Southwestern salad with salmon, and I try the turkey club. Satiated, we head to the archery range. This is the part of the schedule that Laura was most excited about, having never fired a bow before. With the help of a very kind and patient associate, we plunk arrows down the range for the better part of an hour before our bowfingers give out. (There's also a gun range, but you have to bring your own weapon.)

The Fish Bowl is a minor psychedelic masterpiece.

Then it's time to bowl. The Fish Bowl was the first attraction finished, and it's a

minor psychedelic masterpiece. The roof is festooned with coral, with lighting effects projected onto the floor to create the feel of an underwater grotto, and the balls are painted with fish and alligator motifs. By now, it's mid-afternoon. We throw many more gutterballs than strikes, but we have a blast anyway. On the way out, Laura observes, "It's kind of like an amusement park that has a store in the middle of it rather than a store that has all this stuff around it."

WRAP UP


WE LISTEN TO BILL DANCE'S CAT-fish story for the third time as we ascend towards dinner at The Lookout. Chef Christopher Salinsky, who just took over last November, tells us his goal is to uncover the place's untapped potential: "We want this to be a destination restaurant."

One of Salinsky's specials tonight is elk, a dish he says he has never served before. "But this is Bass Pro Shop, the outdoorsman's paradise!"

We opt for the trout special, and the butternut, flaky fish is divine. As we're finishing up, we're joined by Nail Task, the manager of Big Cypress Lodge. Originally from Turkey, he trained to be a hotelier in Montreux, Switzerland. He has worked all over the world, from Napa Valley to the Mediterranean coast, but, "I have never worked in a hotel like this," he says. "I love the energy of my team. They want to learn."

He, too, is new to Memphis, so we spend an hour chatting amiably about the city over wine and dessert.

The next morning we get coffee at the General Store, where the smell of roasting nuts gets us moving. The fudge made here is one of the Pyramid's star attractions. "During the summer, it was crazy," the woman behind the counter tells us. "Saturdays, it was backed up out the door. The fudge shop does really well. Don't let us run out of people's favorite flavor!"

Once again, we take the elevator down to Uncle Buck's and have a light breakfast, bathed in the light of the saltwater fish tank in the middle of the dining room. After check-out, we wait for our cab, blinking in the bright sunlight. We agree that 44 hours in the Bass Pro Pyramid was a lot more fun than we had expected, and the perfect place for a genuine Memphis stay-cation! 

Big Cypress Lodge

Bass Pro Shops at the Pyramid

1 Bass Pro Drive, Memphis, TN 38103

800-225-6343

BIG-CYPRESS.COM