

TRAVEL

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TRAVEL: HOMETOWN TOURIST

Discover a pearl of a farm and museum or build a boat in Camden, Tenn.
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Discover pearl of a museum or build a boat in Camden

By **KEN BECK**
Staff Writer

BENTON COUNTY, Tenn. — Aquaculture thrives up a creek just 75 miles west of Nashville at the Tennessee River Freshwater Pearl Farm. Here on Birdsong Creek, tucked back a mile from the Tennessee River/Kentucky Lake, Bob and Janis Keast operate the only farm and museum of its type in North America, and it's built around those gorgeous, shiny white orbs produced by slimy creatures known as mussels.

"Folks who come here are going to experience the natural beauty of the state's official gem," said Bob, who has lived here 48 years. "They are going to see our operations, look at the history and hear the interpretation of the artifacts."

The museum, which is free and open daily, drew about 200,000 tourists last year, including about 20,000 students on school tours. There are four different tours, ranging in price from free to \$50. The latter, labeled a Pearl of a Tour, runs about four hours and features a close encounter of the wet kind as a mussel diver ascends from the bottom of the river and shucks a few mollusks for guests.

Keast moved to Birdsong Creek from Memphis at age 10 when his parents purchased the marina. Today, the 58-acre Birdsong Marina and Resort is "kind of a little city" with 14 rental cottages, places for 100 mobile homes and 90 RV sites. The marina has a 140-boat slip and a 10-slip yacht club.

Pearls have been Keast's passion for years, and in 2000 he purchased the pearl farm from the Latendresse family who planted it here in 1980. During the first half of the 20th century, the mollusks were valued for their shells, used in the button industry. Today, it's more about the pearls.

"Tennessee exports up to 25 million pounds of shells annually," Keast said. "Our shell has a beautiful iridescent color and is easy to be shipped. Ninety-nine percent of these come



Bob Keast and his wife, Janis, operate The Tennessee River Freshwater Pearl Farm in Benton County. The farm is the only freshwater pearl farm in North America.

PHOTOS BY GEORGE WALKER IV / THE TENNESSEAN

from the Camden area.

"It's a lifelong project, a way of living and not a job," Keast said. From his four-acre creekbed, he harvests washboard and heel splitter mussels, which yield thousands of pearls a year. These are sent to Japan, China, the Philippines, Tahiti and Australia.

The museum features artifacts made from mother of pearl, photos and thousands of pearls. Its Mini-Pearl Theater plays a seven-minute clip on the pearl farm from *CBS Sunday Morning*. The showroom contains 3,000 to 5,000 pearl items, such as necklaces, rings, pendants and bracelets, priced

from \$5 to \$5,000.

River history flows

Nine miles north of Camden, atop Pilot Knob, the Tennessee River Folk Life Museum captures the past with photographs, artifacts and storytellers.

"Our central focus is on industry and way of life along the Tennessee River," said Robert Wood, park manager at Nathan Bedford Forrest State Park.

Strolling out to the deck that grabs a commanding 13-mile view of the river, he says, "This is a very popular place

in the park. With the elevation and view, it's so quiet and peaceful."

Nearby is a 40-foot-tall granite monument to Forrest, who with his cavalry whipped the Federal Navy in the Civil War Battle of Johnsonville.

The exhibits shine on showboats, lumbering, log rafting and folk art. A main attraction is *Old Betsy*, the Brail boat used by T.J. Whitfield, "the old man of the river," for snagging mussels. Also mesmerizing are photos by Maggie Sayres, who documented river life with her camera from 1937-65.

A liars' bench on the wooden deck offers audiotape

as old timers share hunting, fishing and folk-life tales of the area.

Float your boat

Three miles from the river on their Grand View Farm, Karl and Debi Weinert give landlubbers the opportunity to build a wooden boat in two days at their Tennessee Boat School.

"It's a wonderful alternative vacation and a way that puts tools back into the hands of people and kids. It's all about building a boat and floating a memory," Debi said.

For many years Karl was a

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boatwright in Pompano Beach, Fla., where he oversaw the construction of multi-million-dollar crafts.

Now he teaches crews of two to five per boat how to make either a 12-foot rowboat or 16-foot pirogue out of yellow pine, spruce and oak with hand tools.

"I have the pieces of wood already rough cut. They do the cutting, nailing, fitting and gluing. By the second day, around 2 p.m., most of it is done," said Karl, who recently restored a 1960 Chris Craft boat, a 1936 disappearing propeller boat and a Reelfoot boat.

Participants test their boats on a 10-acre pond on the premises. About 75 groups have graduated from the school, which runs April through October by appointment.

"Some grown men leave here with tears because of bonding time with family," Debi said, "and they leave here with a beautiful boat, too. Every time they use boat, the memory comes back."

While in Camden or Benton County, check out these attractions



1 The Tennessee River Freshwater Pearl Museum, Farm, Jewelry Showroom and Tour. The only freshwater pearl-culturing farm operation in North America features a free museum and four tours, priced from free to \$50. The facility includes Birdsong Marina and Resort. Hours: 8 a.m.-5 p.m. daily. 255 Marina Road, www.tennesseepearls.com and www.birdsongresort.com, 731-584-7880.



2 Tennessee Boat School. Karl and Debi Weinert's boat school guides two to five people per boat in a two-day process of building a 12-foot rowboat or 16-foot pirogue. Cost is \$1,500 to \$1,600. 1327



Prince Road, www.tennesseeboatschool.com, 731-584-2103.
3 Tennessee River Folk Life Museum at Nathan Bedford Forrest State Park. The museum focuses on the indus-



try and way of life along the river with exhibits, photos and artifacts on showboats, lumbering, folk art and fishing. Museum hours: 8 a.m.-4:30 p.m. daily. 1825 Pilot Knob Road, www.tennessee.gov/



environment/parks/NB Forrest/, 731-584-2128.

4 Betty's Doll Shop. Betty Cummins has created more than 200 porcelain dolls, from dollhouse size to 2½ feet tall, including such characters as Shirley Temple, Davy Crockett and Tom Sawyer. Prices from \$50-\$85. The shop is



next to her house, so it is open whenever Betty is at home. 961 Lodge Road, 731-584-3418.

5 The Country Look. Virginia Short's store on the Camden square steps into yesterday as she offers furniture, antiques, glassware, heirloom replicas of lampshades, kerosene globes and chandeliers for sale. Hours: 10 a.m.-3 p.m. Monday-Saturday. 50 N. Church St., 731-584-4785.

6 Nunnery's Burger-N-Shakes. Owned by the same family since 1952, this Camden landmark has sold a zillion burgers, milk shakes, chili dogs, fries and ice cream cones. Hundreds of historic photos of local businesses, sheriffs and Nunnery employees stick to the walls. Hours: 10:30 a.m.-8:30 p.m. daily. 232 W. Main St., 731-584-4942.

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