



Just Ducky

The Peabody Memphis' daily march of the aquatic birds has been delighting guests since 1933.

By Katherine Rodeghier



Duckmaster Anthony Petrina stands beside the lobby fountain with his duck-head-topped cane.

Photo by Katherine Rodeghier

The little girl's pigtails bobbed as she leaned forward to peer down the red carpet in the lobby of The Peabody Memphis. The children seated on the floor beside her wiggled in anticipation; adults stood behind them, cameras poised.

Then the doors of the hotel elevator opened and in marched five ducks: the drake, his green head shining above his white collar, and four brown hens, their tails wagging as they waddled down the runway. They hopped up red-carpeted stairs and splashed into the marble fountain in the center of the lobby. Cameras flashed and applause echoed around the room.

It's a scene repeated every day at 11 a.m., as the ducks ride the elevator down from the Royal Duck Palace on the hotel's Plantation Roof, and at 5 p.m., when they hop out of the fountain and return to their lofty abode.

Leading them is Duckmaster Anthony Petrina, the gold trim on his scarlet coat glowing as brightly as the brass duck head on the cane he wields ever so gently to encourage an errant duck to stick with the program. Before each march, Petrina, or an assistant duckmaster, gives a history of the hotel and the duck march that began more than 80 years ago.

Practical Joke

In 1933, The Peabody's General Manager, Frank Schutt, and a friend went duck hunting across the river in Arkansas and imbibed a bit too heavily on Jack Daniel's. Back at the hotel, the tipsy duo decided to play a practical joke by putting their live duck decoys, legal in those days, in the lobby fountain.

The next morning, Schutt came to his senses and scurried to the lobby, fearing the havoc the ducks may have caused during the night. He found them still happily swimming in the fountain to the delight of guests gathered around. He apologized and ordered the ducks removed, but

the guests protested. The ducks stayed and a tradition was born.

Every duck march draws a crowd—hotel guests and visitors filling the lobby lounge chairs and bar and lining the railing of the mezzanine waiting for the ducks to move to the tune of John Philip Sousa's *King Cotton March*. The busiest day is the day after Thanksgiving, said Petrina. Santa appears at the afternoon march with as many as 2,000 people looking on.

At many duck marches, someone is chosen Honorary Duckmaster to assist Petrina. Usually he or she is a guest celebrating a life event or a celebrity. Oprah Winfrey has had the honor, said Petrina, as has the queen of Jordan, Larry King, Peter Frampton, George Hamilton, and Bert, Ernie and Elmo from *Sesame Street*.

Sometimes celebrities are just part of the crowd. On one memorable day, President Jimmy Carter was ushered into the lobby. His motorcade was early, and he decided to pop in to see the ducks. Lisa Marie Presley and Nicolas Cage, who were engaged at the time, were looking on from the mezzanine. Seated in the bar, disguised in sunglasses and baseball hat, sat Michael Jordan.

Wild and Wacky

Celebrities themselves, the ducks have appeared with Johnny Carson on *The Tonight Show*, on *Sesame Street* and on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. They've also been featured in People magazine and a Sports Illustrated swimsuit issue.

The ducks are wild North American mallards living on a local farm. After three months of marches, they are returned to the wild at Peabody Retirement Island, said Petrina, and depending on the season, they fly off or stay and "raise a new team of Peabody ducks."

Every effort is made to keep them wild. Petrina rarely touches them and never feeds them by hand. Instead, they eat cracked corn, wheat and milo seeds from a silver tray by the fountain. In the Duck Palace, they feast on lettuce and specially formulated duck chow.

Most teams consist of five ducks, but the number was cut to four on one occasion. "We had a diva duck. She would hop out of the fountain at 2 in the afternoon and do her own little duck march," said Petrina. "We retired her early."

The ducks' feathers are clipped so they cannot fly, but they grow back in a couple of months, a fact Petrina became painfully aware of one day when they grew their feathers back at the same time.

Upon returning to the roof after the afternoon march, "They all took off and went right for the [Mississippi] river," said Petrina, who stood there helpless, thinking where he would get another team of ducks by morning, and more urgently, where he would get another job. "All at once they turned around in mid-flight and waddled right back into the Duck Palace," he said. "I think they conspired against me."



The ducks waddle down the red carpet toward the elevator.

Photo by Katherine Rodeghier



Children watch the ducks swim in the marble fountain in the center of the lobby.

Photo by Katherine Rodeghier

Duckmaster

Petrina, 27, is The Peabody's fifth Duckmaster and was trained by his predecessor. The longest-serving Duckmaster was Edward Pembroke, a former circus-animal trainer and bellman at The Peabody. He offered to help deliver the ducks to the fountain every day and created the idea of the duck march, which he led for 50 years.

Petrina said it takes him only a day or two to train a new team of ducks, using his cane to direct them back and forth between the Duck Palace and the elevator. "They are very habitual animals," said Petrina. "I keep the same rhythm and same routine, and a month in, I will tap my cane and they will just march out."

In addition to the care, feeding and training of the ducks, Petrina leads history tours of the hotel and takes the ducks on visits to schools and retirement homes.

The Peabody carries the duck theme to the extreme with duck-shaped soaps in guestrooms and duck insignia everywhere. Lobby display cases and shops sell all manner of duck items, from decoys to toys, but there is one place in the hotel where ducks are strictly banned. Chez Philippe, the hotel's acclaimed fine-dining venue, may be the only French restaurant in the world where duck is not on the menu.

Planning Your Trip

Duck marches are held twice daily for hotel guests and visitors. For information about the hotel and its ducks, contact The Peabody Memphis at (901) 529-4000 or www.peabodymemphis.com. For trip-planning assistance, contact your AAA Travel agent or visit AAA.com/travel.

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