

How we survived a loopy server at Carrabba's, a stint at Shoney's, communication issues at Cracker Barr

Written by By TERRY MATHEWS, News-Telegram Arts Editor
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Most of our dining and travel experiences on the Mathews/McCrary Trek Across Tennessee were excellent. The new Margaritaville in Nashville was first class, as was Connor's (lobster bisque to die for) and the deli at the Peabody in Memphis (fabulous sandwiches that must be the best value in the city).

There were, however, a few glitches.

Take the space cadet we had for a server at Carraba's on our first night in Knoxville. I don't think there was one course that came out the way we ordered it ... and no one at the table had any changes (think "on the side" Sally in "When Harry Met Sally") ... my mother-in-law ordered Minestrone and got fennel and sausage soup. You'd have to know my mother-in-law to know how ridiculous it was to serve her fennal and sausage soup.

My mother-in-law, ever the peacemaker, said "No worries. I'll eat this."

I ordered an Insalata Carrabba Caesar with grilled shrimp. The space cadet brought grilled chicken.

The server from another planet couldn't get our coffee order right, either. My mother wanted de-caff ... my mother-in-law, who has an IV drip hooked up to her coffee maker at home, wanted the real deal. Space cadet switched cups on them. My mother was climbing the walls all night while my mother-in-law had caffiene withdrawal so badly that she resorted to making a pot of coffee in her room in order to make it until sunrise.

We won't be going back there, even though the place is just steps away from the Comfort Suites where we stayed.

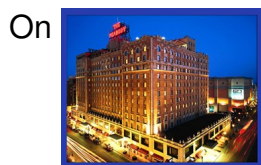
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Then, there was the disaster on Black Friday - and it didn't have a thing to do with bargain shopping.

We left Knoxville, headed for a night at the Peabody in Memphis. We planned the day so we could have lunch in Jackson before meeting up with Mr. Mathews' cousins in Brownsville. We stopped at Shoney's. The place was not that busy, but it was sure dirty. The floors were sticky. The table was greasy. We should have just turned around and left, but we didn't. After we placed our order, we watched a couple send back their food and another table tell the server the fruit on the breakfast bar was rotten. We waited. And waited. And waited. 45 minutes later, we left, still hungry. Won't be doing the Shoney's thing again. Ever.

Outside of Memphis, we saw a billboard for Cracker Barrel. Can't beat their home cooking, so we stopped there. Not a big crowd. Lots of tables open, but somehow we ended up with a server with a mild speech impediment. Pair his communication issue with with two women who can't hear thunder and you know you're in for a rocky ride. A really funny rocky ride. But my husband and I had to stifle ourselves because the two women who can't hear thunder do not like being reminded of their serious need for hearing aids.

I don't think we'll repeat a meal at that Cracker Barrel. At least not with two women who can't hear thunder. If we got the same waiter, Mr. Mathews and I would not be able to hold back the laughter.



to downtown Memphis. We found the Peabody entrance with its valets, but decided to check out the self-parking. Oops. Five miles later, we found ourselves in a garage across the street from the AutoZone baseball park. We had a lot of luggage and none of us was up to carrying it the five miles (okay ... it wasn't five miles, really, but it sure seemed like it) so we started looking for a way back to the hotel and a valet.

There was no way out. We circled for several minutes, trying to find a ticket taker. What we soon realized is that there was no live person to take our money and make the little lever go up so we could drive out. We finally found a machine that ate our ticket, made some noise and then spit it out. We found a lever that looked like it led to our freedom, so I put the spit out ticket

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in the slot and, like a miracle, the lever raised and I gunned the engine.

Back to the grand entrance to the Peabody to check in. Did I mention that it was about 29 degrees outside, with a 30 mph prevailing north wind? Egads and little fishes, it was cold.

Trouble was, everyone in Memphis trying to get into the Peabody through one door. What we didn't know was that it is an annual tradition to come to the Peabody on the day after Thanksgiving to see the lighting of the Christmas tree.

There was one bellman - dressed to the nines in a red overcoat, grey gloves and a black stove pipe hat - to take care of 20 or so cars lined up behind us. Bless his heart.

I sent Mr. Mathews and our mothers in to get checked in. I knew I was in trouble when I got to the lobby and saw 3,000 faces I did not know. I elbowed my way to the the reception desk, found my people. We made our way to the opposite side of the lobby where the elevators were.



One of the reasons we decided to stay at the Peabody was to see the ducks. The historic hotel is famous for the 5 ducks that swim around in a circle in the lobby fountain from 11 a.m. until 5 p.m. These ducks live a charmed life. They sleep in a heated, glass-enclosed roost on the roof. They ride up and down in their own elevator every day, with much fanfare and with a very large crowd watching their every move. They even have a butler, called the Duckmaster, who dresses in a red overcoat, black pants, carries a big walking stick and gives a brief history lesson before each elevator journey. They ducks and their guy enter and leave the lobby to their own music.

Not that I saw any of this Friday.

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I spotted the head of one duck through the crowd, but that was all. We arrived too late to get a spot close enough to see anything but the backs of 3,000 people's heads.

The mezzanine is usually a great place to watch the ducks enter and leave the lobby, but not Friday. The crowd was about 6 deep all the way around the balcony.



So, we forged ahead to find our rooms.

Imagine our surprise when we unlocked the door on the 8th floor and found ONE king-sized bed instead of two doubles. For my mother and me. Way too close for comfort.

When I called the front desk, I heard, "Specialty Services, this is Ashley. How can I help you, Mrs. Mathews?" but Ashley could not hear me. I hung up. The phone rang. No one was there.

How did they already know my name? I didn't check in. My mother and mother-in-law did. I was waiting on the overdressed bellman to unload the car and give me a valet ticket.

I tried again. "Specialty Services, this is Ashley. How can I help you, Mrs. Mathews?"

"We have a king bed instead of two doubles."

"Mrs. Mathews?" Ashley said, "Mrs. Mathews? Are you there? Hello?"

I gave up after the fourth try and headed to see if Mr. Mathews and his mother were in the same

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predicament.

They were, but luckily, their phone worked. As I was explaining our predicament to Ashley in Special Service, our luggage arrived, carted by a bell hop named Jeffrey who took one look at the room and the four of us and realized we were in trouble.

"Hang up the phone," Jeffrey said. "I'll take care of this."

"Front Desk?" he said into a walkie talkie he wore on his shoulder like a law enforcement officer. "The Mathews have two king rooms and they need two doubles. Now."

"Com'on," Jeffrey said. "Follow me."

We went down to the 7th floor, where Jeffrey opened the doors to two side-by-side rooms with two double beds each and adjoining interior doors. Lovely. Thank goodness for employees like Jeffrey.

"We need ice," my mother said. "Ask the nice boy if he could get us some ice."

I thought Jeffrey had done enough, but my mother insisted. Jeffrey worked his magic again and the ice buckets in both rooms were filled.

"When you get settled, go to the Concierge's desk and we'll have your keys," Jeffrey said as he left with a hefty tip.

