

# The Charlotte Observer

## One Cracker Jack of a tour

We'll take you out to the best of the ballparks - with food, ambience, history and entertainment in mind



Tom and Linda Broach

At 51, Tom Broach is doing what he's wanted to do since childhood: Spend spring through fall going to major-league baseball games. He got the bug growing up in Warner-Robins, Ga., and 15 years ago bailed out of the insurance business to start his own baseball-tour business. Broach Sports Tours, based in Charlotte, handles trips for fans of a variety of sports, but baseball is still No. 1: Through October, the firm will be offering 26 tours - about 14 multistadium junkets; the rest weekenders.

Many of his customers are die-hard fans. But we recently asked Broach to recommend ballparks that cater to special yens and needs.

### If you're into food

"Newer stadiums are very people-friendly: They have more non-baseball activities, better food selections and indoor restaurants. My favorite of these is PNC Park, in Pittsburgh. Old stadiums have hot dogs and maybe added nachos. At PNC, you can get several flavors of chicken wings, Philly cheesesteak sandwiches, all varieties of pizza and

more. PNC has an Outback Steakhouse. There's also a barbecue stand out in centerfield owned by (1970s Pittsburgh Pirate catcher) Manny Sanguillen. The food's pretty good - and he's often out there signing autographs prior to the game.

"Down to basics - hot dogs. Boston's Fenway Franks and L.A.'s Dodger Dogs are thought to be better, and are very popular. But it's hard to say how much of that is marketing promotion.

"San Francisco (Giants; AT&T Park) is known for garlic fries, and there's usually a long line for them. They're very fragrant - you don't want to kiss anyone who has been eating them unless you've been eating them, as well - and cost \$4 or so for an order."

### If you're into shopping

"New stadiums are often located in downtown areas. Pittsburgh's PNC is one: You can walk a bridge across the river and be in the middle of downtown. The St. Louis ballpark (Cardinals; Busch Stadium) is in the middle of downtown shopping. In Cincinnati (Reds; Great American Ballpark), walk uphill three blocks and there's a big mall. In Baltimore (Orioles; Camden Yard), you're three or four blocks from Inner Harbor Place and its shopping, music and entertainment complex.

"The best ballparks for souvenirs? My staff recommends the stadiums in Denver (Colorado Rockies; Coors Field) and Toronto (Blue Jays; Rogers Centre). The Denver stadium sells fudge - and Denver and Toronto team stores also sell items from other teams, especially that day's opponent."

### For an old-school experience

"The three traditionalist parks are Wrigley, in Chicago (Cubs); Fenway, in Boston (Red Sox); and Yankee Stadium, in New York." All three are cool places, but Wrigley is my favorite. The thing most people recognize from TV are the apartment buildings beyond the outfield wall: People love to sit on top of them and watch the game.

You don't realize, though, how far from the field those buildings actually are. They're not good seats, but are fun to experience.

"The area - Wrigleyville - has lots of restaurants, bars and activity. Get there three hours before the game and have brunch. After the game, hang out in Wrigleyville a few hours to enjoy the people coming and going."

### If you want a last-chance trip

"This is the last year for Yankee Stadium, and if there's one you have to do, go there. It's also the last year for Shea Stadium (New York Mets), but Shea isn't as special.

"There's nothing overly nice or exotic about Yankee Stadium, but there's so much history in that building. A must-see is its Monument Park, beyond the outfield fence in left field. It has monuments to all the Yankees whose uniforms have been retired. Nowadays, most every number under 15 is retired.

"(All-Star shortstop Derek) Jeter is 2; (player-turned-manager) Joe Torre is No. 6. No. 8 has been retired twice - (catcher/manager) Yogi Berra and another guy (catcher/manager/coach Bill Dickey) each had it before they started retiring numbers.

"(Legendary slugger) Babe Ruth was No. 3 - and Yankee Stadium is 'The House That Ruth Built.' When you walk out through the tunnel and look around, it's like, 'Babe used to stand here in right field,' and that type of thing. I'm not a Yankees fan, but I still get goose bumps when I walk into Yankee Stadium."

### **If you want the best floor show**

"At Yankee Stadium, after the fifth inning, the grounds crew drags the infield and 'YMCA' is played over the PA system. When the song gets to the part where the Village People would spell the letters with their arms, the grounds crew all drop their drags and start doing the dance." Also, after the eighth inning, they often play 'Cotton-Eyed Joe,' which doesn't seem to fit a New York team, but is fun to watch."

### **If you have young'uns along**

"A good one is San Diego's new park (Padres; PETCO Park). They have a small baseball field beyond the centerfield fence where kids can play and hit balls all during the game. The Atlanta Braves' Turner Field has a lot of kids' activities - pitching and batting machines and things of that nature.

"Detroit's Comerica Park (Tigers) has a merry-go-round."

### **Most handicap-accessible**

"Newer stadiums, like any newer buildings, have easier accessibility. All have a good amount of handicapped seating, but older parks have been retrofitted and aren't as easy to handle." Atlanta does a good job of having golf carts in the parking lots that'll get you from the car or bus to the stadium, and that helps."

### **Best when weather turns bad**

"Some newer parks have retractable roofs - even where the Arizona Diamondbacks play (Chase Field); though it almost never rains in Phoenix, it helps during hot weather. There are also retractable roofs in Houston (Astros; Minute Maid Park), Milwaukee (Brewers; Miller Park), Seattle (Mariners; Safeco Field) and Toronto. If it rains, they can close the roof and the game continues."

### **Best for a night game**

"Most lighting systems in newer parks are good. The lighting in Cleveland, which is maybe 12 years old, is one of the coolest looking. The lights themselves have more of a high-tech look."

### **Best for a day game**

"Chicago's Wrigley. The Cubs still play the majority of their games in daytime. There's a city ordinance that says they can only play a relatively small percentage after dark."

### **Friendliest crowd**

"Wrigley. It's part of the attraction of going there. My theory: Cubs fans are so used to losing that they don't have the 'attitude' that fans have in most other places. They're there to have a good time." Also, so many games are in the afternoon. People are in a more laid-back mood when they're out in the warm sun."

### **On the ball BASICS**

Broach Sports Tours 2008 baseball trips are opening day through early September; most are between late May and early September. Cost varies.

A weekend trip to Atlanta starts at \$210 per person; the All-Star Game tour is \$2,175 per person.

Most trips are by motorcoach. Cost includes transportation, hotel, game tickets and tour director. (New York trips include meal at Mickey Mantle's restaurant.) Tours leave from Charlotte and Raleigh; on many trips, you can also board the bus in Greensboro.

### **RESOURCES**

Tour info: 704-365-6500;  
[www.broachsportstours.com](http://www.broachsportstours.com) Team  
schedule/stadium info:  
[www.mlb.org](http://www.mlb.org).