



The Great Smokies

WHY GO The Cherokee Indians fell in love with these ancient, mist-shrouded mountains, which they named Shaconage (Place of the Blue Smoke). Lose yourself in their lush valleys and mossy, shaded trails. But lest you overdose on trees, there's plenty of man-made fun (hello, Dollywood!) on either side of the park.

The Great Smoky Mountains, a subrange of the Appalachians, straddle the North Carolina–Tennessee border. On a map, the southwestern corner of North Carolina looks like a lump of taffy being flattened by the rollers of Tennessee and Georgia. This “tail” – geographically part of the Tennessee Valley – is crisscrossed with thundering mountain rivers, and dotted with lakes and hidden waterfalls.

The terrain, unsurprisingly, is fantastic for whitewater rafting, kayaking and tubing. The **1 Nantahala Outdoor Center** (NOC) launches trips on the class II and III rapids of the Nantahala River from their main outpost west of Bryson City. Ride a group raft or a two-person ducky through the wide, brown river gorge, spinning through a dizzying whirlpool and splish-splashing over the Nantahala Falls. The NOC also offers whitewater trips for all ages and skill levels on a half-dozen other rivers in the Appalachians. Experienced paddlers can brave the 9-mile trip down the roiling class IV-V Cheoah, launching from nearby Robbinsville. After a long day on the river, put your sore muscles to bed at the NOC's **2 Nantahala Inn**, a rustic, pine-paneled motor lodge tucked into the trees.

Trips on the historic **3 Great Smoky Mountains Railroad** depart from Bryson City and plow through the dramatic Nantahala Gorge and across the Fontana Trestle. The former Murphy Branch Line, built in the late 1800s, brought unheard of luxuries like books, factory-spun cloth and oil lamps to these mountains, making rural Appalachian life a little

TIME

5 days

DISTANCE

180 miles

BEST TIME TO GO

Apr – Jun, Sep & Oct

START

near Bryson City, NC

END

Knoxville, TN

ALSO GOOD FOR





less tough. Themed trips on the red-and-yellow trains include a beer tasting, a Thomas the Tank Engine–themed ride for kids, and a mystery dinner theater.

Half an hour to the northeast is the town of **4 Cherokee**, the major North Carolina gateway to the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. The Cherokee people have lived in this area since the last Ice Age, though many of them died on the Trail of Tears. The descendants of the people who escaped or returned are known as the Eastern Band of the Cherokee, about 12,000 of whom live on the Qualla Boundary reservation near town. Contemporary Cherokee can feel a bit sad, with “chiefs” hawking plastic headdresses on Tsali Blvd and elderly locals playing the one-armed bandits in the dim, smoky depths of Harrah’s Cherokee Casino.

But several sights transcend the kitsch and stereotypes, and actually teach a thing or two about Cherokee culture and history. The cool, earth-colored halls of the **5 Museum of the Cherokee Indian** have displays filled with artifacts such as pots, deerskins, woven skirts, eerie life-sized dioramas and a new animated exhibit on Cherokee myths.

In the summer, catch **6 Unto These Hills**, an outdoor play dramatizing the Trail of Tears. Performed at the Mountainside Theater since 1950, it’s the second longest–running outdoor drama in America (the oldest is *The Lost Colony*, in the North Carolina coastal town of Manteo).



Pick up any last minute supplies at the mini-mart and head into the vast, cool wilderness of Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Established in 1934, the park attracts as many as 10 million travelers a year, making it the most-visited national park in America. To beat high-season crowds, merely wander off the main trails to find yourself deep in the damp, earth-scented wilderness.

Newfoundland Gap Rd/Hwy 441 is the only thoroughfare crossing the entire 521,000-acre park. And what a drive it is, traversing 33 miles of deep oak and pine forest, and wildflower meadows. Stop first at the **7 Oconaluftee Visitor Center**, with interactive exhibits on the park's history and ecosystems. Pick up a map and stroll the Oconaluftee River Trail, which leaves from the center and follows the river for 1.5 miles to the boundary of the Cherokee reservation. Don't forget to pick up a free backcountry camping permit if you plan to go off-trail.

Also near the park entrance is the **8 Mountain Farm Museum** and **Mingus Mill**. The museum, located next to the visitor center, is a 19th-century farmstead assembled from buildings from various locations around the park. The worn, wooden structures, including a barn, a blacksmith shop and a smokehouse, give you a peek into the hardscrabble existence of early Appalachian settlers. A half-mile north, the 1886 Mingus Mill still grinds corn and wheat.

Further down the road, 6643ft **9 Clingmans Dome** is the third-highest mountain east of the Mississippi. You can drive almost all the way to the top via Clingmans Dome Rd, then walk the rest of the way to the Jetsons-like concrete observation tower. From here you can see over the spruce- and pine-covered mountaintops for miles around.

Climbing 6593ft **10 Mt LeConte** is probably the park's most popular challenge, sure to give some serious hamstring burn. The Alum Cave Trail, one of five routes to the peak, starts out from the Alum Cave parking area on the main road. Follow a creek, pass under a stone arch and wind your way steadily upward past thickets of rhododendron, myrtle and mountain laurel.

11 LeConte Lodge, a collection of rough-hewn log cabins near the summit, is the park's only non-camping accommodation. There's no electricity, no real showers and all the food – beef and gravy for dinner, grits and ham for breakfast – is packed in by llamas three times a week. But you'll be amply rewarded by glowing purple sunrises from the eastern-facing cliffs at Myrtle Point.

THE TRAIL OF TEARS

In the late 1830s, President Andrew Jackson ordered more than 16,000 Native Americans removed from their southeastern homelands and resettled in what's now Oklahoma. Thousands died of disease, exposure and exhaustion on the forced march west, now known as the "Trail of Tears." In Gatlinburg, see a **monument to Tsali**, the Cherokee hero who, according to legend, was executed for his part in an anti-relocation rebellion.



Continuing on Newfound Gap Rd, turn left on Little River Rd, which becomes Laurel Creek Rd, running right into the 11-mile loop around **12 Cades Cove**. This secluded (except for the glut of cars in summer) valley contains the remnants of a 19th-century settlement. Park your car to see the old churches and farmhouses up close, and to hike trails through postcard-perfect meadows filled with deer, wild turkeys and the occasional bear. Cyclists take note – cars are banned from the loop road until 10am every Wednesday and Saturday from May through September.

DETOUR

In the Pisgah National Forest, one hour southeast of Cherokee, you'll find **Sliding Rock**, a 60ft-long natural waterslide. In summertime visitors wait their turn to swoosh down the slick rock face into the 7ft-deep pool below. The ride can be painful on the tailbone and the water is freezing, but you'll line up to do it again anyway. Nearby **Brevard** is a cute mountain town of B&Bs and candy shops.

Doubling back to Little River Rd, you'll find the **13 Elkmont Campground**. The 220 wooded sites can fill up quickly in high season. Back at the juncture of Little River and Newfound Gap Rds is the **14 Sugarlands Visitor Center**, park headquarters. There's a bookstore, exhibits on plant and animal life, and seasonal ranger-led talks and tours.

Driving out of the park on the Tennessee side is a bit disconcerting. All at once you pop out of the tranquil green tunnel of trees and into a blinking, shrieking welter of cars, motels and mini-golf courses, all blaring Christmas music and smelling of fried dough. Welcome to **15 Gatlinburg**. It's Heidi meets Hillbilly in this vaguely Bavarian-themed tourist wonderland, catering to Smokies visitors since the 1930s. Turn off your cynical side and let the kitsch work its magic. Most of the tourist attractions are within the compact, hilly little downtown.

Pancakes are to Gatlinburg what pizza is to New York. Though there's a different pancake house on every corner proclaiming itself the best in town, **16 Pancake Pantry** is the granddaddy of them all. Chow down on 24 varieties of pancake, cheese-swollen omelets or whipped cream-smothered waffles in a building that looks like an overgrown Smurf house.

The Ripley's franchise operates seven shock-and-awe-style attractions in town. The gargantuan **17 Ripley's Aquarium of the Smokies** features sea turtles, piranhas and stingrays far, far from their homes. A 340ft-long moving sidewalk shunts you through the clear tunnel on the floor of the Shark Lagoon, where you can watch long, sinister shapes glide by overhead. Though the original **18 Ripley's Believe It or Not!** burned down in 1992, taking with it nearly all the exhibits, the popular odditorium rose from the ashes twice as large. Join the crowds to gawk at the shrunken heads, the 6583½ft-long gum-wrapper chain and the 1840s vampire killing kit.



The **19 Gatlinburg Sky Lift**, a repurposed ski resort chair lift, whisks you high over the Smokies. You'll fill up your camera's entire memory card with panoramic snapshots. At night, take your pick of a plethora of Appalachian-themed motels and lodges. **20 Buckhorn Inn** is a tasteful bed and breakfast with views of Mt LeConte, and a flagstone terrace with rocking chairs.

A few miles north of Gatlinburg is the dismal stretch of chain motels, ye olde kountry shoppes and discount cigarette warehouses known as **21 Pigeon Forge**. This town exists for one reason only: the worship of that big-haired, big-busted angel of East Tennessee, Dolly Parton. Dolly was born in a one-room shack in the nearby hamlet of Locust Ridge, started performing on Knoxville radio at the age of 11 and moved to Nashville at 18 with all her worldly belongings in a cardboard suitcase. She's made millions singing about her Smoky Mountain roots and continues to be a huge presence in her hometown, donating money to local causes and riding a glittery float in the annual Dolly Parade.

The **22 Dollywood** theme park is an enormous, gushy love letter to mountain culture. Minivans full of families pour in each morning to ride the hee-haw themed thrill rides like the Mystery Mine Coaster and the Tennessee Tornado; see demonstrations of traditional Appalachian crafts such as wagon-making; and browse a plethora of shops hawking Christian-themed T-shirts and pink taffy. You can also tour the bald eagle sanctuary, attend Sunday services at the country chapel or worship at the altar of Dolly in the Chasing Rainbows life-story museum. The adjacent **23 Dollywood's Splash Country** takes the same themes and adds water. Ride the Mountain Scream waterslides and the "whitewater rafting adventure" of Big Bear Plunge.

ASK A LOCAL

"Any real Dolly fan must make a pilgrimage to **Dollywood**. But there are also several less well-known stops in the area. Many fans visit the **Sevier County Courthouse** in Sevierville and get their picture made at the statue of her on the courthouse lawn. In Pigeon Forge you'll pass the **Little House of Prayer**, where her 'holy roller' Pentecostal grandfather preached, and **Caton's Chapel School**, one of the schoolhouses Dolly attended as a child."

Duane Gordon, webmaster, www.dollymania.net

Head out of town via Hwy 321. This rural highway gives you an idea of what a Tennessee road trip was like before I-40 sliced its way through the state.



Watch as the tree-covered peaks of the Smokies mellow into grassy green hills dotted with farmstands and flea markets; stop for an ice-cream cone as you pass through the time-warp town of **24 Maryville**, where it still looks like 1955.

About two hours southwest of Pigeon Forge is the town of Sweetwater, home to America's largest underground lake. **25 The Lost Sea** is a genuine country roadside attraction, where families and elderly couples with guidebooks queue up for hour-long tours. Before the modern tourist-era, the caves were used as a dance hall, as a venue for cockfighting and as a hiding place for moonshine stills. Descend into Craighead Caverns via a long metal tunnel and ride a glass-bottom boat across the eerie greenish lake, illuminated from below by underwater lights. If you're lucky you'll spot a silvery cave trout gliding through the murky depths.

"Ride a glass-bottom boat across the eerie greenish lake, illuminated from below by underwater lights."

Double back northeast for 45 minutes to hit **26 Knoxville**. This funky little gem of a city is one of those places where, despite the lack of specific tourist attractions, you come away feeling like you might want to live there one day. Driving in, note the giant gold orb towering over the city skyline. That's the **27 Sunsphere**, a relic of the 1982 World's Fair. You can walk up to the observation deck for free. Downtown Knoxville is full of splendid 19th-century warehouses and storefronts turned lofts and boutiques. Pedestrian-only **28 Market Square** is the center of the action, with outdoor cafés and a public green that hosts summertime concerts and plays.

Grab a table in the crowded, art-filled dining room of the **29 Tomato Head**, where tattooed hipsters will serve you a gorgonzola and free-range chicken calzone. Right around the corner, the **30 Hotel St Oliver** is like something out of a Tennessee Williams play. The 28 rooms have the eccentric elegance of a slightly dotty Southern belle, with Victorian wingback armchairs and thick Persian carpets. Sit for a spell in the dim downstairs library with its crumbling leather tomes and gilt-framed oil paintings. Wind down with a night of music at the impeccably restored **31 Bijou Theatre**. Built in 1909, the Bijou has hosted luminaries of the bygone era like Dizzy Gillespie and Groucho Marx. These days, Knoxville's old guard comes for the ballet, while the whippersnappers from the University of Tennessee bobble their heads to indie rock performers such as Bright Eyes.

Emily Matchar



TRIP INFORMATION

GETTING THERE

From Charlotte, NC, take I-85 South to I-26 West to I-40 W. Turn onto the Great Smoky Mountains Expressway and continue for 40 miles toward Bryson City.

DO

Bijou Theatre

Downtown Knoxville's opulent 19th-century theater hosts big-name rock acts, ballet and theater. ☎ 865-656-4444; www.knoxbijou.com; 803 S Gay St, Knoxville, TN; 📺 show times vary

Dollywood

Revel in the Appalachian-themed kitsch at this family-friendly amusement park, owned by East Tennessee's own darlin' Dolly. ☎ 865-428-9488; www.dollywood.com; 1020 Dollywood Ln, Pigeon Forge, TN; adult/child \$50/39; 📺 hours vary by season, closed Jan-Mar; 📶

Dollywood's Splash Country

Cool off in the Mountain Waves pool at Dolly's 25-acre water park. ☎ 865-428-9488; www.dollywoodsplashtcountry.com; 146 Middle Creek Rd, Pigeon Forge, TN; adult/child \$42/37; 📺 10am-7pm high season, closed Oct-Apr; 📶

Gatlinburg Sky Lift

Ride this chairlift high into the mountains for incomparable views. ☎ 865-436-4307; www.gatlinburgskylift.com; Parkway light 7, Gatlinburg, TN; adult/child \$12/9; 📺 9am-10pm, to 5pm winter

Great Smoky Mountains Railroad

Choose from a variety of scenic train tours, including dinner and wine trips and kid-friendly rides. ☎ 800-872-4681; www.gsmr.com; 226 Everett St, Bryson City, NC; adult/child from \$34/19; 📶

Mountain Farm Museum and Mingus Mill

Be transported to the 19th century at this replica farm (next to Oconaluftee Visitor Center) and working grist mill (a half-mile up the road). ☎ 423-436-1200; www.nps.gov/grsm; 📺 9am-5pm Mar-Dec

Museum of the Cherokee Indian

Artifact-filled exhibits trace the long, proud and often sad history of Native Americans in these mountains. ☎ 828-497-3481; www.cherokeemuseum.org; 589 Tsali Blvd, Cherokee, NC; adult/child \$9/6; 📺 9am-5pm

Nantahala Outdoor Center

This trusted river outfitter has whitewater trips for all levels, with several outposts throughout the Appalachians. ☎ 828-488-2176; www.noc.com; 13077 Hwy 19/74, near Bryson City NC; guided rafting trips from \$38; 📶

Oconaluftee Visitor Center

Pick up maps and camping permits at North Carolina's gateway to the Smokies. ☎ 423-436-1200; www.nps.gov/grsm; Hwy 441, near Cherokee, NC; 📺 8am-4:30pm, until later spring & summer

Ripley's Aquarium of the Smokies

Take a walk through the shark tunnel and play with stingrays at this massive fish tank. ☎ 865-430-8808; www.ripleysaquariumofthesmokies.com; Parkway light 5, Gatlinburg, TN; adult/child \$22/12; 📺 9am-9pm Sun-Thu, to 11pm Fri & Sat; 📶

Ripley's Believe It or Not!

The shrunken heads are a major crowd pleaser at this house of oddities. ☎ 865-436-5096; www.ripleys.com; Parkway light 7, Gatlinburg, TN; adult/child \$15/9; 📺 9am-midnight; 📶

Sugarlands Visitor Center

Tennessee's main park entrance has a bookstore and ranger tours in summer. ☎ 865-436-1291; www.nps.gov/grsm; Hwy 441, TN; 📺 8am-4:30pm, until later spring & summer

The Lost Sea

Descend into Craighead Caverns and sail across a 4.5-acre underground lake. ☎ 423-337-6616; www.thelostsea.com; 140 Lost Sea Rd, Sweetwater, TN; adult/child \$16/7.50; 📺 9am-5pm, until later spring & summer; 📶

Unto These Hills

This summertime outdoor play dramatizing Cherokee history has been performed at the Mountainside Theater since 1950. ☎ 866-554-4557; www.cherokee-nc.com; Drama Rd, Cherokee; adult/child \$18/8; 📺 8:30pm Mon-Sat Jun-Aug

**EAT****Pancake Pantry**

Dig into an extra-tall stack at this beloved all-day breakfast joint. ☎ 865-436-4724; 628 Parkway, Gatlinburg, TN; mains \$4-9, ☎ 7am-4pm; ♿

Tomato Head

Fill your belly with pizza and tofu burritos at this quirky locals spot. ☎ 865-637-4067; 12 Market Sq, Knoxville, TN; mains \$5-9; ☎ 11am-9:30pm Tue-Thu, to 3pm Mon, to 10:30pm Fri & Sat, to 9pm Sun

SLEEP**Buckhorn Inn**

Curl up by the fire and gaze out at the misty mountains from the parlor of this gracious bed and breakfast. ☎ 865-436-4668; www.buckhorninn.com; 2140 Tudor Mountain Rd, Gatlinburg, TN; r from \$115

Elkmt Campground

The park's largest campground has 220 sites on the banks of the Little River. ☎ 865-436-

1271; nps.gov/grsm; Little River Rd, TN; campsites from \$17; ☎ Mar-Dec; ♿

Hotel St Oliver

Sleep amid quirky Southern antiques in this eccentric old downtown hotel, with a grand piano in the tiny lobby. ☎ 865-521-0050; www.hotelstolivertn.com; 407 Union Ave, Knoxville, TN; r from \$75

LeConte Lodge

Hike up to these rustic cabins at the summit of Mt LeConte and enjoy a group meal and a stunning sunrise. ☎ 865-429-5704; www.leconte-lodge.com; cabins per person from \$64

Nantahala Inn

Rafters crash at this simple wooden lodge amid the pines after a day on the river. ☎ 828-488-2176; www.noc.com; Hwy 19, 12 miles west of Bryson City, NC; r from \$59

USEFUL WEBSITES

www.gatlinburg.com
www.nps.gov/grsm

LINK YOUR TRIP

www.lonelyplanet.com/trip-planner

TRIP

- 10** Appalachian Trail *opposite*
- 19** Blue Ridge Parkway: High Country *p157*