

# The Great Smoky Mountains: A Travel Feature

by Michelle Clark, PassPorter Guest Contributor

Looking for an escape from the hustle and bustle of city life? A great destination for a weekend getaway or a family vacation is the Great Smoky Mountains. Situated at the North Carolina/Tennessee border, the Great Smoky Mountains or the "Smokies" are part of the Appalachian Mountains and are home to Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Some 521,000 acres were set aside as a National Park in 1934. With over 9 million visitors to the park each year, Great Smoky Mountains National Park is the most visited National Park in the country. This is largely due to the fact that over half of the U.S. population is located within a day's drive of the park. U.S. Highway 441 travels through the park and is the most utilized route to enter the Great Smoky Mountains.

The Smokies are a true nature preserve, with forest comprising nearly 95 percent of the national park. Approximately 1,600 black bear make their home in the park, and whitetail deer are plentiful. Bird watchers will delight in the 200 species of birds native to the park. Recently the National Park Service reintroduced elk and river otters into the park. There are over 1,600 different wildflowers native to the Smokies, more than any other national park.

As you travel on U.S. Highway 441 you will encounter many beautiful scenic views of the Smokies. Newfound Gap (elevation 5,048 feet) is the lowest drivable "gap" or pass in the park. There is plenty of parking at Newfound Gap, so be sure to stop and check the view. Clingmans Dome at 6,643 feet is the highest point in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park as well as the highest point in Tennessee. You can take the half-mile hike up to the observation tower at Clingmans Dome. On a clear day you can see seven states from the tower! The hike is steep but paved and pretty easy to maneuver. Bring a jacket along, even in the warmer months it can be a bit chilly at the top.

The park itself provides a variety of activities for day trips or vacations. There are over 800 miles of hiking trails inside the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. These trails range from short nature trails to longer backwoods hikes. If you desire something in between, there are several 1.5 to 2 mile hikes that will reward you with fabulous scenic views of the mountains or waterfalls. Horseback riding is another popular activity in the park. There are several riding stables in the area that offer guided riding tours in the mountains.

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The Oconaluftee River at the southern end of the park near Cherokee and the Little Pigeon River near Gatlinburg are popular with trout fishermen. Open season for trout fishing runs April 1 through November 30, and a license and permit are required to fish. These can be obtained at the Park Welcome Center for fishing in Tennessee. If you plan to fish the Oconaluftee in the Cherokee Indian Reservation you will need to purchase a separate North Carolina license, available at a number of stores and locations in Cherokee.

Picnic and camping facilities are available inside the park. Need to cool off? White water rafting on the Pigeon River is another popular activity in the area. You can make reservations for your rafting trip with several area outfitters. The dense foliage of the forests in the Smokies provides spectacular colors in the fall, drawing large numbers of leaf watchers. The roadways in the park can be packed on autumn weekends with cars lining up to view the changing leaves.

One of the most popular destinations inside Great Smoky Mountains National Park is Cades Cove. Cades Cove is a valley tucked deep inside the Smokies that was originally inhabited by a group of pioneer settlers. Many of the original log homes and other buildings dating back to the 1800s have been preserved and can be toured today. Cades Cove is accessible by an 11-mile one-way loop road. There are three churches still standing in Cades Cove that can be reserved for church services. Our local congregation has visited Cades Cove and held a service in one of the old church buildings. Sitting on backless pine benches is quite different than the padded pews we have today! The biggest draw of Cades Cove is not the old settlement buildings but rather, the plentiful wildlife. One trip around the loop road can easily reward visitors with glimpses of dozens of whitetail deer and possibly even a bear. Approximately halfway around the loop is a visitor center with restrooms. There is a large meadow next to the visitor center that is perfect for picnics. Since Cades Cove is extremely popular and has only a one-way road, traffic can back up during the busier seasons. Biking and horseback riding is also allowed on the loop road.

New visitors to Great Smoky Mountains National Park will benefit from a stop at the Sugarlands Visitor Center located on U.S. 441 south of Gatlinburg. Nearby is Little River Road, which leads to Cades Cove. Here you will find information on all the park has to offer. The center has plenty of maps and brochures. You can also view a short film about the park and view a preserved animal exhibit in the nature museum. There is a bookstore and gift shop inside the visitor's center along with restrooms and vending machines.

Most hotels and restaurants in the Great Smoky Mountains area have

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brochure stands with literature on a variety of attractions in the area. There are an abundance of coupon books for some of the area attractions as well.

The Smokies offer a variety of activities for visitors from all walks of life, any time of the year. There is sure to be something to please everyone!

Here are some helpful sites when planning a trip the Smokies:

National Park Service (<http://www.nps.gov/grsm/index.htm>)

Gatlinburg Chamber of Commerce (<http://www.gatlinburg.com>)

Pigeon Forge Department of Tourism ([www.mypigeonforge.com](http://www.mypigeonforge.com))

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Article last updated: 6/7/2007

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