

Misty and Magical -- The Tennessee Smoky Mountains

By Mira Temkin

I had no idea I'd fall in love with the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. But with its vast, natural beauty and rich historical heritage, I got caught under its spell. The Cherokee's got it right when they saw the "blue, like smoke" rising from the mountains and called them "The Smokies." Some 800 square miles of rolling hills, winding trails and waterfalls abound in America's most visited national park and World Heritage site. The park offers a wealth of recreational activities -- hiking, fishing, biking, horseback riding and more. But it remains an outdoor museum of living history with weathered log structures, barns, and churches, showcasing remnants of South Appalachian mountain culture.

One of the most popular areas is Cades Cove, an 11-mile loop that I saw from the perspective of a hay ride wagon. Wait, was that a deer? Yes, several of us quickly grabbed our cameras, ready for a great shot (photo, that is!) There are abundant tree species and flowering plants, 200 species of birds and 60 different mammals, making it truly a nature lover's paradise. But what fascinated me were the stories of the early pioneers who worked the land, creating a sense of community out of corn-husking and molasses-making.



The Inn at Christmas Place - it's X-mas everyday!

Like an old world Bavarian hotel, the Inn creates a warm, cozy atmosphere filled with holiday decor. Located across the street from its namesake, The Incredible Christmas Place, this four-star hotel is right in the center of all the action. Deluxe hot breakfast with made-to-order omelets; rooms include microwave and



The park will be celebrating its 75th anniversary in 2009.

mini-fridge, making it ideal for families. Yule love it! 888.HOLYNIGHT, www.innatchristmasplace.com.

Flapjacks, fudge and fun!

The tri-city area of Pigeon Forge, Sevierville and Gatlinburg is overflowing with things to do. Between all the great restaurants, mini-golf, go-carting and shows, there are more venues here than people! Here are just a few recommendations:

Pigeon Forge -- Loved the Hoot 'N Holler Dinner Show. Delicious Italian feast with an audience participation show had me in stitches! Plus, it's housed in Wonder Works, an upside down house filled with interactive activities. Pigeon Forge is where Dolly Parton was raised, and you'll feel her presence everywhere. Dollywood, a family amusement park and entertainment complex, reigns as Tennessee's number one attraction. With roller coasters, water rides, award-winning shows and master craftsmen, Dollywood is as unique as her namesake. Enjoy dinner at Dolly's Dixie Stampede and thrill to the horses, longhorns, entertainment, exciting races and lots of audience participation. Tuckaleechee Caverns is called "the greatest sight under the Smokies." I felt like Tom Sawyer exploring the beautiful underground waterfalls, streams and stalagites formed over thousands of years. Take time to explore Old Mill Square. With several restaurants, a giant water wheel and crafts shops, you'll get a real feel for local handiwork, not to mention the best pecan pie!

Gatlinburg -- Gatlinburg has a busy main street filled with Ripley's Entertainment venues, among them the fabulous new Ripley's Aquarium of the Smokies. Walk through the underwater tunnel and see the sharks floating above you! For the more adventurous, there's white-water rafting on the Big Pigeon River and zip lining. For the less so, take the aerial tramway to the top of Ober Gatlinburg and discover a ski resort/amusement park at the top.



Belle Island Village, Opening Soon -- A 26-acre themed destination complex with entertainment, restaurants, shopping and riverfront lodging awaits you. Highlights are the Debbie Reynolds Hollywood Motion Picture Museum, the world's largest private collection of Hollywood memorabilia, Darrell Waltrip's Racing Experience and Knoxville Zoo's Otter Cove.

But it's the quiet moments in the park and the clean fresh air that touches your soul and rejuvenates your spirit. You'll discover beauty as pure and simple as the setting sun in this wilderness paradise. I did.

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