



**WATER
SMOKE
SPIRIT,,,
FOREST,,,
GHOST,
LAND,
SKY**

*A photographic essay on Great Smoky
Mountains National Park.*

BY MATT BRASS



On my mother's side of the family, connections to East Tennessee go back for generations to when the first pioneers put down roots in this part of Appalachia. In more recent history, my mom and dad spent their first date in Cades Cove, a verdant valley in the mountains, after which my father immediately declared to a friend that he would marry her. I grew up in Michigan, Washington and Texas, but Great Smoky Mountains National Park is where we'd go when we were visiting family. This is where we'd drive down narrow roads, following creeks, skirting rocks and, sometimes, pressing through new-fallen snow. This is where we would bring picnics, sit in quiet churches and walk along trails lined with may-apples, jonquils and honeysuckle.

And this is where I bring my own family now — to spots including Tremont, Alum Cave, Cataloochee, Metcalf Bottoms, Roaring Fork, the Chimneys, Rainbow Falls, Fontana Lake and Elkmont — to hike or swim or kayak or camp or just stay still for a little while in sacred, familiar places. The park remains a constant even as I move from house to house, my children grow up, and life goes by with its unpredictable ebb and flow.

Of course, the landscape changes, too, though. Seasons, fires, storms and people make their marks and take their toll. But whether scarred by tornado and flame, flaming with autumn color or speckled with spring wildflowers, the land feels like it's ours. Always ours.

I've traveled all over the country, drawn by natural wonders. I've lived in the shadow of the Rockies, made annual pilgrimages to the Badlands, stood breathless on rugged coasts in Washington, and spent days paddling through rich and murky swampland. But we always return to the Great Smokies. And we exhale. Some days, we see bears or watch wisps of cloud move swiftly through green-clad peaks after a summer rain, and we are reminded how lucky we are that this place is part of our past, present and future. That it's home.

MATT BRASS resides in Knoxville, Tennessee, with his wife, Larisa, and their seven children. He works as a creative director for an ad agency specializing in sustainability and the environment. A photographer and freelance illustrator, he has created multiple series of artworks featuring America's national parks. To learn more about his Great Smoky Mountains photo project, go to mattbrass.com.



BRASS' SON, LIAM, exiting Little Greenbrier Schoolhouse (left). Above: A panoramic view of the park from Max Patch Mountain. Previous pages: Brass' son, Levi, ascending the Alum Cave Trail toward the summit of Mount Le Conte, the park's third-highest peak.



CADES COVE METHODIST CHURCH, constructed in 1902 (opposite, top). Opposite, bottom: Fall foliage along Newfound Gap Road. Top: Brass' son, John, sitting in the Primitive Baptist Church in Cades Cove. Bottom right: Brass' sons, Andrew (left), Liam (center) and Judah (right), at an overlook on the Roaring Fork Motor Nature Trail. Bottom left: Levi entering Primitive Baptist Church.



JOHN (LEFT) AND LEVI (RIGHT) at Ephraim Bales Place on the Roaring Fork Motor Nature Trail.



VIEW FROM the John Oliver Cabin in Cades Cove (left). Top right: The tunnel on Laurel Creek Road after a rainstorm. Bottom right: A buck in Cades Cove.