

# TRAVEL



**“On Top of Old Smoky”:** At 6,643 feet high, Clingmans Dome is the highest point in Great Smoky Mountains National Park. An observation tower offers terrific, 360-degree views — on a clear day. *Photos by Susan Glaser, cleveland.com*

## GREAT SMOKY MOUNTAINS NATIONAL PARK

# Dodging the crowds (and clouds) at America’s most popular national park

*An easy 8-hour drive from Cleveland gets you to one of the most accessible national parks to Ohio.*

**Susan Glaser** [sglaser@cleveland.com](mailto:sglaser@cleveland.com)

GATLINBURG, TENNESSEE — I stopped my bike and stared. A black bear at the side of the road was drinking from a puddle, perhaps 30 feet from my wheels.

I tried to remember what the park ranger told me the day before: Don’t get closer than you have to; make yourself known as you give the bear space; don’t run.

I considered my options as I stood in wonder, unable even to reach for the cell-phone in my pocket to document the encounter (so you’ll just have to take my word for it).

After a few moments, the bear ambled away and I continued my tour of Cades Cove.

It was a peak experience among many at America’s most popular national park.

Honestly, I was prepared to be underwhelmed during my recent three-day tour of Great Smoky Mountains National Park, which encompasses more than a half-million acres in eastern Tennessee and western North Carolina.

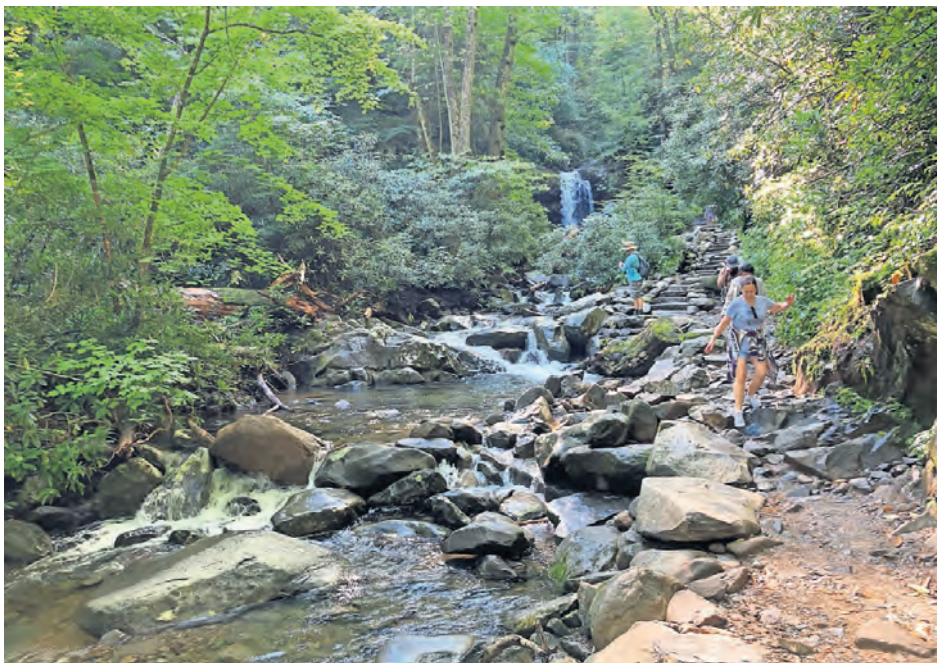
I hadn’t been here since I was a kid, and everyone I talked to in advance of my trip warned me about the crowds. “You couldn’t pay me to go back,” said my sister-in-law.

Well, I would go definitely go back — maybe not in October, which is the most visited month in the park. But soon. And here’s why:

- › It’s an easy, eight-hour drive from Cleveland, one of the most accessible national parks to Ohio (and much of the rest of the eastern United States, which is why it drew more than 14 million visitors in 2021, a new record).
  - › There’s a tremendous variety of activities here — lots of hiking trails, short and easy or long and strenuous, plus gorgeous scenic drives, places to bicycle, raft, horseback ride and more.
  - › This is the most biologically diverse national park in the U.S. system, with more than 19,000 recorded species, including 100 types of trees, 200 kinds of birds and 30 different salamanders.
- In addition to the black bear, I had a close encounter with a herd of elk near Chero-



**View from a scenic overlook along U.S. 441 through Great Smoky Mountains National Park.**



**En route to Grotto Falls, one of more than 100 prominent waterfalls within the park.**

okee, North Carolina, where a park ranger ordered me back inside my car out of a concern that the bull might get aggressive. So I sat in my car taking photos alongside dozens of other vehicles. Because yes, this place is crowded — but for good reason.

### EXPLORING THE PARK

The park, created in 1934, covers more than 522,000 acres — the 19th-largest in the U.S. (11th, if you leave off Alaska). There was no way I was going to see it all.

Ranger Thomas Lynch told me that the best way to avoid crowds is to focus exploration in the southern and eastern areas of the park. But he told me this as I chatted

with him inside the Sugarlands Visitors Center, at the park’s northern and busiest entrance in Gatlinburg.

I never made it to those less-crowded areas. Instead, over the next three days, I toured the park’s most popular attractions — Cades Cove, Clingmans Dome, Mount Le Conte and the Roaring Fork Motor Nature Trail.

The park is trying to solve, or at least adapt to, some of the overcrowding issues. Starting next year, Great Smoky Mountains — among a handful of national parks that currently don’t charge admission — will institute a parking fee for the first time, which is likely to deter some visitors.

### THE 13 MOST-VISITED NATIONAL PARKS IN 2021, INCLUDING CUYAHOGA VALLEY

GATLINBURG, Tennessee — More than 14 million people visited Great Smoky Mountains National Park in 2021, a new record, making it by far the most-visited national park in the U.S.

The second-most popular park, Utah’s Zion National Park, attracted fewer than half as many visitors, but also set a record — with 5 million visitors in 2021.

Here’s a list of the most-visited national parks in 2021, a year that saw many parks set attendance records, likely due to increased interest in outdoor activities because of the ongoing coronavirus pandemic:

1. Great Smoky Mountains National Park, Tennessee and North Carolina, 14.1 million, up from 12.1 million in 2020, also a record.
2. Zion, Utah, 5 million
3. Yellowstone, Wyoming, 4.9 million
4. Grand Canyon, Arizona, 4.5 million
5. Rocky Mountain, Colorado, 4.4 million
6. Acadia, Maine, 4 million
7. Grand Teton, Wyoming, 3.9 million
8. Yosemite, California, 3.3 million
9. Indiana Dunes, Indiana, 3.2 million
10. Glacier, Montana, 3.1 million
11. Joshua Tree, California, 3.1 million
12. Olympic, Washington, 2.7 million
13. Cuyahoga Valley, Ohio, 2.6 million

*Susan Glaser* [sglaser@cleveland.com](mailto:sglaser@cleveland.com)

The fee goes into effect March 1 and is \$5 for one day, \$15 for a week and \$40 for one year.

In addition, the park has experimented with parking reservations and blocked roadside parking at the popular Laurel Falls trailhead. And two years ago, the park closed off the Cades Cove area to vehicular traffic one day per week to give pedestrians and cyclists an opportunity to explore the area free of cars (alas, the last car-free Wednesday for 2022 is Sept. 28; the program will resume in May).

I chose my travel dates in September in an attempt to straddle the busy summer **SEE NATIONAL PARK, K2**



Historic Methodist church along the Cades Cove loop.



Elk along the side of the road near Cherokee, North Carolina.

## NATIONAL PARK

## Dodging the crowds (and clouds) at America's most popular national park

Continues from K1

months and October when spectacular fall foliage is likely to attract more than a million visitors to the park. Even so, the park was busy — we had trouble finding parking at several popular hiking trails and got stuck behind some painfully slow-moving vehicles as we negotiated park roadways.

I had some gripes with Mother Nature, as well. Somehow, I didn't quite realize how much rain this area gets — between 55 and 90 inches a year, depending on location. Indeed, some of the highest elevations in the park get enough precipitation to qualify as a temperate rainforest.

Even when it wasn't raining, it was misting or humid, which made it impossible for our wet clothes to dry. And the rain comes unexpectedly — it's sunny one moment, and dripping the next.

Indeed, we thought we picked a perfect time to go to Clingmans Dome — the highest point in the park — but by the time we drove the 23 miles from the park entrance to the peak, the mountaintop was encased in clouds.

I didn't mind too much. The clouds and the fog are, after all, what make the Smokies so magical.

A subrange of the Appalachian Mountains, the Smokies get their name from the smoke-like fog that often envelops the park. The fog is caused in part by vapor emitted by the trees, bushes and other plants. As the plant vapor scatters blue light from the sky, the fog often takes on a blue hue. The Cherokee called this "shaconage," or "land of the blue smoke."

We saw lots of blue smoke as we meandered through the park, at both low and high elevations.

My husband and I conquered one big hike, up Mount Le Conte, a 6,593-foot-high peak that is the third-highest in the park. There are five trails that scale the mountain — I opted for the shortest, 5-mile Alum Cave Trail, a gorgeous, strenuous path that took us along a creek,



Descending Clingmans Dome — in the rain — at Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Photos by Susan Glaser, cleveland.com

through a cave and into a Fraser fir forest before delivering us to the top. I was lucky to score a last-minute reservation at the rustic mountaintop LeConte Lodge — the only overnight (noncamping) option inside the park. (Reservations for 2023 will be accepted starting Oct. 3; for details: lecontelodge.com.)

Plenty of hikers go up and down Mount Le Conte in a day, although I was grateful for a couple of good meals and a comfortable bed in between the climb and descent.

Other, shorter hikes we enjoyed included the trail to Grotto Falls, one of more than 100 prominent waterfalls inside the park. The 25-foot-tall Grotto Falls is about 1.3 miles up the Trillium Gap Trail, which also winds its way up Mount Le Conte. Most hikers, however, myself included, turn around after walking behind the scenic waterfall (the trail actually runs behind the cataract.)

As previously mentioned, the highest point in the park is Clingmans Dome, elevation 6,643, accessible via a 7-mile drive scenic drive west off U.S. 441, which winds

### GREAT SMOKY MOUNTAINS NATIONAL PARK

**Where:** The park encompasses more than 500,000 acres in eastern Tennessee and western North Carolina, about an eight-hour drive from Cleveland, primarily via I-75. The closest major airport is McGhee Tyson Airport near Knoxville, Tennessee.

**When:** The park is open year-round, though some roadways close in the winter. The busiest months are June, July and October.

**Admission:** The park is currently free; starting in March 2023, the park service will begin collecting a fee to park for more than 15 minutes — \$5 for one day, \$15 for a week or \$40 for the year.

**More information:** [www.nps.gov/grsm](http://www.nps.gov/grsm)

through the park. After you park your car, there's a ½-mile paved uphill climb to a lookout tower that offers 360-degree views of the park. On a clear day, you can see as many as 100 miles in any direction.

It was clear when we started ascending, but the clouds gathered as we climbed. Still, the clouds broke just enough to give us a glimpse of what might have been.

The views were better at Newfound Gap, the mountain pass that forms the border of Tennessee and North Carolina. The Appalachian Trail, which runs nearly 2,200 miles from Maine to Georgia, intersects here.

And on this site on Sept. 2, 1940, President Franklin Roosevelt formally dedicated the park at the Rockefeller Memorial, constructed by the Civilian Conservation Corps to honor the Rockefeller family for its \$5 million donation to help establish the park.

Unlike previous national parks, which were almost all created out of government-owned land in the West, the land that would become Great Smoky Moun-

tains National Park was mostly privately owned, and had to be purchased. The park today is home to more than 90 historic structures, former homes, barns, churches, schools and gristmills that were inhabited a century ago.

Among the best places to see these structures: Along the Roaring Fork Motor Nature Trail, a one-way, 5.5-mile scenic drive that starts and ends in Gatlinburg, meandering through dense forest along the gorgeous Roaring Fork. This is where we picked up the Grotto Falls Trail, and where we stopped to tour the log cabin structures that are part of the historic homestead of Noah "Bud" Ogle, who settled in this area in the late 1800s.

The park's Cades Cove area, in the northwest section of the park, is probably the best-known former mountain community. A population of as many as 700 lived here in the mid-19th century, farming the fertile valley land.

There are dozens of preserved historic buildings here, including three churches and numerous log cabin homes. An 11-mile, one-way loop road meanders through the valley, a gorgeous route with mountains on all sides.

This is an area of the park that can get extremely crowded, with cars clogging the roadway during morning rush.

My husband and I stopped by late in the afternoon on a Wednesday, one of the park's last vehicle-free days of 2022. We rented bikes at the Cades Cove Campground Store and had the loop road almost all to ourselves. It was one of the most scenic bike rides I've experienced anywhere, marred only by — you guessed it — an unexpected rain shower.

Adding to the allure: The black bear by the side of the roadway as I pedaled away from the Primitive Baptist Church, built in 1887. I saw the bear out of the corner of my eye and pressed my handbrakes. For several minutes, I stood there mesmerized.

Then he went his way and I went mine, on the lookout for more magic.

## GREAT SMOKY MOUNTAINS NATIONAL PARK

## Pigeon Forge or Gatlinburg: Where to stay

Susan Glaser [sglaser@cleveland.com](mailto:sglaser@cleveland.com)

GATLINBURG, TENNESSEE — Gatlinburg and Pigeon Forge are side-by-side sister cities in eastern Tennessee, both gateway communities to Great Smoky Mountains National Park, the nation's busiest.

Both are tourist towns, with attractions tacky and tasteful. Both have many hotels, restaurants, ice cream shops and more. Traffic in both can be extremely congested.

Despite many similarities, they're not identical twins. Here's how to tell them apart, as you plan your trip to the nation's most popular national park:

Gatlinburg, population 3,944, is immediately adjacent to the park, just north of the Sugarlands Visitor Center. It's more compact geographically than Pigeon Forge, squeezed by mountains on three sides.

Its downtown district is more walkable than Pigeon Forge's and it is generally considered to have better restaurants.

Top attractions include Ripley's Aquarium of the Smokies, Anakeesta adventure park, Gatlinburg SkyLift Park, Hollywood Star Cars Museum, Salt and Pepper Shaker Museum, Ober Gatlinburg amusement park and ski area and numerous others.

## GATLINBURG

**Where to stay:** We stayed at the Oak Creek Lodge, 680 River Road, a terrific location just off the main strip, but easily walkable to numerous attractions and restaurants. Our balcony overlooked the Cliff Branch River, which runs through the town; rates



A tribute to Dolly Parton inside Dollywood's DreamMore Resort in Pigeon Forge, Tennessee. Susan Glaser, cleveland.com

start at about \$150 per night.

**Where to eat:** We enjoyed fresh fish at the Smoky Mountain Trout House, which offers 10 different trout dishes; other recommended options include the Peddler Steakhouse, and Pancake Pantry (or any one of numerous pancake houses in town).

**Don't miss:** The Great Smoky Arts and Crafts Community, a collection of shops and galleries along an 8-mile loop east of downtown. Member artisans include

woodworkers and broom makers, potters, jewelers and more.

**Information:** [gatlinburg.com](http://gatlinburg.com)

## PIGEON FORGE

Pigeon Forge, population 6,247, is about 8 miles north of Gatlinburg, connected via the Great Smoky Mountains Parkway (U.S. 441), which also winds 33 miles through the park.

The route through Pigeon Forge is wider, more dominated by parking lots and neon signs and is less pedestri-

an-friendly than Gatlinburg.

Top attractions include the Titanic Museum, built half-scale to the original ship; Dollywood; Alcatraz East Crime Museum; Pigeon Forge Snow, with indoor snow tubing; Dolly Parton's Stampede and others.

**Where to stay:** We stayed a night at Dollywood's DreamMore Resort, opened in 2015 and owned by Dolly Parton. This is a true resort, with lovely grounds, a spa, indoor and outdoor pools, entertainment, evening s'mores and more. And coming next year: Dollywood's Heartsong Lodge and Resort, on the adjacent property. Room rates vary widely, but start at about \$200 a night.

**Where to eat:** We ate two good meals in Pigeon Forge, at Local Goat, for fried green tomatoes, pimento-cheese burger and other Southern-American fares; and the Old Mill, serving extra-large four-course homestyle meals inside a historic gristmill. No reservations are accepted at the Old Mill, where wait times routinely run an hour or more (we got lucky and were seated within about 20 minutes).

**Don't miss:** Dollywood, a terrific amusement park that has been ranked as the best in North America by voters in the annual Amusement Today survey.

**Information:** [mypigeonforge.com](http://mypigeonforge.com)

**Bottom line:** I'd opt for Gatlinburg based on proximity to the national park alone, and also appreciated that it was much more pedestrian-friendly than Pigeon Forge.