Travel and Adventure: Gatlinburg - gateway to the Smokies

by Fred and Karen Eckert

Almost from the time it was established 75 years ago, the Great Smoky Mountains National Park has been America's most visited national park. No surprise here â€” it is, after all, stunningly beautiful, and what really runs up its visitor numbers is the fact that half of the country's population lives within a one-day drive plus, unlike other national parks, there is no admission fee.

A well-preserved log cabin greets visitors to the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Photo by Fred J. Eckert. A view of the mountains from near Gatlinburg, Tenn., the gateway to the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Photo by Fred J. Eckert. Downtown Gatlinburg, Tenn., does its best with restaurants and crafts shops to encourage visitors to stop on their way to the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Photo by Fred J. Eckert. And with 2009 seeing so much 75th-anniversary publicity for the park, those visitors numbers just might break records. Which means that if this is the year you plan to visit the Smokies, you might want to consider booking accommodations in Gatlinburg, Tenn. sooner rather than later.

Gatlinburg is the gateway to Great Smokies Mountain National Park. Close to half of the nearly 9 million visitors who visit the Smokies each year pass through Gatlinburg, this small, pop. 3,500, southern Appalachian Mountains town that goes way out of its way to make the most of the traffic it gets by offering just about anything anyone can think of to lure tourists.

That's the knock on this town â€” that it is too touristy. Its streets are lined with T-shirt shops, tattoo parlors, fudge shops, wax museums and museums housing items such as salt and pepper shakers.

You'll find a good selection of miniature golf courses â€” even one offering "Hillbilly Golf" â€” plus a few lift rides, a few wedding chapels and an abundance of pancake restaurants.

There are also lots of made-up "attractions," such as a "Mystery Mansion" where you can walk through a maze of mirrors on floors that creak and a "Space Needle" that takes you up a few stories for a view of town streets and distant mountains.

Actually, the fudge and the pancakes are good and there are some interesting attractions, most notable of which is Ripley's Aquarium of the Smokies. Visitors glide through a 340-foot-long acrylic tunnel on a moving walkway in this 115,000-square-foot, 1-million-gallon wonder where they can take in close-up views of sharks, seahorses, piranhas, giant octopi and other fascinating aquatic life.

Right across from the aquarium is another place well worth checking out â€” the Arrowcraft Shop, a late 1930s mountain-style cabin that sells handicrafts made by members of the highly regarded nonprofit educational Southern Highland Handicraft Guild.

Folk art and handicrafts make the best souvenirs from a visit to Gatlinburg, and another good place to check them out is in the Great Smoky Arts and Crafts Community, about 10 minutes from downtown, where you can buy original hand-made items as well as watch craftsmen producing them.

If arts and crafts hold great appeal for you, consider visiting during the Great Smoky Mountain Arts & Craft Show event the town puts on each spring. Each summer there's a Craftsmen's Fair, as well such other events as a Wildlife Expo and a midnight Fourth of July parade. In the fall, events include a Great Southern Collectible Expo, a Gem and Jewelry Show and an Antiquefest. In the winter months the town takes on a different look by decorating its streets with an ongoing display of more than 2 million lights.

But, unless they have friends or family here, few come to Gatlinburg just to visit the town. Visitors pass through on the way to the Great Smoky Mountains National Park and Gatlinburg's convenient location makes it easily the most popular place to stay for anyone who wants to take in the park's highlights.

The drive from Gatlinburg into the park takes only minutes. Suddenly, you find yourself in an 800-square-mile preserve that includes the largest deciduous forest area in the East and more species of plants than any other defined area of North America. More than 50 species of mammals inhabit the park and it is one of the best places in the country for observing black bear in their natural environment.

This nature lovers' paradise, with its stunning scenery that includes rushing mountain streams and waterfalls, is a wonderful place for camping or biking or hiking; it offers more than 900 miles of trails. Fishing is outstanding â€” Smokies streams are abundant with trout that can be fished for year round.

You can also get a feel for the lifestyle of mountain pioneers by exploring some of the more than 70 authentic pioneer buildings that dot the park.

The most popular thing to see and do in the park is to visit Cades Cove, an isolated valley first settled by European-Americans during the first term of President James Monroe. You do this by driving on an 11-mile, one-way road that features 19 marked stops, mostly for viewing historic structures. Odds of seeing a black bear, as are the odds of seeing deer, turkey or possibly one of the elk that has been reintroduced into the park.

If you want to avoid the crowds of downtown Gatlinburg but don't want to be too far from the park, you might want to do what we did and stay at the nearby Park Vista Hotel, a hilltop high-rise that offers regular shuttles to and from town and beautiful mountain vistas.

On our last day in Gatlinburg, when we exited the driveway of the Park Vista, we turned left and within a couple of minutes were in the park and then on Roaring Fork Motor Nature Trail, a seven-mile one-way loop road through a lush forest that is often overlooked by park visitors.

The Roaring Fork trail is every bit as pretty as the Cades Cove one, and it includes scenic streams and historic structures, including a gristmill and a couple of log cabins. After the end of the trail we were back in Gatlinburg. Before heading home, we pulled into a parking lot where to the right was that salt and pepper shaker museum and to the left was one of the town's many pancake houses. We opted for pancakes. They were very good, just right for our farewell to the beautiful Smokies.

IF YOU GO

For information, visit www.gatlinburg.com or call toll-free 800-568-4748.

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